

Fidnij realized the basis of her surprise. In the matriarchal almost-gynecocracy of Aglaya, women were the leaders in matters social and political. He was about to reply-and never did. His ears caught a faint sound-overhead. A sound entirely too familiar, and chilling on Aglaya. He jerked his head upward and Pransa's gaze followed his. Above the forest raced a long streak of fire, orange-red as a swinger's fur at rutting-time, and brighter than anything ever seen in Aglaya's sky even in daytime. The night sky here was near and blank, the stars a permanent unknown to the dwellers on the hothouse planet. Two moons shone murkily through the clouds but gave little light. Sky-ghosts. Yet such skyfire proved not unknown to Pransahilodial: "Sky-demons!"

SPACEWAYS #1 OF ALIEN BONDAGE #2  
CORUNDUM'S WOMAN #3 ESCAPE FROM MACHO #4 SATANA ENSLAVED #5 MASTER OF MISFIT #6  
PURRFECT PLUNDER #7 THE MANHUNTRESS #8 UNDER TWIN SUNS #9  
IN QUEST OF QALARA #10 THE YOKE OF SHEN #11 THE ICEWORLD CONNECTION #12  
STAR SLAVER #13 JONUTA RISING! #14 ASSIGNMENT: HELLHOLE #15 STARSHIP SAPPHIRE

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be making that much noise but the rather anthropomorphic little swinger did not pause to think. It reacted. He peered around and down from the other side of the tree's bole, nose twitching in aid of an underdeveloped sense of smell. Presently the branches parted and a phrillium bowed, and a creature entered the clearing. For a moment the swinger did not know what to make of it, eyes and nose and ears. Then he realized that he was looking at an animal not to be feared, one of the erect two-legs that lived in the Big Clearing. No-this one was different! This one was all sheathed in black, though it hadn't the look of fur. Since he had never known harm from any such being, the swinger let go with all four "hands," hung for an instant by his tail, and returned to the ground and his foraging. The two-legs-a man, and fully clothed-stood gazing into the clearing. His hands remained on branches on either side of his point of emergence. He was of medium stature, though well-muscled. His hair, blond as sunlight, had been cropped short. Below it, eyes the color of opaque water squinted into the mist. His nostrils flared with heavy breathing, as if he were winded from this planet's heavy gravity. The black sheathing that had disconcerted the swinger was a snugly fitted fabroprene jumpsuit. From the black equhyde belt around its middle depended a holster filled with a cylinder of dark blue metal. Boots of the same color and material as the belt and holster covered the man's feet and extended well up his shins. He moved slowly into the clearing-and out of the haze appeared the Big Clearing: a village. Small stone cottages nestled around a central plaza, where the well was. Roofs of woven phrillium-root covered the simple structures. From the vicinity of one or two of them the smoke of early cookfires eddied, lowering, to blend into the overcast. While the man took all this in, one word kept repeating itself in his mind. Home. And then: Home? And yes, home. 3 Aglaya. With a sigh, he set his hands to his hips. And am I of Aglaya, still? When now I have difficulty breathing her air, walking in this gravity? He started, surprising himself. O Aglii-I'm thinking in Erts! Hesitantly, pushing himself, he repeated the same thought in Aglayis. Then: Can I ever feel a part of this place again? Do I know if I want to? He shook his head slowly, feeling even heavier than Aglaya's gravity made him. Fighting down the rising thickness of emotion, he moved toward the buildings. He smelled it before he saw it: roasting leapfoot. He remembered that aroma so long out of mind. Rounding the corner of a house, he saw a figure bent over a fire, turning a spitted rump of the antelope-like beast. An old man, long white hair loose in the custom of Aglayan males. He wore only an off-white tunic that bared one arm and shoulder. Natural, the newcomer thought. I've learned to call that un-color "natural." Well-it's that all right, on Aglaya! The other straightened from the fire, set his hands behind his hips to arch his back as lean old men will do, and turned. He saw the newcomer. At once the old man froze in seeming fear. Then he squinted, cocking his head to study the strangely-attired intruder, who also ceased movement. The oldster shook his head in disbelief. "No! Can it be?" he muttered. Then, louder, "No! O Sunmother-Fidnij! Fidn'jherdhar! It's you!" He dropped the stick he'd been using to poke the fire and hustled toward the black-clad younger man. His gait was good enough, despite his years. The man called Fidnij, meanwhile, looked blank. Almost he retreated a bit. Then recognition lighted his face. "Kentoj!" he said, the last syllable a puff of expelled air as the other man embraced him. He returned the embrace. "Kentoj!" he repeated. "Friend of my father-of me!" He drew back to hold the oldster by the shoulders, at arm's length. "I nearly did not recognize you, Kentoj!" "Sunmother has aged me, to be sure," Kentoj said. "Time has passed your vanishing." "Not so much time, it seems, Kentoj. But-of course you 4 were here." Of course he's aged faster than I did, offplanet. But-so much . . . "And you, Fidnij! You have hardly changed, save for your dress and womanly short hair. What is this! And where have you been?-how come you return? We thought you taken by Sky-demons." Fidnij released his friend's shoulders. Again he transferred hands to hips. He looked at the ground, pondering. How to say it, now he was here? "I was, Kentoj," he said at last. "At least, what you call Sky-demons." He paused, coming to a

decision. "There . . . are no Sky-demons, Kentoj. No wait-listen a moment. There are only humans who come from the sky. Humans who-" He broke off, searching for the nearest equivalent word in the Aglayis he was speaking, here. "-Humans who enslave other humans. Who come from places other than Aglaya. Places beyond Sunmother's light." There. And now I've said it, if it's ever found out, I'm a wanted criminal all along the spaceways. A Mindrunner. Kentoj was busy looking baffled. He hardly knew which perplexity to address first. "Other . . . people? Off Aglaya? Beyond S-" He shook his head. "But Fidn'jherdhar-no Sky-demons? It is a teaching of Sunmother! They are evil ones, demons opposed to us Her children. They . . ." He spread his arms helplessly. "The 'demons' are a teaching of Sunmother's children, and of Tribemother, Kentoj-and Sunmother has never spoken to her directly. There are many such teachings in the . . . (universe)" he said helplessly in Erts, for no precise equivalent word existed in Aglayis, on Aglaya. "And of many deities. No no," he said, seeing shock on the other's face, his drawing back. "I do not speak against Sunmother, or blaspheme Her. I am of Aglaya, Kentoj. "But come! We will talk of this later, all of us. Now we must rouse the others, everyone I have come to see. My parents . . . ?" No; he knew already, from the look on the lined face. And Kentoj shook his face, looked sympathetic. "They died within months of your disappearance, Fidnij. You know they were old. Old. You were a late-life child. The grief of losing you . . ." 5 Fidnij looked at the ground, sighed, nodded. "May their souls be forever at one with Sunmother. I knew it before you asked, old friend. Before even I returned, I think." "They were worthy of Aglaya, Fidnij." Fidnij nodded once more, smiled. "They were worthy of Aglaya. Cool winds to them-" He broke off. His parents were beyond cool winds, now. They were one with Sunmother, happy in her sky-searing heat. "And you are worthy of Aglaya, Kentoj. Now come! Let me see my friends." Kentoj had little rousing to do, as the villagers were nearly all awake by now. Soon Fidnij was encircled by old friends, all talking at once. Answering questions under such conditions was impossible, and soon all adjourned to the long council building at the edge of the village. As they walked Fidnij wondered about his reaction to the death of his parents. Am I still so much of Aglaya that I ritualize my feelings so? Or am I now so much a Galactic that I am removed from those feelings? It sounds so strange to be called Fidnij after all this time-and it's my own name! No one commented on his reactions. Aglayans formalized their emotions; it was the Way. Occasionally there was one who wore feelings as clothing, out in the open for others to see. There had been that woman-scarcely more than a girl!-on Resh. The slave . . . who had so bloodily freed herself. In the council building, all seated themselves quietly to gaze at Fidnij. He sat at the head of the room at the side of Tribemother. Before her on the latticework table: the disk and the bud, signs of Sunmother and Aglii. Out there-faces. Aglayan faces, waiting to hear Fidn'jherdhar. They expected wonders, naturally. Many Aglayans had disappeared, either known or presumed to have been taken up by the demons from the sky. None had ever returned. Until now. They heard wonders. They were hardly prepared for them- for the shaking of their very concept of creation! Sky-demons were humans (nearly!), slavers, who came from other planets? But no one on Aglaya knew of other worlds. The near-constant cloud cover made astronomical observation impossible. No one on all Aglaya suspected even the existence of other peoples-like Aglayans and yet not- called Galactics. 6 Fidnij told them. Told them that those Galactics traveled between planets, along the parsec abyss between planets, between suns-yes! there were many "Sunmothers!"-in great metallic craft. Even stronger than iron, yes. That most of those systems, including Aglaya's, hung in "space" near the center of a vast group of "star systems" called the Galaxy. That Aglaya was one of those few planets not a member of a sort of interstellar village; not admitted to the fraternity of the spaceways; but instead deliberately kept in ignorance. ("Protected," Fidnij termed it.) That despite this "protection," slavers came and took Aglayans-or because of it, since "protection" made Aglaya a sort of ignorant game preserve for slavers. They took Aglayans as merchandise, to be

sold throughout the Galaxy. No, it was not legal. Yes, slavers did it. Sons and daughters of Sunmother and Aglii looked at each other in shock and incomprehension. "In fact," Fidnij told them, retaining the speaker's bud, "what I am doing now is not legal. Telling you of the spaceways is a crime! I am happy to be guilty of it! It was either this or never see you all again. So!" Out of unconscious habit he flipped the fingers of one hand out and upward, the Galactics' equivalent of a shrug. Though the gesture was unknown here, his words were enough. His audience understood the ties to Aglaya that bound them all. They were the ties; they were Aglaya. Because they were Aglayans, that little sea of pale faces under blond hair, and because Fidnij was Aglayan, the question of belief or disbelief never arose. Fidnij was Aglayan. He spoke. Therefore it was true. With each new wonder he spoke, the men of Aglaya looked about at their women, who merely nodded assent (though not without looks of astonishment). With that ability peculiar to Aglayan women, they chattered Fidnij's sincerity throughout, and some chanced his very thoughts, and confirmed it to their men. There could be no non-acceptance of this incredible tale of how one of their own had been carried off to the skies, the realm of Sunmother, goddess, and of demons—and carried beyond!

Still, shock showed on their faces. They were being asked to compromise their religion and rewrite its tenets, nothing less. Thus it was that Fidnij's attention was drawn to one among them whose face registered something else. She was hardly a woman; more a girl still, and pretty. Young and strong, her breasts (warheads, Fidnij caught himself thinking, in the jargon of the spaceways) not yet affected by the years of high gravitic tug. Her hair was milky and short and girlish, her skin the lovely golden hue of a sun she had hardly seen. He thought, She seems not so much amazed as—what? Excited! She continued to watch him intently, too, after the assemblage broke up and most of the villagers dispersed to ponder and discuss the shattering things they had heard. She stood nearby, cradling in her arms an enjjo, the traditional Aglayan stringed instrument. Fidnij approached Kentoj and asked quietly, "Who is that, Kentoj? With the enjjo." "What, do you not know her? But of course not—I forget. That is Pransahilodial. You recall—daughter of your parents' neighbors." "Pransa? Little Pransa? Great Tao-Agii, but time has passed differently for me! I knew her as a child." Fidnij did not note the frown that clouded his friend's face at the sound of an alien religion in Fidnij's swear-by (which indeed interested him, picked up from proximity to his ship's captain). Kentoj tactfully said nothing of it, but spoke only of Pransa. "She has become . . . something of a rebel, I fear. A dreamer, a wanderer. Undisciplined. She is Promised to a boy from another community against her parents' wishes. And Tribemother's." Fidnij raised his blond eyebrows. Then he smiled self-consciously. "I nearly let myself be shocked, Kentoj. For a moment I forgot where I have been and was truly of Aglaya again. It felt good." Kentoj looked gratified. "You are of Aglaya, my friend. Why should you feel that you are not? Have we not been kind in our welcome?" Fidnij smiled warmly. Acceptance, that was Aglayan welcome. "You have, of course. Worthy of Aglaya, all. I'm the one who has doubts." He turned away, frowning again. "We need not speak of them now." If ever, he thought. Kentoj paused, then brightened. "Then come! There will be feast for you this night, and we can talk until then." And taking the younger man by the arm, feeling that strange clothing, Kentoj hurried him outside. After dusk, at the feast, Fidnij spoke to Pransahilodial. Again he had the feeling of being torn between his Aglayan upbringing and his Galactic ways. The former said: She is Promised. The latter said that she was a beautiful young woman, and Fidnij was not known along the spaceways for his reticence with women. Indeed, he had been called—but never mind. His honor was of Aglaya. Thus he walked with her along the fringes of the gathering, with no intention other than to talk. They spoke of her childhood, when he had been the older boy in the next cottage. She made him laugh by recalling the "love" she had felt for him then. And he had been completely unaware of it! "You made me angry," she said. "I hated you." Even with the harshness of those words, her voice had the softness of the Aglayan

mist. "Perhaps the thing I was most unfortunate to lose when they stole me off Aglaya was something I did not know I had," he said. He noted that she did not look away at the compliment, but smiled openly in a way that ran a big dimple up her left cheek. She is bold, for a daughter of Aglaya, he mused- knowing that out along the spaceways she'd seem the picture of reticence. "Shall I sing for you?" she asked, and Fidnij nodded. Pransa sat on the soft grass with no seeming care for her burnt-orange tunic, and tuned her enjjo in the humid evening. She sang him an old song they both knew, all about love's being as fleeting as the fringebird but strong as the phrillia root. It seemed quaint to Fidnij now, accustomed as he was to the unsentimentality of those who fared the spaceways. It also soothed him and made him feel still more at home. When she finished on that last low, soft note, he had been lulled to the point of closing his eyes. He became aware that her hand had moved to his shoulder. She was stroking him gently. Fidnij looked at her in surprise. The look on her pretty face was one he had seen before, on the faces of more sophisticated women of other planets. Fidnij of Aglaya, Whitey of the space ways, was attractive and knew it. Easy, he reminded himself. She is promised. He recognized that her attraction was more likely to the romantic image of what he was-a spacefarer, an adventurer-than to himself. At least that's so if Kentoj is right about her. He had known that sort of woman, too-and, too often, girl rather than woman. They were good for socializing a bit, for trysting-slicing and soaring-and little else ... as were their male equivalents. Some of the husts at Kit-Cat's on Resh were more sincere than the type that hung around spacefarers, male or female, for the thrill of association. He rose, feeling the downward push of gravity that was once natural to him, and reached down. She came to her feet supple as a cat and they resumed their ambling walk along the edge of the rain forest. Attempting to keep her at some length by being as formal as possible, Fidnij expanded on the reasons he was able to visit home after his long sojourn offplanet. "The captain of my ship is gathering phrillia. We are a merchantship, you see, and the phrillia blossom is much prized on other planets-and hates to grow anywhere else. Since Aglaya is a Protected planet, it is rarely that anyone gathers cargo here. It is technically illegal, Pransa-but no one bothers merchanters much, so long as they avoid populated areas. It's the slavers that TGO comes down on." "Teejiyo?" "T.G.O.," he pronounced again; "TransGalactic Order. Sort of a peacekeeping organization." (He saw her frown at that. Peace was. It need not be "kept," on Aglaya.) "Anyway, we had just unloaded cargo on Karma-a moon of Luhra, a planet-and were sort of in this 'vicinity,' and Captain Tachi decided it would be worth our while to come over and down for the phrillia. Choosing this area now-that was my doing.'" "Keptan-Dotchey?'" He grinned and nodded. "Captain Tachi, right." "Then other people of your sky-sship are on Aglaya? Gathering flowers?" 10 "Uh," he confirmed with another nod. "On the other side of this thin stretch of forest. A klom or two." Excitement shone on her face and she grasped his arm with strength. "Could I see them? Meet them, Fidnij? Oh Fidnij, could I ..." He cut her off: "'No. I have done enough already, Pransa-too much, in telling you about them. I haven't the right to make greater lawbreakers of them. No!" he repeated, when she opened her mouth for further pleading. They walked in silence for a time, until: "Fidnij . . . they are your friends? I mean-you care for them, as you would for those of your home?" "In a different way, yes. Some of them, anyway. And all of them are good crewmates. Companions," "And your Tribemo-captain! This Dotchey, is that right?" "Tachi, yes," he chuckled. "He's a good man, and a strange one. He-" "He?" Pransa cut in, showing her surprise. "He?-a man?" Fidnij realized the basis of her surprise. In the matriarchal almost-gynecocracy of Aglaya, women were the leaders in matters social and political. He was about to reply-and never did. His ears caught a faint sound-overhead. A sound entirely too familiar, and chilling on Aglaya. He jerked his head upward and Pransa's gaze followed his. Above the forest raced a long streak of fire, orange-red as a swinger's fur at rutting-time, and brighter than anything ever seen in

Aglaya's sky even in daytime. The night sky here was near and blank, the stars a permanent unknown to the dwellers on the hothouse planet. Two moons shone murkily through the clouds but gave little light. Sky-ghosts. Yet such skyfire proved not unknown to Pransahilodial: "Sky-demons!" she said, in a shaky whisper. 2 This is the end- He's run from the land, And beauty is saved By a valorous band. -Walt Kelly, The Pogo Stepmother Goose It was quite a moment. . . . There was the build-up of G forces. . . . There were also some events that were not normal. -John H. Glenn, Jr., We Seven "No!" Fidnij snapped. "No Pransa, it's a lander. But not ours, and it's headed for the village. Come-run!" He took her by the arm but she had no need of being hurried through the thick, grasping foliage. They ran, Fidnij feeling the effort more than the lithe, muscular-legged woman at his side. On most other planets Aglayans were excellent runners and jumpers, because of their high-G musculature. Fidnij, long away from the relentless tug of his native world, felt the strain. He was winded by the time they broke from the woods into the village clearing. Before them, darting in and out of the flicker of the great central cookfire, milled a running multitude of screaming or yelling figures. The villagers screamed; those others yelled, while they chased Aglayans. A few of the younger villagers had already been captured. They were being held by strangers 11 12 who were clothed as Fidnij was, in snug all-over suits of fabroprene. Their fists bristled with metal cylinders like the one bolstered at Fidnij's side. Occasionally they raised and pointed the cylinders, and Pransa saw her fellows freeze where they stood or drop senseless to the ground. "Outworld stoppers," Fidnij whispered. Since he spoke in Erts, the language of the Galactics who had "conquered" the star-lanes, Pransa heard only gibberish. The scene before her, however, was all too comprehensible. She had heard Sky-demons described. She knew that they were what Fidnij called "slavers," despite her initial reaction to the flames in the sky. Never before had she heard of these demonic slavers attacking a village! Fidnij's hand went to the chill blue cylinder at his side, hesitated twitching as he thought better of the move. He took his hand away and turned to his companion, face close to huge-eyed face. "Pransa-we've got to flee. I cannot fight them alone. I can't even make out how many of them there are." It had not even occurred to Pransa that Sky-demons might be resisted, fought. She looked at him in momentary confusion. Then she put a hand to his chest. "Wait," she said. "I will return in a moment." She ran off toward the nearby buildings, crouching low. Fidnij, in shock, called after her once, low. Then he cursed and crouched down against a bushy shrub. He watched as she circled behind the outer rim of the cottages until she reached her family's, and disappeared within. Almost at once she emerged, with a humplike something draped across her shoulders. She no longer carried her enjjo. As she came swiftly (and gracefully, Fidnij was helpless not to note and appreciate) up to him, he saw that she bore a swinger. The frightened animal clung tightly to her neck. Its tail was curled tightly, close. "Tao's Name, girl!" Fidnij had snapped before he realized he had blurted in Erts. He switched to Aglayis: "What are you doing?" "I couldn't go without Prot! He's mine; he's my friend. We stay together. I-I did not see my parents. They must have fled." Her lip was atremble, and Fidnij saw her firm it. 1 hope they fled, he thought. "Straight out of the village, if 13 they have any brains. Don't worry, the slavers won't hurt them if they don't resist. What they want is the young ones. Like you. Now let's go." She nodded assent, and he led her off into the forest again, at speed. A swinger, he thought in exasperation. A double-damned sillyswinger! Now there were only the fading sounds of screams from the village, very soon overpowered by labored breathing and the crashing and rustle of underbrush as the two-and the swinger- got themselves far enough away to dispense with caution. Pransa soon realized that they were heading for the Great Meadow, a clearing even bigger than the one housing the village. She surmised that Fidnij was leading her to his-what did he call it? Lander. A huge patch of phrillia was a burst of blue at one side of the Meadow. That must be the gathering-place. Emerging from the woods, they paused to catch their breaths, and Pransa saw the vast pool of

light a few hundred meters away. She had never seen artificial light, and she swallowed hard. It did not occur to her to wonder at it, so great was the wonder that produced the illumination and lay at its edge. It was a great metallic thing, sleek and streamlined and bearing stubby wings on its sides and fins at its tail. The size of two cottages set side by side, with a gaping hole into which a human-looking figure was carrying a big blue armload. -Two others moved in the light, hacking at phrillia bushes with long-bladed knives. One was very long and lean, the other close to her size. So that's a lander, Pransa thought. And a ship is even bigger! Then Fidnij was hurrying her toward it. As they came up to the two with knives, Fidnij yelled. "Mehadar! Disco!" The two figures stopped their work to stare at the running pair. One of the spacefarers held a great bunch of royal and teal-blue blossoms that completely obscured its face. The other, Pransa saw, was a man of about Fidnij's age and size, in a yellow fabroprene jumpsuit-but otherwise a man such as she had never seen or heard of or even conceived. His hair was brown as dead wet leaves, his skin the hue of leapfoot hide. "Whitey?" Pransa heard him say, evidently addressing Fidnij-and then they went off into Erts, and she understood only one word. Slavers. "We've got to log off and redshift, fast," Fidnij said. "Slavers! Over at the village. We don't want to see or know about it, and we don't want the bastards to know they had witnesses." "Ah grabbles," the man said in disgust. "We're hardly half loaded and these are beauties." As if realizing for the first time that Fidnij was not alone, he stared at Pransa. "Musla bless-so's she!" "She comes with me," Fidnij said, moving a hand possessively to Pransa's arm, and the other man nodded. Pransa had no notion what Fidnij had said, but there was no mistaking the tone of command or the fact that the reference was to her, or his gesture in taking her arm. She emphasized it by moving a step closer to his side. She saw that the strange dark man accepted what was said, unquestioningly. Fidnij looked at the other spacefarer. "Disco: where's Willie?" The owner of the name Pransa heard as "Deesko" hurled its obscuring armload of big blossoms and Pransa received her biggest shock yet. Above the lime-green jumpsuit this face was orange!-true orange; very orange. More orange by far than even Sunmother on her rare appearances at day's end. In the face were set two big eyes of absolutely perfect roundness-dark eyes. The nearly pointed chin below those big round eyes gave its face a strangely sweet aspect. This one wore a headdress of straps with some sort of studs that she assumed were decorations. Leader? Pransa thought. The . . . creature was obviously female, since the jumpsuit bore two smallish but definite bulges at the chest. Strangest of all were her hands. Each had four fingers, flanked by two opposable thumbs. Six fingers! It/she addressed Fidnij. The language was theirs again- Erts-but the voice that produced the incomprehensible sounds was very odd. It might have been described as mechanical- 15 sounding save that Pransa had never heard anything mechanical in her life except that of overflying "demons." "Willie's at the lander, loading." "Come on," Fidnij snapped, and repeated it to Pransa, in Aglayis. The four ran for the open hole in the lander's side. The third crewmember emerged as they arrived. Another woman, Pransa saw, with hair that was really black!-and a dark, dark! tan face. Never had Pransahilodial seen hair and skin so dark. The woman was older than she, and maybe older than Fidnij too. Attractive, if not beautiful-at least of face. Her figure was something else again. Breasts apparently meant for twins or triplets strained the stretch fabroprene of her jumpsuit, which gaped open nearly to her navel. Her waist was small and her hips as smooth and rounded as Pransa's younger ones. Those breasts though- they were as large as any Pransa had ever beheld, and yet without any trace of sag or at least steepening downward slope that would have marked the bosom of an Aglayan woman of her apparent age. The jumpsuit was dazzling, and Pransa stared. It was striped. It wasn't that it had stripes; it was stripes, all of it, diagonally, and in every color Pransa could put name to and a few that were nameless to her because she had never seen them. And the colors gleamed, positively glowed in the light. The woman looked straight at Fidnij and said, "Flash?" "Slavers. Shut down, zip up, and

let's get blasting," Fidnij said in those same commanding tones. The woman nodded. She shot a glance at Pransa but cast no questioning look back at Fidnij, as the man had done. She turned and headed back inside the lander, and Pransa's eyes bulged at the churning display of buttocks that were clenched indecently tightly by the suit of stripes. Then Pransa was looking at Fidnij, blinking. He gave orders to that (indecent) woman! And she is older! Yet Pransa was more fascinated than shocked. Later, when she reflected on this night, she would realize (with genuine shock) that she had felt more alive during all this chaos than she had in all her eighteen years on idyllic Aglaya. "Whitey!" The yell came from the man called Mehadar. "The woods!" Fidnij whipped his head back toward the forest. Pransa imi- 16 tated him to see that two men-jumpsuited men-had broken cover and were racing toward them. "Tao's dangle," the one called Disco said in that strange voice. "The flainers followed you, Whitey!" Fidnij whirled back to yell into the gaping hatchway: "Willie! Close up now\ We'll board for'ard!" He pushed Pransa along the lander's side, both of them in a crouch. Mehadar and Disco followed, close. Again Fidnij reached for the cylinder holstered at his side, and this time he drew it forth. It gleamed dully, bluey. Without using it he reached another, smaller hatch, this one with steps leading up to the opening the size of a normal doorway. He pushed Pransa up and through into a small low chamber filled with cushioned seats with straps depending from their sides. The seats faced a large curved window at the lander's front. Below it curved a panel with buttons and colored lights and-other things that meant nothing to Pransa. She merely glanced at all of it before turning to Fidnij, who was still outside. "Out of the doorway and stay down!" he ordered, and she crouched beside one of the seats. Not enough, however, to obscure her view outside. Whatever happened, Pransa wanted to see it. She saw the two slavers coming on fast-and diverging, putting space between each other so as to come at the lander from two different angles. She saw Fidnij crouch low and point his cylinder outward, moving it back and forth, scanning. (Out of her sight to Fidnij's right, Mehadar and Disco were doing the same, and) Mehadar's voice drifted in. "They're dropping, Whitey! Take cover, now!" "Firm," Fidnij's voice came, followed by : "Careful. Modified stoppers." A moment later he was clambering backward up the few steps to join Pransa, with his hand still leveled out toward the Great Meadow. He cut the lights at once, so that they were not limned in the hatchway. She looked past him to see their pursuers lying prone in the grass out there. Their arms were extended toward the lander, as if pointing with both hands together. Then they were blocked by Mehadar. He appeared in the hatchway, also crouched and backing. Suddenly he stiffened, a gurgle com- 17 ing from his throat but quickly choking off. He seemed somehow to shimmer . . . And then he was gone. Gone. Pransa saw a faint shimmer, a sparkling in the air where he had been, a strangeness that swiftly settled, like dust motes in lamplight, to the ground. Empty space filled the hatchway. "Oh, Mehadar," Fidnij said low, his voice strained. "Tao's ..." and he switched to Aglayis: "Oh, Sunmother!" Pransa turned to ask what had happened. Disco's voice sounded first. "Got him, jacko! Get back-coming onboard fast!" Fidnij crowded back against Pransa as the orange creature leaped headfirst through the hatchway. Landing on the deck, Disco reached a long arm up to the curved panel and hit a button. The steps to the hatchway rose. They joined to the lander's hull and formed a seal. Fidnij scrambled up and seated himself before the panel. He snapped at Pransa in Aglayis, and then past her in Erts: "Get into a seat and strap yourself in. Willie, help her." Pransa realized for the first time that the very dark-haired Willie was in the cabin. The woman came around in front of Pransa, who was settling into a seat. Her swinger was still attached, shivering, to her shoulders. She lifted him down to her lap while the spacefarer woman began fastening stasis locks across Pransa's lap. "There, Prot, good Prot, it's all right. I'm here." She stroked the beast's fur. She looked up at the other woman and received a reassuring smile. "So Flashdoll's got hisself a souvenir, hmmm?" Willie said-and of course it was just so much babble to Pransa. Fidnij's voice came, hard



and calm. "You gonna talk or are we redshifting?" His fingers played over a panel. Crimson and turquoise lights came alive. Pransa heard, felt a humming commence somewhere, growing. "I'm doing as best as best as I can," Willie said, and Fidnij rolled his eyes upward while he shook his head. Willie took a seat next to the orange creature. Pransa glanced at it, just as it was removing the strange helmet-like contraption to reveal-red hair! True red, bright scarlet, the 18 red of the yarn used as hair on the dolls Aglayan children cradled. Fidnij spoke. "Everybody static?" Then, in Aglayis, "Pransa? In?" "Yes." "Firm," Willie said. "Tlee," came from the unhelmeted Disco. Pransa's head jerked around. She understood none of what was said, but that last hadn't sounded like speech. It was more a birdlike whistle. "Put that translahelm back on," Fidnij said irritably, and the orange creature replaced the peculiar device on its-her, Pransa thought-head. "Sorry," she said. "Just brushing the sweat off." "I didn't know you Jarps sweated, Disco darlin'," Willie said. "I thought Jarps just panted." "Only when we're ignited, Will-liee." "Which is all the time, right?" "Think we're all just alike, huh bigot? Do you know that we think all you-" Fidnij cut in even more irritably: "May I point out that this lander's about to be ignited?" And in Aglayis, "Hold on to that swinger, Pransa." She clutched Prot tightly to her and heard Willie's voice again. "Did you Fry that vugslicer, Disco?" "Pos. I'd like to Poof the whole flaining bunch. Poor Mehadar ..." Disco's voice was drowned out by the whine of the lander's engines. A moment later the vessel rose slowly straight up over the Meadow. Prot squealed in pain as Pransa clutched him reflexively. They began to move forward slowly, then with a roar, picking up speed. They seemed headed straight for the trees. At the last instant their trajectory curved and they cleared the forest, still climbing, steeper and steeper. Pransa's ears were filled with the roaring. She was mashed back into her seat by an acceleration force she did not understand. The swinger tried to squeal again but couldn't get it out through the G-forces. 19 Something's wrong! Pransa thought, worse than frightened. We're all going to die! She wondered-was that true or did only she feel this crushing pain? She had to work to turn her head to look at the others. With an effort, she caught a glimpse of Fidnij at the controls. He too was pressed into his seat, face made ugly, fingers working laboriously with some buttons set into the chair's arm. Pransa became aware of a pain in her chest and her teeth hurt her lip. The pressure against her breasts was agonizing. Dimly she heard Willie's voice, badly slurred. "Don't worry, sweetcakes. 'sallright. You'll get used to it." Pransa blacked out first. She awoke an indeterminate time later to the distant sound of Fidnij's voice-and an unholy stink that stung her nostrils. "Orbit stable. Rambler three kloms away. Tachi signals dock open." "Any sign of the slaver?" That peculiar voice of Disco's again. "Rambler's SIPACUM reports that their boat is pursuing. We can make dock before-Ah. Now they've changed course. Heading for their own ship." "Would they dare chase Rambler, Flash?" Willie asked. "We'll see ... Holy Tao, what is that stench!" He turned around to Pransa. "Oh, muth, that swinger's dumped its cargo in the excitement. Pransa, did you have to bring that animal?" Pransa, only dimly aware of what he was asking, looked baffled. Fidnij nodded toward her lap. Glancing downward, she saw the brown blob of excrement. On the deck at her feet, moaning and rolling its eyes, lay Prot. "Thank all the gods for artificial G, or that cess'd be floating about," Disco said. "Right now I'd be more grateful for an antinaus pill," Willie said. "Oh, Theba ..." She reached for her insy bag, dumped its contents on the deck, and stuck her face into it. Pransa's chagrin and embarrassment at her pet's behavior nearly overcame her sense of awe at sight of and docking with the lander's mother ship. Nearly. She had had no idea 20 from Fidnij's tales that these ships were so big. (He said that he crewed on a small vessel!) Pransa went with Willie directly to her quarters, where the older woman gave her a jumpsuit to replace her fouled tunic. (This suit was checked: mauve and heliotrope.) Willie tossed the tunic into a nearby opening, flipped her fingers at Pransa and said, "Poof!" Despite the language barrier, Pransa

felt this woman's kindness and attempts at reassurance. After all, she was one of Fidnij's companions. Pransa trusted Fidnij. The two women rejoined him in the con-cabin. (The strange orange woman-creature was evidently elsewhere.) An older man, bearded, not quite as dark as Willie, and dressed in oddly baggy brown clothing and a hard-billed cloth cap, stood before a larger version of the curved panel in the lander. He appeared to be reading something that glowed on a large dark green screen. Pransa sidled up to Fidnij. "That's Captain Tachi," Fidnij whispered. "He's tracking that slaver ship." At that moment two more crewmembers walked in. One was a slight man, perhaps Fidnij's age. He glanced at Pransa, then cast an odd look at Fidnij. Fidnij stared back coldly. Pransa, with the ability common to all Aglayan women to cherm, to sense the emotions of those around her, caught from the newcomer the first sensation of hostility that she'd felt from any of these people. From Fidnij she felt defensive-ness-and a little confusion. She had no time to dwell on these sensations, though, so taken aback was she at the other crewmember who entered. It was the orange-woman? But she was wearing a halter top now, and tight briefs of some stretch fabric. Pransa looked her over. She was orange to her toes, no doubt about it, or at least to the tops of her cream-colored evershine equhyde boots. That seemed positively normal compared with the sight of those briefs. There was no mistaking the male bulge in the front of the garment. Pransa looked again at the halter top. There was no mistaking those breasts, either. Holy Sunmother, what am I looking at? The creature tossed a friendly nod to Pransa, who would 21 have recoiled had she not chermmed simple hospitality from the . . . thing. She turned to Fidnij, seeking some explanation. He shook his head as if to say, "Later." She chermmed amusement. The bearded man turned from the panel to address the two newcomers. "Achmet, Disco, to DS, pres. Redshift!" The two nodded and left the con. "The rest of you into your seats. We're leaving orbit at once." Willie headed for one of the two rear seats in the group of four that faced the panel. Fidnij escorted Pransa to the seat next to hers and helped strap her in. "We're going to be feeling a little more G-force, Pransa. Gravity. Not so bad as before. Do you think there's anything left in that animal?" He indicated the swinger draped over her shoulders, twitching its long, two-fingered tail and looking about as happy as a hust in a mosque. "He'll be all right. I'm sorry, Fidnij." Fidnij smiled and shook his head. Then he headed for the chair next to the one Tachi had strapped into. "Are they pursuing, Captain?" "Aye," Tachi said, eschewing spacer slang for something older and more to his taste, a preference that showed also in his anciently-patterned Homeworld sailor's garb. "Which means they'll intercept. Us with only sublight drive! That's no small-timer out there. It's the fast ship of a successful slaver." "Will we fight, Captain?" Willie asked. "No average in that. No, if that bastard wants a scrap, we're space dust. I'm hoping it won't try pirating a merchanter no matter how easy a catch we are. Slave-raiding Aglaya is one thing, but I don't think we're enough of a prize for him to risk piracy. Still," and he inclined his head toward Pransa without looking her way, "they did seem quite eager to pursue this youngster. She would make them prime . . . merchandise." Pransa tried to cherm this man and found it difficult. Not that he was any harder to sense than anyone else. The problem was that she had trouble interpreting what she felt, putting a name on it. 22 He seems so matter-of-fact about everything. Accepting. That was the way he seemed to feel toward her, toward their situation, everything. She did seem to catch some hostility, evidently toward the slaver, but the captain kept it in tight check. Overall he was simply calm, commanding, in control. Efficient. And Fidnij seems to be his second-in-command, not the woman. Pransa's thoughts were interrupted by the increasing G-load, pressing her once more into her seat. Not so bad this time. It lasted a few minutes, during which she was able to watch Tachi and Fidnij work the controls, pressing buttons, activating lights. She found it fascinating. Soon the acceleration eased and gravity returned to standard. Pransa discovered that she hadn't been imagining it when she had felt, earlier, that she was lighter

than normal. She had attributed it to her blackout and subsequent dizziness. No; she was indeed experiencing less gravitic pull than she had all her life on Aglaya. The feeling, the very realization of it, exhilarated her. So this is the spaceways! I think I might like this. Fidnij's voice interrupted her thoughts, but in incomprehensible Erts. Every time this happened she felt a growing frustration, a sense of being a bystander at some higher order of event from which she was excluded. "We're being scanned, Captain." Fidnij indicated an Eye-bright pink scan-winker on the panel. "They're at five hundred kloms-and holding." He paused, then added, "No voice scan." Tachi nodded. "They'll doubtless open comm any-ah!" A red light had flashed on directly before Tachi. He swung a microphone arm down to hang a few sems before his face. "Hold us on this course and speed, Whitey. SIPACUM to Manual-and-Continue." As his mate moved to execute these orders, Tachi toed open the ship-to-ship comm. "Merchant ship Rambler out of Terasaki, Nagzhong Tachi commanding," he said curtly. "State your name and business." A pause. Then an oily tenor voice came over the comm. No visual. "I greet you, Captain Tachi. I will not waste your time. 23 You have some of my property onboard your vessel. Two Aglayans. I want it." "There's his business, at any rate," Tachi said sourly in an aside to Fidnij. Then to the slaver, "I have an Aglayan crewmember, sir. He is clearly not your property." "You have also a woman." Tachi paused, only a moment. "I have a woman passenger. Is that who you mean? My passengers are not your property, either." Fidnij-Whitey-smiled reassuringly at Pransa on hearing this. She took the smile gratefully, though of course she had no notion of its import. She heard only . . . noises. "Taking primitives onboard your vessel, Captain Tachi? That makes you a Mindrunner, sir. A criminal. Which you apparently already were in any case, being on a Protected planet." "An interesting statement of my situation, sir," Tachi said drily. "Hardly a threat, though. Somehow I can't see you reporting me." "Need I point out then, Captain Tachi, that my DS capability is far greater than yours, and my vessel far faster? I can take my property by force if necessary. There are no space nippers in this vicinity, Captain. I checked." Tachi (whose name in one of the old Homeworld-Urth- languages meant "sword" and who wouldn't have cared if he'd known) was not an aggressive man, save in business dealings. Being part owner of Rambler (with an onplanet partner), it behooved him to be sharp in business. Sharp, but honest. In space his policy was Live and Let Live. Still, he was not one to be pushed around by those who broke that rule. And he did not in any way consider the present badinage to be a business dealing. Before he had an opportunity to reply to the slaver, Pransa's pet swinger once again made himself the unwelcome center of attention. It may have been Profs nervousness at the ever-changing display of blinking lights on SIPACUM (Ship Inboard Processing And Computing Unit: Modular, the ship's computer behind the winking panel that so fascinated Pransa). Or it may have been that he finally saw something in this sleek, artificial world that reminded him of his native forest. Whatever the stimulus, he suddenly leaped for the over- 24 head comm mike dangling before Captain Tachi's face. As he hit it, it swung away, carrying the orange-furred creature with it. Mike and swinger banged up against a plexiplas viewscreen. Prot let out a screech, directly into the mike, followed by shrill chattering. Back over the comm came a startled yelp, at least two and a half octaves higher than the slaver's speaking voice. The distance of the sound made it apparent that its maker had pulled back from his own mike in startlement. Whitey frantically unstrapped himself, leaped up and grabbed the animal. He returned it grimly to Pransa. Whitey caught a glimpse of Willie, doubled over in her seat, red-faced, biting her hand. He tried to frown at her, but had to suppress a chuckle as well. He returned to his seat just in time to hear the less-than-assured voice of the slaver asking for a repeat. (At this a muffled gasp came from Willie.) Tachi, his craggy visage the color of Saipese flamesilk beneath its normal dark bronze, turned to Willie. "Get that woman and her Thebanian cess-rooter off my con!" he said through clamped teeth. "Now!" Willie, as red as he and holding her breath, unstrapped, helped

Pransa to do likewise, and led her from the cabin. Just before the door hissed shut behind them, Whitey and Tachi heard an explosion of released air. Tachi turned back to the comm. "My apologies, Captain. You were saying, I believe, that there are currently no policers in Aglaya's vicinity. Of course I am aware of that. If there were, you would not be carrying out your despicable activities there. Or, true, I my quite peaceful ones. However, may I point out that I have already sent signals giving your current position and your ship's signature. Even if you destroy us, policers--and I mean TGW--will know who did it." Whitey knew that no such signal had been sent. Moreover, it could not have been. Rambler had neither ion sensors nor trace analyzers to detect the characteristic "smell" and "taste" of expelled particles and gases left as distinctive individual "fingerprints" by every ship in space. Tachi was bluffing. He was good at it. Whitey had seen him do it many times in business dealings, although he never lied or misrepresented. 25 Whitey thought he would excuse the lie this time. "You're trying to fob me, Captain," came over the comm. The slaver's voice had regained its assurance. "You haven't that capability." "Haven't I? This is a small ship, Captain, but a profitable one. Those profits go not into luxurious fittings but into equipment. We have no tachyon converter as you know, or I'd be speeding away at light and faster, not sitting here talking to you. But our SIPACUM is an up-to-date model, equipped for deep-space tracking. We need it. I salvage derelicts as a good part of my business . . . Captain." No reply came. Tachi waited only a couple of beats before continuing. He keyed his voice just slightly lower this time, sounding even more relaxed and in control. "And if I am bluffing, sir, is it worth it to you to find out? We are not talking slavery now, at getting away with which I'm sure you are a past master. We're talking piracy. TGO" (he deliberately used the name of the dreaded parent organization this time, not its "mere" enforcement arm, TGW) "frowns rather more heavily on piracy than on slaving Protected planets, Captain." This time Tachi remained silent, waiting. Nothing came. Whitey, looking at his captain, saw no sign of the growing tension felt by ship's mate Whitey. It was one of the many reasons Whitey admired and emulated this man. If ever Whitey were to become master of his own vessel, he would wish nothing more than to be such a one as Captain Tachi. Right now Whitey knew his chances of gaining even another few moments of life hung by a filament. The slaver was clearly coming to a decision, and that decision could be to open fire with DS-Defense Systemry, a laughable name for an offensive weapon. Whitey knew that Achmet and Disco were standing by at Rambler's own DS, listening to every word of the faceless exchange with the anonymous slaver captain. There was no real chance, of course, of defense against the larger ship. There was also no chance that Tachi would ever give up two under his protection. He would take the whole ship down fighting first. It was his Way. Whitey would have expected no less. Suddenly the slaver's voice came over the comm, almost merry. 26 "Kirin bids you farewell, Captain Tachi. That's spacer Kirin, Captain Shieda commanding. Remember the name. Doubtless we'll meet again and pursue this matter under more propitious terms. For me." The comm went dead. The light winked off. Tachi turned quickly to his mate. "Bluff, Whitey?" Whitey keyed a toggle, checked a screen. "Neg, Captain. Straight. Slaver's moving off." He grinned. "Well done, Captain!" Tachi did not deign to acknowledge the compliment. Whitey had not expected him to. Whitey/Fidnij never gave compliments--or indeed did anything else save continue competent--to gain favor. "The man identifies his vessel with himself. That's a sign of a good captain. He sees himself and his ship as one. Mark me, lad, behind that grunsnot voice and slimeworm's profession there's a fine ship's master. And a clever one." "Not too clever to be fobbed, this time." Tachi flipped his fingers upward. "Discretion can be clever, Whitey. The slim chance that I might not have been bluffing-- well, two Aglayans weren't worth it." He flashed his mate a rare smile. "Not that at least one Aglayan isn't worth a lot to me," he said, an even rarer compliment. Whitey followed his captain's lead and acknowledged neither. "As for that other Aglayan," Tachi went on, his face taking on its accustomed

dourness again, "well-we're going to have to talk about her!" 3 Any position is tenable if you've got someone to cover your ass. -Trafalgar Cuw Garbage in, garbage out. -dictum of Jefokamo, god of computers In the con-cabin of slaver vessel Kirin, a grossly fat man sat scowling at the quietly winking lights of the ship's SIPACUM. The scowl deformed the blue tattoo of a ringed planet that decorated one of his cheeks. His stubby fingers played with the long ringlets of hair seeming to dribble from his head and the action exposed large earrings; crysplas hoops. After a time he nodded in decision. He rose. A wave of his pudgy hand toward the crewmember in the mate's seat indicated that she was to take the con. She nodded, watching the captain stride from the cabin-a garish figure in blousy, bright red shirt open down the chest (revealing no hair, of course; like nearly all Galactics, Shieda was hairless below the neck). The deep blue sash gathered around his waist slung fringed tassels nearly to his knee on the leg opposite his holstered stopper. Below the sash he wore baggy yellow trousers tucked into boots of Saipese lizardskin. Garish, tall, yet dumpy. Altogether he seemed rather to be attempting both to conceal and call attention to himself, all at once. His crewmember stared after him, frowning. A good captain and a good-paying one, she mused. All I have to do is 27 28 my job, and put up with that body. The lean, very young-looking woman sighed. Every night. Turning sidewise to squeeze through the con-cabin's hatchway, the captain headed down the gold-hued tunnel toward his cabin, brushing back his hair as he went. Kirin's captain reached the cabin, entered, and crossed to a small locker in one corner. He opened it and hurriedly took out two foodpaks. The shipfarm on Kirin was equipped with as advanced a cloning system as any along the spaceways. Its captain saw to that personally. This food, however, was quite a bit fancier than that grown onboard. This was planet-grown food, expensively preserved and stored, and for the captain's personal use only. Opening the paks, he stuffed the contents of both quickly into his face and swallowed them almost without chewing. He washed it all down with a skweez-pak of everchil pop (Jahpurese root ale), gulping it so fast it hurt his throat. He grimaced, belched hugely, and left the cabin. Decalorics were long since a commonplace of Galactic civilization. Indeed, they were a product of the old Homeworld technology, predating even interstellar travel. It was said they were contrived by the long-subsumed white race of humans, once dominant but since absorbed by the darker races, the red, the yellow, the brown, and black that had now commingled to produce the vari-hued (but rarely true black and never white) Galactics. (Add to these the individuals who had voluntarily changed the color of skin, hair, and eyes either by subcutaneous injection or, at a deeper level, cell dye.) Decalorics were a simple set of enzymes that persuaded the body to reject all unnecessary fat-producing calories and fat cells. They were effective in 98.797 per cent of all Galactics. Kirin's master was one of those unfortunate 1.203 per cent who had to wear the outward sign of the still-as-common-as-ever compulsion that had once been called gluttony. He strode back to the cargo area in the one-half G maintained on Kirin for its captain's comfort. (Null-G would have been even more comfortable, but he felt like a fool in those clumsy static soles that made him jiggle and shake-and a grotesque, floating Shirashite without them.) Two crewmembers awaited him. They knew he had taken 29 longer than necessary to arrive. They also knew why, and said nothing. Both were quite accustomed to their captain's frequent duckings into his cabin for food (and drink). Their captain thought his gluts were a secret. His crew let him. They accepted his excuses ("Got to visit the sitter"; "Time for my medicine") with no comment. They also accepted without comment the results of this behavior: sour moods produced by indigestion; constant belching; and-worst of all, particularly onboard a spacer- flatulence. The latter made the crew very grateful for the one-half G. Captain Shieda now gestured to his two crewmembers, who preceded him into the cargo area. Placing his hand against the palmlock on the slavehold, he stood back for his mate to open the hatch. The three men entered, the captain standing carefully behind his men until they could be certain no slaves were in a mood to cause trouble. All

seemed quiet. The captain stepped forward to scan his walking merchandise. About twenty Aglayans stood or sat on the bare deck of the hold. All were young men or women. Three or four were very young, mere children. A few, who had been in unruly moods when captured, lay stupor from drugs. The rest, hostile but frightened, stared sullenly at their captors. These newly-enslaved wretches had only begun to realize that these were humans that had taken them from their homes, not Sky-demons. The slaver who styled himself "Commodore" took note that one youth wore a tunic of a different style from all the others. It was cut shorter, gathered at the waist, and of a deep olive color. Shieda also noted that this lad's glare was the most challenging-if such a term could be extended to anyone in his position. "Phack," the captain said thoughtfully. Phack-Phayakhmer, off Ghanj, originally-glanced at him. Phack was a bit better dressed than his fellow crewmember, as befitted his position as Ship's Mate. "Pos, Commodore?" "Speak to that fellow in the short olive tunic. He's different from the others. Find out why, Phack." 30 Phayakhmer nodded; he'd been on the Aglayan slaverun longer than his captain and had picked up a working knowledge of Aglayis. (No learning injections existed for the barbarous tongues of Protected planets.) He spoke to the sullen young man-slave-or boy. At first the youth didn't understand. He had never heard Aglayis spoken with any sort of accent and was astonished. At last he brightened a bit, and replied. Phack turned to his captain. "Says he's from a different village than the one we raided, Commodore. He had come to visit his Promised-which means they were to be wed-when we arrived." Shieda's eyebrows lifted. He smiled speculatively. Just when I was getting bored with slicing these Aglayan cakes! But to slice one before her intended's eyes-ah, now! That could be as delicious as that week with Alanni Keor! "Slaver's perks," it was ironically termed along the spaceways. Not all buyers cared whether they gained virgin slaves. Many even preferred otherwise. Many captains were happy to oblige. "His Promised, is it? Find out which one she is, Mate." Phack spoke again in the slave's tongue, but received no answer. He repeated the question with the same result. Turning to his captain, Phack opened his mouth to speak. Shieda cut him off; he'd read the situation. "Tell him who I am, and what his position is." Phack rattled off some more Aglayis. The slave's brow furrowed when he caught the unfamiliar sound of his captor's name-Shieda. Phack had to struggle to get across the idea of "slave" in the language of a backward people with no such concept. Judging from the dark angry look that came over the youth's pale-skinned face, Phayakhmer was successful. "Now," Shieda said, staring, "ask him again." Phack repeated the question. This time the boy answered. "He says his Promised is not here-she wasn't taken in the raid, Cap'm. Apparently she wasn't in the village at the time. He had just arrived himself, and hadn't seen her." Shieda regarded the Aglayan youth. "D'you suppose that's the straight scrute, Mate?" "I think so, Captain. Judging from my experience with these people. They don't lie worth a jinkle. I haven't seen 31 him show anything toward any of the females since they've been onboard, either. We been watchin' 'em pretty close." "Uh. Continue to do so, Phack." Shieda turned to leave, and stopped thoughtfully. "Out of the village, you say. Do you suppose she could have been the one you chased, Tember?" That to the other crewmember, a wretch of a fellow Shieda had picked up in a bar on Front. "She was young enough, Cap'm, far's I saw. Could be." He flipped his fingers. "There was that celebration going on," Phack said. "Probably not too many out of the village." Shieda nodded. "Pos. Pos-I think perhaps Captain Tachi's 'passenger' is this boy's intended. Phack-tell him so. And tell him . . . tell him that we destroyed that ship when he refused to hand over his beloved." Phack obeyed. The dark look on the youth's face turned to black hatred at Phack's words. The slave waited not an instant after the mate had finished-he pounced at Shieda. He got as far as the lapel of the captain's bright red shirt, which he grabbed in a clenched fist, before Phack had his slavetube out. Jamming the device into the boy's ribs, he actuated it. At once the slave fell to his face on the deck, screaming in greater agony than he had known possible. He also knew nothing of what a slavetube could do to his

central nervous system if it were left on long enough. Phack's hand followed him down, giving him just enough of a dose to exhaust him. The slavetube was an ingenious device, instilling a pain that was not only fearful and demoralizing, but draining. The brave youth lay gasping and quiescent at their feet. Shieda pushed him away with a booted toe. "Solitary, Phack," he said huskily. "And get busy on brainboosts for these others. I have business in my cabin." He wheeled and left hurriedly. Phack and Tember exchanged knowing glances. Then they set to hauling the exhausted boy away to separate confinement. Shieda, shaking from the attack on his person-which was of a size and height to daunt most would-be attackers-closed and locked his cabin door behind him. He went directly to a 32 small locked box and removed a pak of repsonal pills, relaxants. He popped one, thought a moment, and took another. They did him little good, since he proceeded to eat till he vomited. 4 The untented Kosmos my abode, I pass, a willful stranger; My mistress still the open road And the bright eyes of danger. -R. L. Stevenson, Songs of Travel ... I must go Where the fleet of stars is anchored and the young star-captains glow. -James E. Flecker, The Dying Patriot The small private freighter Rambler had both its outstanding qualities and its lacks. It possessed a huge cargo space. It had the power to haul more than would fill that space-and often had, with all manner of freight attached by cargo cable to the ship's exterior hull. Rambler's was one of the better captains on the spaceways, a shrewd merchant as well as a good spacefarer. On the other hand, Rambler was not overly spacious aside from stowage. At this level of dealing, the cargo was paramount, not the crew. Amenities were nonexistent. The captain slept in the con-cabin when the mate was on watch. The captain could have had a cabin; Rambler had just finished its best year ever and had hired on two additional crew-members to its original four (including Tachi). A cabin had 'been added by carving a bit of space from this area and that. The crew naturally assumed that ship's master would take it. 33 34 Tachi did not; he would keep his small work-cabin and continue to sleep by the con. The new cabin was First Mate's! A bit embarrassed even though none of his crewmates begrudged him the perk, Whitey moved in. The others contrived, as before, to sleep where they could. Mostly in the cargo hold. Willie, sole female onboard, had a small cabin of her own-one that shared sonishower and sitter with Whitey's. (It was common knowledge that the two shared more than that. No one begrudged that, either. Usually.) Now more room was available. Mehadar had not completed his first trip. He slept permanently as random dust motes on Aglaya. Rambler lacked more than space. It lacked the tachyon converter that would give it lightspeed capability. Therefore it also lacked choices. It had to take any cargo, at whatever price, usually local. It couldn't afford to bypass any planet where opportunity might wait. Still, Captain Tachi's expert dealing had built its business up to a point where it might soon be outfitted with a tachyon converter. All this Whitey (he had asked her to call him that, now that they were on the spaceways) explained to Pransa as they sat in his modest but private cabin. She tried to understand it, although she was yet grappling with the concept of there even being other worlds-"planets." She waved the matter away and changed the subject back to the crew. "What happened to your other man? I never caught his name." "Mehadar. He was Fried. Poofed. Killed." "But he vanished!" "That's what a stopper" (he patted the metal cylinder at his hip) "does on its highest setting. On setting One-Freeze-it stops a person in its tracks, as long as the beam is kept on the person. On Two it affects the nerves more severely, setting the person to sort of dancing. On Three it kills. Disintegrates. "The stoppers used by the slavers were what we call Modified. Their Two settings cause unconsciousness." Pransa shuddered. Are these Galactics advanced, as they seem? And claim! Or barbarians? "What setting did you have yours on, out there in the Meadow?'" "Three. We were fighting for our lives. And you can't just 35 stand there and hold the beam on one person while another's attacking you." "It would seem these, uh, modified things would be better, then." Whitey nodded. "But they're hard to come by. Illegal. Expensive." He flipped his

fingers. "Tell me about that orange woman. Who-what is she?" (It never occurred to Pransa to inquire further about the murdered man. Whitey's lack of outward emotion was perfectly in keeping with his Aglayan upbringing. What she didn't realize was that no one else in the crew showed much feeling, either, and it had little to do with upbringing. Life was cheap and quickly lost on the spaceways. For all the advances in technology, which often outstripped the human ability to deal with social change in a civilized manner, these were still frontier times in interstellar travel.) At her question, Whitey laughed the loudest Pransa had ever heard him. He shook his head, coughing. Finally he spoke. "Disco isn't a woman, Pransa. Don't tell me you didn't get a good look at those shorts!" Pransa colored slightly. "I did, but-I mean, breasts! He's a man, then? With a-problem?" Whitey laughed again, and again stopped with an effort. "No, no. Disco is a Jarp, Pransa. From the planet Jarpi. It's an alien. Disco I mean. A hermaphrodite." He rendered the word in Erts, since there was no Aglayan equivalent. "That's a creature who's half one sex and half the other. It occurs occasionally among humans, although never among Aglayans. All Jarps are that way. Disco has breasts. It also has a penis-slicer in our slang, by the way-and a stash, I mean vagina, plus one testicle and one ovary. Jarps are all capable of pregnancy. Each is capable of mating with any other Jarp. And does, frequently. Ah well, who am I to talk? Show me the Aglayan who doesn't love lovemaking." It was a truism that there were no frigid Aglayans. Mature members of the species mated often and joyfully. All-of both sexes-were circumcised at birth. Jarps were reputed to be something else again, though. Aglayans took Lifemates. Jarps mated not only with their Chosens (Whitey wasn't even certain they had such) but with 36 about anyone, Jarp or Galactic, who acquiesced. At least such was the impression among Galactics. Whitey could not recall that any Jarp of his acquaintance had denied it. Pransa seemed to have missed the comment about Aglayans. She still struggled with the concept of Jarps. "You mean that he's-it's?" (Whitey nodded.) "It's not human?" "Correct. Jarps are true aliens." He paused. "So are we, Pransa." "We? But we're human! I mean, look at us! Look at them. Galactics I mean. We come from another planet but you said there were lots of planets and-we're not so dark, but ..." She stopped, confused. Whitey shook his head. "Galactics live on many planets. They came from, evolved on, one. They call it Home world. We evolved separately, on Aglaya. Very like them, and maybe we could even be called human. But we're one race and Galactics are another. And Jarps are another." Pransa tried to absorb this. It proved not too difficult. She liked the notion that Aglayans were different from these strange people who traveled like gods and enslaved each other like demons. (Whitey had told her that Aglayans were not the exclusive source of slaves. Galactics enslaved Jarps and other Galactics as well.) She never doubted that Aglayans were better, somehow. Finally she asked, "Are there other races?" "Yes, a few. Some so alien you'd think Jarps were human in comparison. Shirashites, for example." He shuddered at the thought of the blob-like creatures, put off-limits almost as soon as they'd been discovered. Whitey rose. "But we don't need to talk of them now. I have to confer with Tachi about what to do with you. I already asked him whether we would pursue Starjump. He said no, of course-" "But there are Aglayans onboard! Slaves!" "Sunmother herself could be captive onboard Starjump and Rambler still wouldn't have the pursuit capability or resources. Anyway, I asked him whether he would ask TGW to pursue and he also said no. No formal request for pursuit. TGW are policers," he said, seeing her puzzled look. "People who take into custody those who have broken the law." 37 "Why will Tachi not ask for their help?" "It requires that a great deal of red tape be gone through by Rambler's captain. But more than that, it would require that your presence be divulged, not to mention the fact that we were gathering phrillia, uh . . . semi-illegally. A payment of many hunstells, which we can't afford, would make it legal. No payment would make taking you off Aglaya legal. You'd be either locked up or brain wiped, take your pick, and never allowed to return. The rest of us would be through on the spaceways, and tried



as Mindrunners besides, for bringing knowledge of the spaceways to a Protected planet. Even to just one of its inhabitants. Any other captain than Tachi would already have put me through the airlock for bringing you onboard. Tachi's tough but he's not uncaring." "What will he do with me?" "That's what I'm going to find out." Whitey found Tachi in the cramped cabin he used only for business purposes and occasional privacy. He sat in a chair holding a skweez-bulb of Pale, even though Rambler was still at one G, one gravity-standard, and he could have held the no-cal ale in a plass. "Excuse me, Captain. I wanted to ask you about the matter of Pransa ..." "Your little cake with the spacegoing menagerie? That is a definite matter for discussion, pos. You can keep her away from my con, for starters." "I'm sorry, sir, it-" Tachi flipped the fingers of one hand. He took a swig of the Pale. "It couldn't be helped," he said. "You did the right thing bringing her onboard rather than leaving her for those slavers." He sipped his drink again. "But now we'll have to offload her as soon as possible." "Firm, Tachi. Shall I inslot for Aglaya, then?" Tachi looked at his mate as if the man had lost his mind. "Aglaya? Are you completely fobbo, man? That slaver is almost certain to return there, perhaps soon if we interrupted his raid before he had his full cargo onboard. We'd be unprotected and out of touch. When I said offload I meant at our next planetfall. I've saved her life at risk to my vessel. 38 Now she'll have to fend for herself, as other Aglayans have. As you have." "Excuse me, Tachi, but I was a slave. That may not seem an advantage, but at least I was protected while I was assimilated by Galactic society. I also had a better master than most. Most important, I had a brainboost. That girl doesn't even speak the language!" "Then let her get a brainboost." "By herself?" Tachi flipped five again. He saw his mate's lips firm. "Then may I take some time to help her get one?" Whitey said. "And teach her a bit more of our ways, maybe find her a place? A short leave. A few days-ess." "Tao's dingle, man, am I going to lose my whole crew to this runaway?" He sat sulkily while Whitey said nothing. Then, "Oh, I suppose we can't let her run around as she is. Go ahead. But after that I want her off my ship, firm? I haul no passengers, especially ones so recently primitive." "Pos, Captain. Firm. And thank you." Whitey headed for the hatch. Tachi stopped him. "And the next thing you teach her had better be how to maneuver in static soles. I can't afford to maintain this one-G nonsense for her benefit. We'll be going to null in one half-hour." Whitey nodded and departed. Not uncaring, he thought. Tough. Just a captain first, that's all. And second and third. Whitey returned to his fellow Aglayan. She took the news of being unable to return to Aglaya surprisingly well. Kentoj was more right than he knew about her. I swear she wants to stay offplanet just out of curiosity! "But J don't understand why I can't stay with you, Fidnij," she said. "I can see the danger in returning to Aglaya, at least right now. Though I don't understand your silly law about Aglayans." She scowled. "My place is with my captain. He says you can't stay. We could be caught as Mindrunners if you were with us." "You're an Aglayan, Fidnij! I'm an Aglayan!" "I was born an Aglayan, Pransa. I'm of the spaceways now. I may not be Galactic by race, but I am by my ways. And my name is Whitey." 39 "You say Galactics are aliens," she said, neatly reversing the distinction. "You let an alien give you orders? When an Aglayan from your own village needs help?" "He is my captain. Pransa, he is my captain! Captains give orders, crewmembers follow them. Unless they want to lose their livelihoods. Berths on ships are not that easy to come by-especially for Aglayans." "Now you're an Aglayan again? All right then, if I can't stay, why won't you come with me?" Whitey sighed. "Pransa, I've told you-this is my work. This is what I do. I'm a spacefarer, and if I want to stay one I can't just quit my berth." "Why do you want to stay one?" Whitey turned from her and stared at the bulkhead. He rubbed a knuckle across his mouth and was silent for a few moments. When he spoke, it was without facing her. "Have you had time to look, Pransa? At space? You got a glimpse in the lander, although you weren't feeling too well then, and most of what you saw was Rambler. But you've seen the viewscreen in the con, haven't you?" Indeed she had. Seen it?

She'd stared at it, entranced, when Whitey had taken her-previous to the recent directive to keep her out of the con entirely-on a tour of the ship. She'd stared at the dark-but-not-black pool of space, spattered with those bodies that were unfamiliar to Aglayans save as dots of light seen infrequently peeking from the nighttime cloud cover. She'd stared at the center of the galaxy, with its uncountable such bodies, its stars, lighting up the vastness with a glow like flaming ice against the fuliginous depths. Space-empty but not empty. The immense distances between the stars seemingly impossible, so crowded with them was the void. Yet great as their numbers were, those distances reduced them to occasionality. It was more than she could believe, let alone accept. It was a beauty she had never allowed for, let alone imagined. It excited her more than anything she had ever anticipated. Yes, anticipated, for anticipation was the startlingly unexpected emotion she experienced as she viewed this impossibility of universe. This gigantic, small portion of Universe. She said none of this to Whitey. How could she? She spoke 40 only Aglayis. She merely nodded in response to his question. He turned from the bulkhead and spoke to her. "I love the spaceways, Pransa. There's no good work for Aglayan spacefarers onplanet, and if there were I wouldn't take it. "There's more than that, though. I was raised in the heat of Sunmother, Pransa, and I knew nothing else. I know now that there is so much more than Sunmother. I honor her-the idea of her-and always will. But there are other people with other deities. "Aglaya is not the only way, Pransa." "Fidnij," she said desperately, ignoring his frown, "I am pulled apart! Think how it is now with me, as it was with you when you first found all this. I don't even know the language of these people as you say you did at the outset. I am frightened! I want to return to Aglaya-and yet I don't. I want to see this new world. These new worlds! But not alone. I'm not ready for that. I need a-friend. Someone of Aglaya." Whitey smiled softly at her. "I understand, Pransa. And you must know that I would not leave you alone and helpless. I've told you of the brainboost you will receive. You can't realize how much you will learn, all at once. It will be as if the knowledge just existed in your mind. You will survive. And I will not simply abandon you. I will help you find a place. And I will always seek a way to return you safely to Aglaya." "Once I have lived among them, will it not be illegal for me to return?" He sighed again. "Yes." She stood stiffly and proudly before him. "Then if you are going to leave me to my own devices, perhaps you had best be thorough about it. 7 will find my own way back to Aglaya." He stared at her, then nodded. "Perhaps you will. You're not the first, nor the most determined, woman of Aglaya I've ever seen along the spaceways." He shook his head and went on, more to himself than to her. "Tao knows I've had this conversation before.'" "What do you mean?" "Nothing. Never mind. A-year or so ago, I helped a slave, an Aglayan woman, on Resh. I argued very strongly in 41 favor of Aglayan ways at that time, while insisting I was of the Galactics. Perhaps I'm less confused now. All that time on the space ways, and my visit to Aglaya, have shown me that I'm more Galactic than ever." "Are you? I cherm your confusion . . . Whitey." He ignored the observation. "That's another thing that will help you survive, you know. They can't cherm, these Galactics." (As soon as he'd said it he regretted it, recalling where this line of talk had led him a year past.) "I'd already gathered that from watching that woman, Willie." Whitey raised his eyebrows. This girl is more perceptive even than I'd thought, and without Erts! I think she will be all right. "Willie is a good woman, though," Whitey said clumsily. (Anything to change the subject.) "She's an Outie, you know. From the planet Outreach. That's why she dresses that way. So ... colorfully. They all do. Duties." Tao, stop babbling! "I wondered when I first saw her how it was that she took orders from you." "Galactics have no superiority of one sex over the other. I'm told they used to, ages ago. Men were in charge." Pransa's eyes widened. "Of religion? Politics? Everything? Men?" Whitey nodded. "It must have been women like you and Willie who changed all that.'" "Like me and Willie?" "Capable women." He's trying to talk me into accepting being put

offship. It was her turn to change the subject. "Is that her whole name? Willie?" "No. Outies have two names. Hers is Wildorado Jee. Outies also tend to be very capable-like Aglayans." He looked directly into her eyes. "And we can dance around this forever, Pransa, but the fact remains: When we reach Franji to sell this phrillia, I'm going to help you get educated and find a place, and then I'm leaving you there. I've saved your life, and I'll do all I can for you. What I can't do is keep you with me." Pransa's eyes flashed like Terasaki ice-diamonds. "Even though you want to-Fidnij? Perhaps I'd be too 42 much of a reminder of Aglaya for you." She spun around, giving him no chance to reply, and exited the cabin. Behind her, Fidnij of Aglaya ran a hand through his light golden hair, then turned and banged a fist against the cabin wall. 5 . . . knowledge as yet beyond dreaming . . . -H.G. Wells I would far rather be ignorant than knowledgeable of evils. -Aeschylus "If we're lucky we can take on something to get us as far as Barbro," Captain Tachi said to his ship's mate. They were walking along the navel tunnel that stretched from Rambler's airlock into the outer wheel of Franjistation, the docking torus that orbited planet Franji. Close behind them came Willie, Pransa, and Disco. Achmet had been left oncon. Tachi never left his vessel unguarded while cargo was onboard. True, a ship stood little chance of being pirated while docked at the space station-any station. Still, it was not unheard of. Ironically the danger came not from the more notorious pirates that preyed along the spaceways, but from the lesser, inexperienced, and often desperate ones. "Lubbers," Tachi called them contemptuously, when he was using the Homeworld sailor's lingo he liked. "Amateurs," at other times. He reserved a grudging respect for the bigger-more professional-raiders of the star-lanes-for their spacemanship rather than their activities. One of those he had always respected (as opposed to admired) had recently disappeared from the spaceways in a battle with the equally-notorious and more-respected Captain Cautious-now deceased. (Unless . . . that odd rumor . . .) 43 44 The feared Captain Corundum had been forced to save (?) himself and his ship, Firedancer. To jam-cram-to throw one's ship into tachyon conversion without SIPACUM's having had adequate time and area for the plotting of a safe conversion point (since space was far from empty and even a fist-sized piece of space "dust" could throw off a converting ship)-was to risk never returning to normal space. "Going Forty Percent City," spacefarers called it, referring to the 40.2269 per cent chance of . . . whatever it was that happened to ships that didn't return from jam-cramming. From wherever it was that ships went when they jam-crammed. Some ships returned safely, others with (often extensive) damage. To these it had been a rough trip through subspace. To the others . . . Perhaps Corundum knew, now. No one who did had ever returned, as far as was known. Tachi was glad to have that ruthless pirate off the spaceways, and cared little about speculation as to what lay on the other side of Forty Percent City. "Payday, Captain! We are going to I hope have some onplanet time before we head out again, aren't we?" Willie said. "I mean, all work and no play spoils the broth." Tachi sighed. (Whitey ground his teeth, inaudibly, as he always did at Willie's malaphorisms.) "Oh, pos!" Tachi said. "Your mate's seen to that. He intends to spend a few days educating our 'passenger' in the ways of Galactics." "I see. Sounds like fun, Flashdoll. Gonna give her some quickie learning? Deep protein injections?" Whitey ignored both the remark and Disco's stifled snicker. The group emerged from the tunnel into the outer wheel, the rim, of Franjistation. Tachi, turning left, led them from Rambler'?, berth to the nearest spoke leading to the hub of the station. There he would sell the phrillia, he hoped, to one of the factors of corporations who kept offices on the station. Then he and the crew would offload the valuable and delicate plants. After that would come that favorite time of sailors, and now spacefaring men and women, since time out of mind: Shore Leave. Or, in this case, Ground Leave. The great paradox on which most sailors and spacefarers probably never wasted a moment's thought: Those who loved 45 voyaging loved only one thing more-ending a voyage and getting offship. "If you're going to get this thing done, Whitey, you'd best redshift," Tachi said.

"We've only a partial load of phrillia anyhow, thanks to your last 'Ground Leave.' And the Terasaki cargo is small, mostly those gems. We can handle the offloading. Go on, take what's-her-name to the skyhook and get onplanet." He tossed his head at the trailing Pransa. "Thank you, Captain." Whitey thought it best to go quickly and say no more. He turned back to explain to Pransa while the others went on. The shuttle (skyhook: a bullet-shaped elevator car that rode the enormous tower stretching from Franji to its orbiting spacedock) down to Velynda was no great thrill to Pransa after having taken off from Aglaya in a lander. And null-G, now! That had been something, these last few months in space. She was truly beginning to understand the attraction of this life for spacefarers. Yet nothing she had undergone compared to the wonder of seeing a new planet. The only world other than Aglaya that she had ever seen. And seeing at the same time the first city she had ever known. Her neck soon ached from jerking her head back and forth from the sky-pink, electric blue, dark amethyst streaked with umber-to Velynda itself. Buildings of more than one story! Of stone and syntheesteel. Windows of crysplas. Floater cars in the streets, or rather above the streets. And more people than she'd seen in a lifetime. People of every shade from near-black to the color of prass or gold. And people of shades that people shouldn't be, their hair and skin and even eyes subcutanated to colors that the rainbow could only guess at. Pransa felt oddly conspicuous with her white hair, light skin, and decidedly ungarish, loose-fitting jumpsuit. ("It wouldn't do to attract attention," Whitey had said. He wore a dark wig over his own light hair. Pransa had refused to do so, and so attracted attention.) The baggy outfit actually stood out among the streetsful of bodies garbed in tight-fitting, brightly-hued garments. Many seemed so tight that their wearers couldn't bear to be covered completely by them. Strategic pieces-one arm, a leg, a 46 crescent on a buttock-had been removed, or were never there. I wonder if they can't get cloth enough, Pransa thought as a woman went by with one huge breast thrusting out of her five-way stretch lavender skinTite. The warhead had a blue-glowing nosecone. Pransa's gaze went back to the sky. Seeing the sun was a rare experience for an Aglayan, whose planet's star showed itself only on exceptional occasions. Here Pransa saw two! Aglaya's having only one sun placed it in the minority, among planets. Here on Franji, certain cults saw the mating of their two stars as celestial evidence of BOOPFAITU, Booda's Plan For All In The Universe. The more fundamental of these cults said the meaning was clearly that humans, just as stars, were meant to mate for life. Other sects, not entirely facetiously, argued that this might be true only on planets that had mated stars, and that even there one mate should dominate the other, as was usually the case with stars. Suspicions existed among the fundamentalists that these sects used the "dominant partner" reasoning as an excuse for all sorts of perverse practices. Pransa found that she could look almost directly at the smaller of Franji's two suns. Had she been a Galactic she could have done so easily; Aglayan eyes were not used to so much light as those bred on less cloudy worlds. The primary wasn't actually too much brighter than its partner, this close to evening. It was an old body, now low on the horizon, orange-red as if in imitation of the bricks of Velynda. Even in the city itself the light was remarkable to pale Aglayan eyes-or rather the lack of light. The shadows fascinated Pransa. Never on Aglaya did shadows show such sharply defined outlines, or such deep blackness within. Pransa was alternately speechless and voluble. She rattled on to Whitey about the beauty around her. He remained taciturn, his mind on the business to hand. They stopped that night in adjoining mods at a small hotel near Velynda's business district. From their "karavanserai's" windows they could see the luxurious Royal Franjis Hotel, where only the wealthiest of spacefarers stayed. It had been a favorite of the notorious Jonuta, till he had got himself Poofed in the sky over Aglaya-some said by that selfsame Aglayan 47 slave who had recently been on Whitey's mind. Whitey knew only that "Captain Cautious" was dead,\* not that his death was indirectly due to Whitey's having once saved the life of his vengeful killer! None of this occupied Whitey's thoughts as he lay on his bed, wearing

only his trousers, in the Light of Chan Hotel. He was concerned only with the young woman in the next mod and what to do with her. For her. Tao knows I'd love to return her to Aglaya. That's impossible. So what am / going to do? What did I mean when I said I'd "find her a place?" Doing what? She has no skills, no-wait, perhaps her music! Aglayanfolk music? Neg, she'd need a manager for a novelty like that. Can't just walk 'into a bar . . . Besides, we don't want to advertise her being Aglayan. A celldye job, I fear. She- A small voice interrupted his thoughts. It spoke in Aglayan. "Fidnij?" Then, quietly accented: "Whitey?" He turned his head toward the door that connected the two mods. Pransa, of course. Wearing nightclothes loaned to her by Willie. A short shift of Frontier coolweav, reaching to mid-thigh, with long sleeves. Garishly colored of course, in gentian shading to mulberry with rust and honey swirls. Somehow Pransa's wearing it softened the effect. Its soft, loose-woven cloth diffused the brightness of the colors. Or perhaps it was the glo-globe behind her, shining through the fabric. Whitey swallowed. He had seen the garment before, often. On Willie. He had seen it off Willie. He had seen Willie's body in it with the light shining through the fabric, making it transparent. As now. The body he saw now was different. Younger, shorter, stronger. Muscular yet not exaggerated legs. Hips of hard muscle under soft skin, and smooth. He couldn't see her breasts at this angle with the light behind her, but he knew they were smaller than Willie's (though not much). They would have pale, pale aureoles of pink, those nipples, and- \* Whitey's information was a bit out of date; both correct and incorrect. The slaver Jonuta had indeed been slain. He was also very much alive and back on the spaceways; c.f. books 9, 11, 12. 48 She is Promised! he told himself forcefully. To a boy on Aglaya. A boy who is still alive. On Aglaya. Where she will never return . . . "What is it?" he answered softly. She entered the mod, slide-walking silently on bare feet across the carpet. Her legs moved so gracefully, so-Aglayan, with no jiggle to betray softness. Yet he knew they would be soft . . . "I-wanted you to know something, before I have this . . ." She waved a hand in the air, searching. "Brainboost," he said in Erts. "Yes, that. I wanted you to know that I do appreciate what you are doing to help me. I know you did save my life. I know you care." She stood now by the side of his bed. "Of course I care, Pransa." "And I am excited by all this, Fidnij-I'm sorry. Whitey. Even though I'm scared." Almost without realizing it she sat down on the bed. (He shifted onto his side to make room.) "I know. You were excited by this new universe before you even saw it. Before you even left Aglaya. You were excited by me. By the idea of me, of what I am. A spacefarer." He flipped his fingers. "Many women are that way. Many men." "I can't help that. I don't mean to hurt you." He smiled. "You aren't hurting me. As I say, there are women like that. Then there are women who are friends. And sometimes in one's life there are women, or a woman, who is-more." "Do you have one such, among these people?" He shook his head. "No." He realized that she was again doing what she had done that night on Aglaya, stroking his shoulder with a gentle hand. He did nothing to stop her. "Whitey . . . when I go back to Aglaya, will I be very different? As changed as you?" "You will be very different. Very changed." He purposely ignored the part about When she went back. To him the word was, at best, If. Still, she was a strong woman, and a determined one. 49 Could prove nearly as capable as Willie . . . "I wonder if my Promised will still want me then," she said softly. Will you want him? Whitey wondered. "I need to be wanted, Whitey." She moved her hand to his face and stroked his cheek. "I need it now." She lowered her face to his, opening her mouth, covering his with it. But it's not your Promised you want now, it's a spacefarer. Or a friend. Or both. Your Promised is a long way away . . . Then as Whitey found-under her probing, not-at-all-girlish tongue-that he wanted her also, he ceased reasoning with himself. For a fleeting moment thoughts came to him of Resh, of Rambler, of another pale-haired woman and her insistence on the deepkiss. But no, this girl wouldn't demand that. Not with her Beloved still waiting. Then even those thoughts gave way to reaction. And action. He moved his mouth against hers while placing his hands behind her

head and running them over her hair. Very soon he slid them to her shoulders and attempted to lower the familiar straps of her shift. She shook him off, making a little noise of denial in her throat. She stood and swiftly dropped the garment to the floor. In the dim light from the doorway to her mod he saw her pale skin glow. He saw that her nipples were even lighter than he'd imagined, standing out fully erect in the half-light. There was no sag to those warheads at all; they rose young and firm. Most of all his eyes were drawn to her pubis. Whitey was used to Galactic women, hairless from the neck down. Here he saw what he still wore, a patch of virtually white hair. Only slightly wavy, it seemed almost to move in the faint air currents wafting through the room. Like silk it shone. The feel of it was silk, too, when Pransa took his hand and guided it there. He twined his fingers in the strands, both he and she watching the movement. Then he slipped two fingers below and let them glide into her. He looked up at her face, startled, and not because she was already so damp that he had slipped in easily. Partway in, anyway, before he discovered the obstruction that had been the cause of his startlement. She smiled down at him and nodded, acknowledging. Then she sank to her knees beside him, careful not to dislodge his 50 warmly-probing hand. She began to unfasten his belt, to loose the nevelcro fastener of his pants. She looked down as the pants passed his knees. He was clearly as ready as she. From his own patch of curling white hair rose what the Galactics called his slicer. Firm and waiting, pulsing just a little. She wrapped one hand gently around it. She moved toward it and for an instant he panicked. But she was seeking to settle herself upon it, straddling his thighs. He stopped her with a headshake, placing his free hand on one of her hips and pushing her sideways. Soon she lay on the bed beside him and they kissed more while fondling each other. She ran her hand slowly up and down and around his erection and over its exposed tip while he moved his fingers in her, carefully, so gently that she was hardly aware of the moment when he broke her. Then he switched to that part of her (so prominent on Aglayan women, on whom the covering hood of flesh had been circumcised) that Galactics called a flasher. She began to wriggle beside him, making sounds that could come only from pain or from pleasure that was nearly equal in intensity to pain. There were no frigid Aglayans. Very soon she proved this over again, while at the same time demonstrating (without knowing it) why Willie and many other women along the spaceways called this man "Flash." She flashed, loudly and long. And before she could even recover her breath, a consummate lover had moved her onto her back and come over on top of her. She knew then the first filling of herself in her young life, as his seeking slicer entered her stash and took her back to where she had just been, this time with him accompanying her. When it was done and they had rested, they did it again. It was a tired Pransa who would receive an education on the morrow. In the morning Whitey took her first to Velyndabank, where he withdrew enough stells from his own modest credaccount to pay for Pransa's education. They took the slidewalk to a large complex of buildings with a chastely- 51 lettered sign that read Velynda Educenter: Encephaloboostsl Edutapesl Holopictoriographyl Universography Center. Whitey stopped before the main building. He withdrew from his SurLock pocket the wig he had tried to get Pransa to wear earlier. "You will wear this now, Pransa, or we will be unable to accomplish our purpose. They will never brainboost an Aglayan." Pransa bit her lip and scowled. Then, because she couldn't deny that he was right, she smiled thinly and nodded. To the nod she added a flip of the fingers, in the manner she had observed among Whitey and the others, the Galactic way of shrugging (although they occasionally did that, too). They both grinned and chuckled as she donned the wig. Whitey helped her adjust its clinging field. Then, with an arm around her shoulders, he led her toward Velynda Educenter. / will never again be the same person after I come out of there, she thought, and took a deep breath. Whitey passed her off as an immigrant from one of the mining colonies on Delventine, who spoke only a backward dialect of Erts. Thus he was able to obtain basic Erts instruction, along with the history, technology, and sociology of Galactic

civilization. The "instruction" took the form of injected information-bearing cellular extracts. Pransa was aware of only one injection, the one that put her to sleep. All the actual learning was carried out while she was unconscious. She had much to learn. She was unconscious most of the day. As she swam up out of sleep, she felt dizzy but otherwise unchanged. Coming to herself, she wondered-where was the great rush of knowledge she'd expected? She heard Whitey's voice as the light started to return to her eyes. "Easy. It may hit you all at once, as it did me." She felt around her. She lay on a soft surface. Oh, pos. That was the equhyde cover on the Learning Recliner. The Educouch. Did Whitey tell me that? Her eyes popped open in surprise. It's not an Aglayan word! 52 She looked at Whitey. She propped herself up on one elbow. "Whitey, I feel like I'm orbiting!" Like I'm what? High. That means high. "Whitey, what. . . ?" Her voice trailed off in confusion and panic. "Easy, now!" Whitey smiled at her. "They've improved these things since I had mine. They even include the slang now. You're speaking Erts, Pransa. Good Erts, too, not like that slop Willie uses. Just stop and think, calmly. You'll realize you know the language. Try thinking in Aglayan and you'll see the difference." She did so. The comparison was astounding. She knew another language! Terms she had never heard crowded her mind. Thinking the words led to thoughts of the things themselves. Of Galactic history, of planets and races, of technology beyond belief! She had already known that vessels traveled through the parsec abyss between the galaxy's suns. Now she understood how. She comprehended the theory behind both near-light drive, such as Rambler's and faster-than-light, although not the technical details. She understood how planets orbited their suns. She knew how terribly many were the peoples of the galaxy, the Galactics. One race, and yet of so many colors, branches, separate planets with separate subgroups: Saipese, Ghanji, Lanatians. And aliens! Jarps, HRal (from HRalix), Shirashites . . . O Aglii and Sunmother, Shirashites . . . And she knew how very many planets there were, how very many suns. And how very far apart . . . The universe filled a mind that had only recently been unaware that there was a universe. Pransa fell back on the recliner. "Oh, Whitey, I feel sick . . ." "It will pass. You will get used to it very fast. The best thing is to use it, use your Erts to learn more. Come. We will try some edutapes. Just one or two today, then many more tomorrow." They did. And Pransa not only became used to it, she decided she liked it very much. Very very much. She eagerly absorbed knowledge of Galactic culture. Entertainments. Sexual customs. Economics. Universography. All on a basic level, 53 but to Pransa it was as if she knew everything there was to know. And more. And as she learned, her excitement rising, her fellow Aglayan looked on in wonder. He recalled his own brainboost and the more refined education that had followed. His initial reaction had been terror. Later came a resigned need to know, coupled with a genuine curiosity. Never had he experienced anything like the eagerness he saw in the girl/woman beside him. She is not frightened, as I was. She is ecstatic. As I am pulled between Aglaya and the spaceways, so, too, is she pulled. But the forces pulling her are her innocence, which is overwhelmed, and this craving, this hunger, for the universe. He wondered how long her former desire to return to Aglaya would last. Likely it's gone already. That night as she lay in bed in her hotel mod, unable to sleep for the excitement coursing through her, Pransa had but one thought: How could they.-how could we-on Aglaya live, knowing so little? How could we ever have thought ourselves satisfied? 6 You can't say that in a bar! -overheard in a bar in city of Hartford, Homeworld I never met a man I didn't like. --Will Rogers I never liked a man I didn't know. Loved a few, maybe . . . -Wildorado Jee Spacefarers, like sailors, had always seen shore leave as Serious Business, with certain Important Things that must be attended to. Any time stolen from those things was exasperating. A gawking green crewmember often caused time to be stolen. Pransa, gawking and green and carrying Prot on her shoulders, exasperated Whitey, Willie, Achmy, and Disco by hanging back to stare about her at the sights of Velynda. She reveled in her newfound ability to read Erts (to read anything!). She insisted

on using it on every sign between the shuttleport and their destination. Most of the way they rode the bright green shafts of the tubeway, over the lower buildings and right through some of the taller ones. Twice Whitey had to stop Pransa from turning and hurrying back against the tube's movement to catch a passing sign. As they came down an incline over an open-air restaurant she saw a huge, glaringly-lit sign touting a GIANT BUBBLE HOLO. Adjacent posters trumpeted 54 55 BRAND NEW!! #16 AKIMAMARS #16 The Abyss Penetrators starring The BIGGEST PAIR in the UNIVERSE!! SETSUYO PUMA in LIVING, BOUNCING 3 count 'em 3 DIMENSIONS !!plus!! Second Feature: Habits of an Outie Beside Setsuyo Puma's name was a character, repeated, that Pransa could not decipher: O O The name Akima Mars rang a bell in Pransa's memory. She felt certain she had heard or seen it in one of the cultural edutapes she had scanned. She did not know what a holomeller was, and could hardly wait to see her first. Whitey grabbed her arm again to remind her to move. They were about to step out of the tubeway. "What is all the hurry? We're just going to relax, aren't we?" she asked, irritated. "I mean your cargo's sold and business is- over.'" "Wrong, Sweetcakes," Disco said. "The business-of relaxing-begins now." "In other words we have some serious elbow-bending to do," Willie said. "I wanta get higher'n spaceport prices, then go to a hotel with a gigundera bed and lay down for a lifetime." "That's lie down," Whitey said. "Lie, lay. Wanta lay down 'n' get lied?" Pransa saw before them a small, bright winkersign proclaiming HARI'S NEW YORK BAR. Almost immediately Whitey ushered her through an archway into the place. She felt as if she were stepping into pure light. The floor was multifaceted crystal that reflected the swirling lights of the bar. Crystal? More likely plastic-plastone? Synthestone! Neg, that's like rock . . . Crysplas! Pransa thought, proud of her knowledge. She knew shaped neon when she saw it, too. 56 The light didn't get very far from the reflective floor before it was swallowed in haze from nobac sticks and various intoxicant smokes. The place was strangely quiet, considering that it was nearly full of patrons. Mostly well-heeled locals, prosperous big farmers and business types. Few if any spacefarers. Red and black equhyde booths lined the room on both sides. Most of these held talking, laughing people, but were privatized by the opaque shields raised before them. People seated on unichairs at tables contributed a fair amount of din. The focal point of the room, at its far end, was the bar. Served by two human bartenders, its rear was lined with decorative and expensive antique bottles, plus rows of more utilitarian spigots and plas pottles. "Whoo. Classy joint for us," Willie said. "When you've got money," Achmy told her, "treat yourself good, Doll." Pransa raised her eyebrows. Achmy was the quietest, dourest person she'd ever met, Captain Tachi included. He rarely showed any sign of being interested in a good time. This was the best mood she'd ever seen him show. This money that the Galactics use must surely be a bringer of happiness. The five walked past a raised dais, empty now. The music wouldn't begin for another hour. They found four empty barstools, and gained another when Whitey politely asked another patron to move down one. The fellow complied with a frown that showed his extreme sacrifice in condescending to a spacefarer. Whitey acknowledged the look with no more than a smile and a nod. Pransa sat Prot down on the bar and said nothing while all the others except Whitey ordered fizzlers. She looked to her fellow Aglayan, who ordered Qalaran brandy for two. (On Aglaya the only liquors were mild beer and phrillia-nectar wine. Whitey let Pransa know that she'd need to be paced through her first Galactic-style drinking.) The two were quiet as they started on their drinks. Pransa's first sip firmed Whitey's warning. It was twice as strong as anything she'd ever had. The others, more voluble, began discussing Willie's latest clothes, a favorite topic among the crew. The Outie's outfit 57 today consisted of a knee-length pleated skirt (an unusual garment for a spacefarer in any case) colored in not-quite-checks and not-quite-stripes of bright scarlet and green and blue. The wraparound garment was held shut not with a clinging field but with old-style pins of prass mounted with Terasaki crescent emeralds (fake; Willie was not rich) and Ghanji gypstones of a deep



red-wine hue. Her stockings, folded down at the tops, were a completely clashing pattern of green, light blue, yellow, and red. Low flat black shoes with laces rested on the rungs of her stool. At her skirt's front depended her insy (spacefarer's incidental) bag, from a cord around her waist. Her top was a surprisingly simple blouse of off-white with simusilver buttons. Over one shoulder, across her chest, and under her other arm halfway down her side was draped a wide cloth in still a third set of colors. This time the odd check-stripe melding was nearly all yellow with thin white stripes and black checks. Her rounded, flat-crowned hat bore still another combination of colors, dark green and black with thin red stripes. A black tassel rose above its center. Achmy looked her up and down and shook his head, smacking his lips in relish of his fizzler. "Musla, Willie, what is all that truck you're wearing?" he asked. "Don't you just love these colors? I found these in a shop that specializes in reproductions of old Homeworld clothes. They're called plaides. They were worn by one of the old Cauc races of Homeworld. The Skahts, I think, or something like that." "Then the old Caucs aren't extinct, after all. Clearly they were the ancestors of the Duties!" Willie ignored that. "They used to wear matching accessories, but I think it's much more colorful to mix, don't you? Each of these patterns has a different name. This one is called Bar Klee, and this is Royal Something-or-other, and Khinnkayde, and I forget this one. Byu Cannon!" "Named after a gun?" "These skirts-kilts-were worn by warriors, I'll have you know," she said with mock asperity. "Male warriors. And look! The patterns are reversible, see? That's what makes 58 them unusual. There's a midpoint to each pattern where it reverses itself and repeats, in a sort of mirror image." She held the edge of her hand on her skirt to show the effect. "Colorful, oh yes," Achmy said drily. "And so practical." "I like it," Disco said. "Keeps attention off of me." It nodded toward the room, where a few of the patrons were casting offended glances in the direction of the Jarp. "I guess if I'm going to be a sunflower I may as well be a bright one, eh Disco darlin'?" Willie reached up and patted the Jarp's cheek affectionately. Disco whistled something untranslatable and gave Willie's hand a peck. It reached into the insy bag hanging at its waist and brought forth a packet. Disco held it out to Willie. "Redjoy?" it asked. She smiled and pulled out one of the lascivicant smokes known as aphrodizzies, a mild intoxicant mixed with an aphrodisiac. The Jarp followed suit and both lit up. "When in Velynda, do as the roamers do," Willie said with a fingerflip, alternately sipping and smoking. She rested a hand on her Jarp companion's knee. "I have no idea what you're talking about," Disco said. "Probably nothing, or else you're just trying to get Whitey's grat." Willie gave Disco a poke in the ribs. Then it put its hand on her bare knee. They went on talking low and laughing, touching and poking, clearly making up to one another. Pransa was both shocked and fascinated. She knew about interspecies sexual activity, but knowing of it and seeing it were two different things. She turned on her stool and spoke quietly to Whitey. "Are-do Willie and Disco have a-relationship? I mean, do they-tryst together?" she said, the known but never-used word feeling odd in her mouth. Whitey flipped his fingers and tipped back the last of his brandy. He signaled the barkeep for a refill. "I have no idea," Whitey said, "if they've ever trysted. It certainly looks as if they will tonight, though. Tryst and slice and soar." He hoisted his newly-arrived drink in mock toast to his two fellow crewmembers. "That seems so bizarre!" 59 "Why? Look what you and I have been doing the last few nights. And we hardly know each other." "That's not true! We've known each other since childhood. Besides, we're both of the same race. I mean have you ever sliced an alien?" This time the slang came easily. "Pos," Whitey said, swallowing. "That one right there." "Disco?!" "Neg. Willie." Pransa cocked her head to one side. "But she seems ... I mean-" "Human? Pos, but Galactic, not Aglayan. Didn't she seem just as strange to you as Disco, at first?" "Well . . . almost. I mean they were both such funny colors. But Disco's face and eyes aren't shaped like ours, and those hands. And that voice! Then when I saw it was both male and female! Well, Willie's not that alien." She stopped,

startled, as if she'd just thought of something that she'd missed before. "Wait a min! Are you telling me that you and Willie. . . ?" "Pos, Pransa. Regularly. It's just for fun. We're good friends more than lovers. Call it recreational. We're in space for long periods." "Recreational! I can't believe that. Whitey, you're Aglayan!" He sighed. "Are we going to start that again? Have you thought about that since the brainboost? Have you asked yourself how Aglayan you still are?" She realized with a shock that he was right. She was not what she had been. She didn't really feel any outrage at Whitey's revelation. Nothing like what she'd felt when she argued so indignantly with him on Rambler. She felt jealousy. And after the manner of jealous lovers everytime, she set out immediately to torture herself with it. "Tell me about Willie, Whitey," she said. "What is all this about the way she talks? You've mentioned it and so has Disco." Whitey smiled. "Willie was brought up very poor, Pransa. Her grammar and usage are not of the best, although she's actually improved greatly. That shows up in such a cosmopolitan profession as ours. Remember, again-you and I learned 60 through brainboost. That's not perfect, and it's acted upon by later use and experience. Still it gives us much better command of the language than the native who learns it as a child. It also makes me rather sensitive. I tend to grind my teeth at certain expressions and usage. Willie says such things as 'As best as I can,' which is two expressions mixed up, or "I thought to myself," which is dumb but which lots of people say. I'm too sensitive, I suppose. "Willie knows all this, knows I hate it, and deliberately fobs things up just to irritate me. The last time I set off to help Tachi negotiate a cargo sale Willie said 'Don't let them pull your leg over your eyes!' " He grinned at the remembrance. Pransa scowled. "She has no right to be that way to you! She has no right to be like that, either.'" She nodded toward the two crewmembers who were now openly stroking each other while Achmy sat, oblivious, beyond them. "Ah! I see. You weren't really curious, you were jealous." "Shouldn't I be?" "Shouldn't your Promised back on Aglaya be?" "That's not fair, Fidnij!" Pransa drained her second plass of brandy in a gulp, looking hurt. "Isn't it? I haven't betrayed anyone in any way. Not Willie, certainly. Nor am I Promised to you, remember. I'm not even going to be with you much longer." "I know," Pransa said quietly. For a moment she took on her former frightened-girl look. Then she toughened again and turned on him. "And what about that Aglayan you met on Resh?" she said accusingly. "Did you tryst with her, too?" Instantly Whitey became sorry that he had prodded Pransa this far. "Pos," he said quietly. "And before you ask: Her Promised was dead: Killed by the slavers who stole and sold her." "Oh." The turn of conversation had become uncomfortable for him. He was not unhappy at the entrance just then of a great deal of noise in the form of four locals. Street-toughs. Obviously this was not their first bar-stop of the day. Their clumsy progress toward a table near the bar indicated clearly their full-strato state. As they neared the five off Rambler they 61 stopped, stared, and giggled before starting to settle into their seats. One of them cocked a thumb at the spacefarers and spoke loudly to his companions. "Grabbles, jackos, they let sunflowers in here now! And big orange things, too!" "Maybe it's one of these rich flainers' pets," one of his friends said-the one with the curly mop and the itsy-bitsy belt. "Those two even look like sunflowers, mates!" a third commented, pointing at Pransa and Whitey. (The latter, contrary to his usual practice, was not wearing a wig. Pransa had asked him why not. He had flipped five and changed the subject.) Disco had turned around at the first couple of comments. Now it turned back to its companions and flipped six fingers. "Talk's easy," its translahelm said. "Ignore them." "Oh, look," one of the narcobums said. "The big scary ay-lien isn't going to pay any attention to us. Oh, thank Kreesna! I was so scared." "Careful, Brell, one of those lighties might hurt you. Those Glyuns." "What's aGlyun?" "That's a Glyun," the fellow said, pointing at Whitey. "Gratshit! You can't fob me. That's a sunflower!" The narcobums roared, then stopped their chatter for a moment in honor of the arrival of their drinks. In the temporary lull, Pransa suddenly downed her third brandy

and spun on her stool. Whitey grabbed her arm. "Pransa, you're drinking too fast. Let me give you a red-Pransa, where are you going?" The slight, muscular woman had twisted free and slid from her seat to stand facing the group of newcomers. She spoke to Whitey from the side of her mouth without turning her head. "If I can't get respect for Aglaya from you, Fidnij, I will at least not tolerate disrespect in these molgin-shits." Before he could reply she had moved lightly across the floor to stand beside the toughs at the table. "Pardon me," she said evenly. The nearest fellow turned to look at her, an expression of mock surprise on his (not-unhandsome) face. He looked her 62 over, starting at her middle, which was just about at his eye level, going down to her short but powerful legs, then up past her also very well-developed warheads. His gaze rested leeringly at last on her face. "Pardon you? Oh of course, Whitecake! What've you done?" He showed two blued teeth that made his smile eerie. "Kissed a Jarp, probly," the moonfaced one said. They all giggled and snorted. "I meant I'd like to say something to you-" Pransa began. "I'd like to do something to you, Doll," blue-teeth said. "Looks like someone already did," another said. "Where'd you get that color, Sweetcakes?" "Somebody fobbed her subcootntain job." He tried to say "subcutane" but was too stoned for such an ambitious undertaking.) "That's what I meant," the first one said, looking down now at Pransa's legs. "What I'd like to do is get under her skin. Give her an injection or two, you know." More snorts and giggles. Pransa stood quietly, her lips tightening. Her muscles tensed. Her heart raced. She made no effort to control herself as only Aglayans could, by slowing that racing. She was too far gone with Qalaran brandy for that. She wasn't even listening anymore, just waiting. Whitey sat tensely on the edge of his stool, also waiting. Blue-teeth turned back to her again. This time his face held a sneer. "Don't worry, stash. You may be the color of a cave slug, but you're built like a synsstone-" (he couldn't pronounce "synthestone"; he tried again) "-a synsstone sitter." He turned his head back to his companions. "Hey, jackos! Is it true what they say about Glyun stash? S'pose it has white hair?" Basking in their laughter, he turned back and poked a thumb in the general direction of Pransa's crotch. He was too high-zap to judge his distance. The intended lewd gesture became a clumsily drunken one. The fellow's thumb caught Pransa right below the pubic ridge. 63 Whitey was off his seat in an instant-and even then he was too slow. Pransa reacted in half an instant. With no tensing of face, no clenching of fists to give warning (not that the bug would have taken any) she brought her right knee straight up with blinding speed. It crashed into the underside of the creep's chin with a nauseating smack. His face was replaced in space by his throat as his head snapped back. Pransa brought her leg farther up against her chest and kicked the fellow in the breastbone. He and his chair went over in a flail of limbs, one elbow striking the table hard as he went. He began to vomit almost as soon as he hit the floor. The other narcobums jumped up in shock and anger, spilling liquor in all directions. The one on Pransa's left took a swing at her, only to have his wrist grasped by a powerful, pale-skinned hand.. The hand's mate, balled, drove itself into his midsection. Whitey shoved the fellow back onto an adjacent table, which had already been vacated. The moonfaced one in the yellow pants had vaulted the table and launched himself at Whitey. As he came down he faced not the pale Aglayan but the very orange face of an angry Jarp. It whistled an impossible sound at him. While Moonface squinted, six long fingers grasped his throat. He felt as if assaulted by two hands, with a thumb grinding into his vertebrae and another into his windpipe. He said, "Gakh." Too stoned to have been knocked out, Pransa's victim meanwhile lurched up to grapple Whitey. Willie wrestled with the droop-moustached one. Left behind on the bar, Prot jumped up and down, squealing in excitement. A floored man kicked at Pransa's legs while Achmy hung back, face working, looking as if he had a hard decision to make. Pransa danced and kicked. That narcobum's squeal rose to counterpoint Prot's. Achmy made up his mind to join his companions and one of the bartenders came climbing over his bar. He swung at Achmy just as the latter was stepping out

to join the growing fray. Achmy hardly noticed; Prot the swinger leaped on the bartender and hung on. Meanwhile he shrieked in his ear- and choked with simian fingers, Prot's tail lashed wildly. Moonface-yellowpants was catapulted backward onto a table. 64 The table held. Moonface slid into the lap of the off-duty stevedore there, in a splash of beer. The beer came down on him, on Moonface, and on the locust-farmer behind the stevedore. "Sumbitch," he snarled, and brought a big fist down on the stevedore's head. He also yelled in pain. Dumping Moonface, the hard-headed stevedore turned to tangle with the fobber who had attacked him for no reason he knew. "Hey!" another man across the bar called, and he came hurrying to help a fellow farmer. Meanwhile other locals had entered on the side of the slime who had started it, since after all a quintet of boys having a little fun was preferable to Jarps and sunflowers-Jarp-lovers. They weren't even local and had funny skins and accents! On the other hand, those who resented the remark about "rich flainers" (and the fouling of their watering hole) aided the spacefarers. Several others, drunk as Sekhari stink-rats and hating both factions on general principles, struck at anybody and anything within reach. That included the woman with the green-and-red hair, whose green-and-red bandeau broke as she fell. Green-nippled, red-aureoled breasts jumping, she got herself under a table and kicked at any leg that came her way. Now the cyberbouncers appeared. They might have headed off such a melee before it started, in a tavern regularly frequented by spacefarers. Here fights were usually confined to Thursday night-the night before the Sabbath-and just didn't develop into brawls. Hari's robotic bouncers were programmed to focus on the center of action or fight-instigators-whom they had been tracking since the outset. (Which had only been a few seconds ago.) Now they bustled mechanically out to discover that there was no center of action. Locals were grappling with each other in complete disregard of either street-toughs or spacefarers. A nicely dressed businesswoman skidded two meters on her backside before coming up against a table. It rocked and spilled drinks. A red-booted foot lashed out from under the table to kick her. The robots went for Pransa and her first opponent, the creep with the two blued teeth. Suddenly the Aglayan was accosted by a shining machine of a sort she had only recently learned existed-and not experientially. 65 Pransa did pretty well, considering that she hadn't a chance. The cyber just wasn't programmed to deal with anyone as fast as an Aglayan. She avoided the clutches of its multijointed arms long enough to get in a few more licks at her latest opponent-whomever it was. (Pransa didn't know and didn't care. The reason for this ridiculous battle was no longer important. Had she had time-or sobriety-to reflect on Pransa2, the true Aglayan Pransa who underlay this drunken reactive Pransa, she'd have been amazed to discover that she was enjoying herself immensely.) In seeking to grasp her, the cyberbouncer failed to brake a flailing "arm" and took out Pransa's opponent. Not to mention the two the poor fellow flopped into. All three went down, one grasping desperately at a table. That went down, too. Drinks showered them amid much festive clatter-clink. The clobbered, kicked bizwoman had just got herself up. She turned, took a step, and fell over the whole mess. Her clothing (typical ancient Nipponese attire: a black business suit over shining plas shirt) suffered. This one of the galaxy's several Hari's New York Bars was posh enough to afford the best. Its cyberbouncers were state-of-the-art. They swiftly compensated by adjusting their progreaction faster than even an Aglayan's "programming." Soon Pransa and her companions-and some others-were being hustled out the door and into the arms of just-arriving policers. (Whitey made tentative mention of a sidewalk trial and was bonked.) Pransa derived some satisfaction from the fact that all five narcobums were being carried out to be put into the waiting floatervan. More culprits were fetched forth, and another van had to be called. "Gra-at shit!" an astonished policer said, staring wide-eyed. "It 'uz a reg'lar war in there. Sure we shoulde cawl TeeGeeYo?" "Who the blinkin' pink blazes storted this wor?" one of his fellow nippers said, in a voice that rose to the squeal-level. "Some dam' stevedore," a topato farmer managed to

get out of his swollen face. "Nah-them narcobums come in V started passin' remarks about a nicely set-up bizwoman in there, and about ever'body 66 there stomped the snot outen 'em." That, interestingly, came from Wildorado Jee/Willie. "Drunken locals shouldn't throw stones at people in plas blouses!" A smallish man tried to get at her. "Dam' sisterslicin' sunflower," he snarled, and was bonked on the koko. He settled down for a nap. "We'll sort this out elsewhere," a policer wearing prass on his shoulderboards said, and gestured at the second van. Both vans were soon heading stationward, transporting spacefarers, narcobums, and those locals not sufficiently known either to Hari's or the nippers to be treated as certain bribe sources. "Nipped again," Willie said jovially, nursing an eye that had already turned darker than her walnut-hued skin. Pransa stared. "You mean this has happened before?" "Oh, Theba, pos! I must admit you bought us an extra good one this time, though!" And she bestowed on Pransa a smile of warmth and excitement-which Pransa returned. Achmy spoke up. "Oh sure, firm. And all for an-" He stopped abruptly with a look at Whitey. Whitey returned his gaze steadily. Achmy looked down and said no more. Pransa caught the exchange, and made a mental note to ask Fidnij/Whitey about it. She chermmed hostility in Achmy, and something else, vague, that she couldn't identify. In Whitey, despite his stern looks, she felt only-sadness. Perhaps I should ask Achmy about it, she thought. "Did you see that one flainer tryin'a get a look up my kilts?" Willie asked. "He was the only one there who didn't want to get up off the floor!" "I was wondering what you wore under those things, too," Disco said. "Not enough that you'd mistake me for one of those Cauc male warriors, Sweetie." Disco sighed. (At least Disco knew it was a sigh. To the others it had the sound of air escaping a pinhole leak in a spacesuit-combined with a birdlike trill.) "Anyway," it said, "there's an end to our drinking on this liberty. The fines for busting up a place like Hari's are gonna be bi-ig." 67 Wildorado Jee flipped five. "The harder it comes, the easier it goes," she said, with the smug air of a philosopher. Whitey rolled his eyes upward. Pransa snorted. A good while later they were emerging from the station when Pransa chermmed something surprising in Whitey. Pride! She glanced to him and caught him gazing back at her, a smile on his face and his eyes sparkly. Pride in-me? She smiled back, shyly. She'd have liked his thoughts, too: I am proud of her, he mused. / am proud of the way she defended Aglaya. And if I would be proud of myself again, I must help her. He is Aglayan yet! Pransa thought. But-what of me? How Aglayan am I now? I want to return home-don't I? I feel as if I've just begun to see what these Galactics have! I hate their ways, I think. I know Aglayan ways are superior. And yet the way I fought back there. Me-a peaceful daughter of Sunmother! O Aglii . . . Her thoughts trailed off in confusion. Walking alongside her, a woman named Wildorado Jee for once put the lie to the fact that Aglayan women were better able to discern others' feelings than were Galactics. I know that man, she thought. ("To herself," of course. Willie always made it plain that she thought to herself, as if anyone could think to anyone else.) At least I know the Galactic part of him. And I know what he feels about women. Theba knows the feelings I've waited to see and never thought I would. I see them now--for her. He thinks it's just his damned Aglayan loyalty that makes him want to help that sweet little cake. He doesn't see what he's starting to feel for her. I wonder if she does? Neg. She's too young yet to know what a man's feeling. What anybody's feeling. So I tryst with him and make him soar and he the bastard makes me flash like no one ever did and I keep him amused by teasing him with my fobbo talk and he falls for some sweetie from home. 'Twas ever thus. It never rains but it pours. Neg-mm-Where there's smoke it pours-neg: It never rains but there's afire! That's it. Save that one. Shit. 68 Willie was right, though she should have been wrong. Pransa couldn't detect the feeling in Whitey that he didn't know about himself, the attraction to her. But it had nothing to do with her age. Aglayan girls younger than she could have chermmed that feeling. It was the confusion in her own mind that interfered with her ability. As at Hari's, she was too involved in a struggle-this time with her own feelings-to recognize

things that her Aglayan mind should have perceived. 7 "And now," said Dorothy, "how am I going to get back to Kansas?" -Baum, The Wizard of Oz "A leave of absence? Tao on a floater bike, man, a leave of absence? What am I running here, a bank? A leave of absence!" Tachi strode angrily up and down the con-cabin of Rambler. Whitey, Pransa, and Willie stood in a little cluster glancing at each other nervously. Disco sat at con, feigning unawareness of the conversation. "I've never asked for favors before, sir," Whitey said quietly. "Aye, true enough. Nor would I have granted them. This is a ship. I am a captain. You are a mate. A good mate. But a leave of absence? Tao!" Whitey and Willie glanced at each other, then back at Tachi, who was pacing and looking at the floor. Whitey opened his mouth, but Tachi, not noticing, began again. "Do you know that after this trip to Barbro we will finally be able to equip this vessel with tachyon conversion systemry? All my life I've been working to have my own lightspeed spacer. Now just when I'm about to my mate tells me he wants a leave of absence! How am I supposed to shake down without a mate, would you tell me! Hm?" Whitey firmed his face and his voice. "Captain Tachi, both Disco and Achmy can handle my duties capably. Willie's as good oncon as I. And you'd have no difficulty finding a 69 70 temporary replacement in any case. I realize it's an imposition and an inconvenience ..." Tachi rolled his eyes toward the overhead. "Oh, Tao keep me on the Way! The boy realizes it's an inconvenience! He always was a fast learner." He looked directly at Whitey. He spoke in softened tones. "Whitey. You're the best mate I've ever had-" "Thank you, sir." "-and I know you're not the fraggy type who'd make such a request on a whim. But you know I'm not the type to run a ship that way. That's the reason we are such a good crew. Disciplined and tough." He sighed. "All right, why? Why do you want a-'leave of absence'?" "I have decided to return Pransa to Aglaya." Tachi's jaw dropped open. "Oh, Lao Tzu's liver and lights! The boy wants a furlough to go commit suicide or be nipped by TGW. Of course! Now it's clear. Why didn't you say so, Whitey my boy? And you're planning on walking there, I presume." "I hope to find transport at Barbro, Captain. And Captain," he went on all in a rush, "I must tell you that I am firm in this. I'm going whether you grant me leave or not. I'd hate to quit you permanently, but this has become-important." Tachi's eyebrows rose. He looked at his mate almost slyly. "As I said, a fast learner. So I've taught you something about bargaining, have I? You know kahzed well I don't want to lose you permanently!" He turned away, then back, deciding. "Ahh-all right, First Mate! Done. But I swear I'll take any inconvenience it causes me, any loss, out of your shares for the next however-long-it-takes." "Thank you, Captain Tachi. I'll be back to you as soon as I can. And I'll see you don't lose because of it." "Oh, I'll see you see I don't. Now let's get to Barbro. "Well, Jee? Why are you standing there with your mouth half open?" (Tachi always referred to Willie by her surname. Part of his style, his way-his Way-was a feeling that he must keep women crewmembers at a distance. Professionally he treated them no differently from male or Jarp crew. The necessity came from within himself. Since Pransa had only one name, he had thus far foreborne to call her anything at all save 71 "young woman" . . . when it became absolutely necessary that he speak to her.) "Yes, uh, I-wish to accompany them, Captain," Willie said. A low whistle came from the direction of the con-chair. Pransa glanced that way to see Disco hunch forward toward SIPACUM as if shrinking from some anticipated concussive force. Tachi stared blankly at his female crewmember. Then he turned to face Pransa. "It's you, of course. You've bedeviled my crew, that's it. Is that what you Aglayans can do? Bewitch people?" Pransa cleared her throat, then spoke with a squeak anyway. "Neg-uh, neg, Captain. Neg, really. I didn't even know Willie's intentions. Captain. Sir." "Nor did I," Whitey said with a questioning glance at Willie. But what we can do, Pransa thought, is cherm your feelings before you're even aware of them yourselves. And right now I know you're not feeling half as angry and put out as you'd like us to think. As I know, that Willie's feelings toward me are warm. She really wants to help. Toward Whitey, though- what? Love? I can't tell. As if she isn't

sure. And Whitey. Uncertainty, too. Does he want Willie to come? Tachi looked back at Willie for a long, silent moment. He nodded. "Go, then. I see you will anyway too. Mind you, the same conditions apply." (Willie nodded vigorously while Tachi stepped to the cabin door. He halted, looked back.) "It's a kahzed undisciplined way to run a spacer," he said. "But it's a good thing you're doing. I wish you luck. "Now let's redshift this thing." "Firm," Disco said from the captain's chair, but Tachi was already gone out the hatchway. "Well!" Disco said over its shoulder to the remaining three. "Lucky me. Maybe Tachi'll get somebody cute to replace you two. Cuter than Achmy anyway!" Whitey was right, I'm jealous, Pransa thought as she sat in the cabin she shared with Willie. And I feel guilty about feeling jealous. Willie does want to help and she is my friend. 72 But the thought of her soaring with Whitey . . . It may be "recreational" for him, but I think it's more than that for her. And she is a Galactic. It's wrong for him to tryst with her. I don't even see how he could do it. Do Galactics know something we don't? What kind of sharing-all right, "slicing"-can they have together and still remain so loosely attached that Whitey doesn't mind if she trysts with Disco, too? She glanced at the door to the sitter/shower compartment that Willie's cabin shared with Whitey's. As they had all been returning to their cabins Pransa had noted Willie's and Whitey's desire for each other. The two had repaired to Whitey's cabin on some flimsy excuse from Willie. That had brought on Pransa's renewed fit of jealousy. Now Pransa realized: the answer to her question lay just beyond the two doors to the sitter. But I can't just spy on them. She rose and opened the door. She entered the small room. She hesitated at the other door, the one to Whitey's cabin. She listened. She thought she heard faint whispers (still of desire?). They seemed to come from a distance. On the far side of the room. Where the bed is. The thought decided her. She cracked open the door just a thin line. Squatting, she placed one eye to the crack. Soft blue light suffused the nearly bare cabin. Directly in her line of vision lay the bed. On it lay Whitey and-no, just Whitey. Naked. Willie knelt between his legs. She was sidewise to Pransa and she was naked too. Older than Pransa she may have been, but it hardly showed on her body. It was smooth and rounded and sagged not at all. Indeed, considering that her breasts were considerably larger than Pransa's, it may have been that she was aging better than Pransa could hope to do. They stood out full and forward. Like . . . warheads. Of course Pransa had seen Willie naked before. Pransa had not the least interest in women's bodies. The thought of seeing another woman involved in a sexual act had always seemed repugnant to her (although she was aware that there were Galactic women who enjoyed each other sexually). Until now. 73 It wasn't that Willie was the least bit enticing to her. It was the fact that she was with Whitey, who certainly was enticing to Pransa. Exposing herself to him, touching him. Exciting him. Because it was quite obvious that Willie was enticing to Whitey. His slicer stood straight up from him as he lay supine on the bed. Willie knelt. With one hand around its shaft, she bent over him. Sunmother! She's going to deepkiss him! As if the thought had spurred the action, Willie at that moment leaned farther toward the supine man's un-supine shaft and closed her mouth about it. Her warheads played softly on his thighs as she slowly moved her head up and down. He wrapped his fingers in her dark hair and aided her motion. Pransa stared, trembling. Her tremblor was not of arousal. On Aglaya this was not just a sexual but a ritual act of love. It was, if it went as far as the swallowing of the man's seed by the woman, the ultimate act of union. For that seed produced a physiological change in the woman's body, enabling her to gain the chonceling ability, the mental attribute that was as far above cherming as cherming was above the powers of the Galactic mind. It was an act reserved for Lifemates. But it doesn't mean that to Galactics. They don't have our capabilities. They don't even know of their existence. Whitey is an Aglayan, though! He knows what it means. I wonder if that Aglayan woman on Resh deepkissed him. No! They wouldn't, they couldn't have . . . He was making low noises in his throat now, as Willie moved faster. His body arched against the bed, on heels and shoulders, pushing up against her mouth. Her

hands worked at his crotch, massaging his balls in circular motions, slowly despite the increasing speed with which she moved her mouth. He stiffened all at once, his body almost leaping upward. He uttered a short yelp that turned into a low groaning. She held her face down against his belly till he relaxed. Then she eased her mouth off him and laid her head sideways on his belly, still holding the shrinking penis in one hand. With the other she reached up to stroke his chest. His hands still rested in her hair. So that's the deepkiss, Pransa thought, closing the door and sitting on the floor of the small compartment, her back to the bulkhead. She stared dully at nothing. At least a Galactic one. I wonder if he'd like it better with an Aglayan. With . . . me? Desire for Whitey flooded her. With it the jealousy returned, and the guilt. As she fantasized deepkissing Whitey, her Promise on Aglaya slipped into her mind. She imagined doing it with him. To him-for him. Krontij. She had come close to trysting (how strange to use the Erts word when thinking of Krontij and herself!) with him. They had never quite consummated their love. Love. I don't feel that now. Not for Krontij. Where is the burning I felt to get back to him? Love? Did I really love him? Would I again if I were home? Or was I just trying to spite my parents, my traditions? I, who argue so strongly for Aglayan ways with Whitey! She recalled how she had almost defiantly told her parents that she was Promised to the boy from another village, the boy she knew they so disapproved. She wondered now if she had wanted him so much as she had wanted to assert her will. Here I am off Aglaya, doing more adventuring than I ever dreamed of, and defending Aglayan ways. Perhaps I am as much a prisoner of those ways as anyone. As my parents. My father always said he'd been just like me when he was young. I mocked the idea! Impossible, I said. How could he have been, and so conservative now. Or was my wildness, my "youthful rebellion" as he called it, just that: a stage of youth, inevitable, one I had no control over? One nobody has control over. It varies in degree, maybe. I had more of it than my friends. Have I then no free will? Must I be young and seeking, then old and not so? Do I even want Whitey or can I just not help it? She sighed under the burden of confusion. She rose, clumsily, one foot asleep. Without conscious thought she called on her Aglayan Self to will the hesitant to feeling again. She walked unfalteringly back into her and Willie's quarters. She sat on the bed, elbows resting on knees, and sighed again. I have aged a great deal in my time away. Inside at least. 75 Perhaps faster than I would have at home. Is that why I defend tradition so? Then what of Whitey? He's been away longer than I. Yet he seems ever less bound by tradition. Is that just a facade he puts up? Is he trying to convince me he has broken away and is truly of Them now? (She unknowingly used the same term for Galactics that Whitey's Aglayan woman on Resh had long since come to use.) Or is he trying to convince himself? 8 Walk! Not bloody likely. I am going in a taxi. -G.B. Shaw, Pygmalion Space is Space-and it's not. It seems empty, to a planet-bound mentality. A vacuum. The question is actually one of whether it is partly empty or partly filled. Or largely empty and slightly filled. A matter of degree. There is matter in space; plenty of it. All matter exists in space, in fact. All suns, all worlds. Even in the vacuum between those larger bodies, matter exists. Asteroids, comets- smaller bodies. Gas, dust-smaller bodies yet. Wandering particles, rarely encountering each other in the mysterious wastes between the suns. The matter that proved the rule: Space is a vacuum. True, but, The matter made interstellar travel possible. It fueled the engines of the vacuum-opposing craft of humans-and others. It fed the great old ram-scoops and the proton-proton conversion drives. It was there. More of it in some places than in others. One such place was the misnamed Carnadyne Void. Void of major bodies, yes. Packed with minor matter, with cosmic debris, with dust and gas. At its far outer edge hung one of the humans' greatest creations. A space station, torus-shaped like most of those that orbited the planets of humans, yet bigger, far bigger, owing gravitational allegiance to no larger world. Not one wheel but twelve, each three times larger than any planetary 76 77 station. Spinning hugely in the abyss, generating its .8-standard gravity



for those within. Those within were mostly spacefarers, off merchanters and freighters from all over the galaxy. The enormous freighters that served the Rim Worlds came here to pick up cargo brought by those merely huge vessels that plied the galactic core. Many Ramblers could have been swallowed by one of the kloms-long behemoths. Many Ramblers brought their cargoes here for transfer to those freighters, and to pick up small parts of the giants' cargoes for transfer to the Inner Worlds. Thus the facility's name. Barbro Transfer Station. Ten of Barbro's wheels—thirty times any normal station—consisted of warehouse space. One wheel, or three times a normal station, serviced the ships. The remaining torus was Hometown. Hometown, where lived the ten thousand men and women who ran this enormous construct. Lived, worked, and played. One of the places where they—and the transients who came in from all points of the galaxy—played hardest was the Star-Flung Lounge. It was, simply put, the biggest bar in the known universe. The biggest bar ever known to humanity. Three thousand could be served here, entirely by cybers (including bouncers that did not wait to track trouble but stopped it before it started. With stoppers set on Two. Modified Outworld stoppers, whose Two meant Unconsciousness). The grandest of the Star-Flung's three rooms was the Crystal Palace Room. Entering it was like stepping into a gigantic collection of gigantic glassware floating in space. Mirrors and faceted reflective surfaces were everywhere, breaking up the room's area into smaller, separate mods while at the same time giving a feeling of expansiveness almost to the point of disorientation. Many of the surfaces were of trueglass. A replica of the Crystal Palace on Hawking, cultural hub of the galaxy, it went that legendary establishment one better in providing a view Hawking couldn't match. The outer walls of the room were of crysplas reinforced with a transparent form of cyprium. Thus this station interior was surrounded visually by the Abyss. On the side facing the Carnadyne Void a glowing, diffuse light reflected off the dust and rock to flood the room, so that 78 only soft artificial illumination was needed, and that discreetly hidden. The effect on the intoxicated was of floating on Stardust. Even the sober had been known to lose breath. In a booth in the Crystal Palace Room sat a patron who seemed not the least bit impressed by this splendid fantasy. A woman, alone, ignoring a glass (not plass; booth service provided the real thing on request) of wine. A woman, evidently not a spacefarer to judge by her dress, a tastefully quiet suit of light Meccan blue. A woman of above medium height, apparently in her thirties though seeming (not looking: her physical looks told little) younger. A woman not beautiful (it would have been hard to apply that word even to perfection in such a woman) but—striking. A woman such as few on the space ways had ever seen. A woman unique in a galaxy where exoticism could be bought by even the moderately well-off. Save that this uniqueness hadn't been bought. Not with money. Her skin was one shade greener than olive. Her hair, waving down to meet her collar, was true, unmixed, no-variant-shade . . . purple. So were her eyebrows. The eyes below them were white. White. The sclera were ivory and the pupils more of a cream color, but one had to get close to her face to make that distinction and see the pupils at all. Few people who saw those eyes from a distance wanted to get close. One who did was a drunken spacefarer whose own orbs were functioning far from optimally. He saw only a woman, an oddly-colored one, true, but he'd seen plenty of those. Besides, she sat alone and that always constituted an overriding consideration. He came up to her table and stood at her elbow. "Notice you're alone, Sweetcake," he got out, thickly. She lifted her head, which had been lowered toward the drink she was clasping with both hands. Milky eyes gazed directly into his. His mouth opened but no sound came out. He tried to focus, thinking his vision played him tricks. (It did, in most things. Not this.) He caught a hint of the outline of her pupils. They did not make the eyes any less strange. He tried to look away. For an instant he succeeded. He saw a jaw set in a way that somehow said danger. He saw a body 79 more tensed and muscular than he thought any female body had a right to be. He looked back at the eyes. All this took perhaps three seconds, during which time the woman had not yet

responded to his comment, "Notice you're alone." Now she did. "Guess why," she said. The fellow redshifted. Backward, three steps, which brought him stumblingly up against a cyberserver, which buzzed a warning. He turned awkwardly and continued out of the bar at speed. In the morning his mates would laugh at the absurd tale he told of the somehow dangerous woman who had done nothing except stare at him with empty eyes he somehow recalled as white. White, for Gri's sake! Before morning he would have dreams in which there was nothing at all to laugh at. The woman returned to her waiting. For that was clearly what she was about: waiting for someone. She would stare into her drink for awhile, then scan the bar, particularly the entrances. Every group of entering spacefarers drew her careful attention. Still she seemed in no hurry. Never glancing at her cuffchron. Never showing any anxiety. Patient. Waiting. Two people appeared in the entrance farthest from the bizarre-hued woman. One was a spacefarer, medium-height with longish brown hair, clad in a black jumpsuit. His female companion was shorter, perhaps 157 sems,\* with short white hair. Clearly an Aglayan, but dressed in Galactic clothes, five-way-stretch cerulean pants and a two-button cadmium yellow tunic that left a great portion of her considerable warheads exposed. That exposure and the white hair gained her a lot of attention from others moving through or near the doorway. Her male companion seemed slightly discomfited by it, not to say annoyed. He urged her onward with a hand at her elbow. They moved toward the bar. As they entered the room proper they caught the attention of the green-skinned woman. / \*157 centimeters: about 5 feet, 2 inches, Old Style. 80 Many other eyes stared at the pair. Their own remained focused straight ahead. Thus they did not notice the woman slip out of her booth and head obliquely for the bar. As they hoisted themselves onto suspenstools, she slid onto one three down from theirs. The intervening seats were vacant. They remained so. Anyone who considered taking one received a look from those albescent eyes that immediately convinced her or him of the undesirability of those particular seats. The newcomers ordered drinks and sat talking quietly. The green woman reached into the surlock-expanbag she carried and pulled out a photo. Not a holo; an old-style photograph, printed on old-style durcard. Flat and much more portable than even a miniature holocube. Holding it in her lap behind the bag, she glanced first at it, then at the man, then at it again. A slight smile crossed her thin lips. She replaced the photo in the bag and ordered Corsi white wine, chilled. When it came she sat sipping and studiously avoiding looking at the two. And listened. The man drank his martyny, looking vaguely uncomfortable. "I don't see why you couldn't have worn a wig as well, to avoid all that attention. An Aglayan in Galactic clothing with that hair exposed may as well be wearing a native tunic." The short woman flipped her fingers. "Well, that's not really honest," she confessed. "I do care. The fact is I wore these clothes to attract attention. Besides, I think that wig of yours looks silly. We're not the only Aglayans on the spaceways, you know. No one's going to nip us just for being from there." "I can't figure you out. You defend the traditions of Aglaya, then flaunt yourself like a Galactic woman." She ducked her head to peer down into her cleavage. "How do you know I wouldn't flaunt myself if we were back home?" she said mischievously. "And I can't figure you out, castigating me for my Galactic ways when you've so thoroughly adopted them yourself." The man sighed. He held up his empty plass horizontally and wagged it at the cyberserver. "I can't help getting that feeling again. That I've had this conversation before." "Me too. Or do you mean the Aglayan woman on Resh?" "Pos, her." 81 "Tell me about her." "She was a former slave, like me. Only she freed herself by killing her owners. I saved her life. Killed three narcobums to do it." "You Fried them?" she asked quietly. He shook his head. "Neg. I stabbed them." The cyberserver arrived and replenished his empty plass. The two humans remained silent until the robot moved off. "Go on," the woman said. He shook his head again. "Another time maybe. I don't know why I brought it up. Let's talk about what we're going to do. Here we sit in Barbro with no ship and very few stells, looking for a way to get to a planet it's

illegal to visit . . . and off which it's illegal for you to be. Not a simple problem, you'll agree." "Could we maybe find a freighter going after phrillia?" He smiled approvingly at her. "Not a bad idea. Not a good prospect, though. It's hardly a regular run, and certainly not an advertised one. I can make discreet inquiries of some people I know here. Even if we find such a voyage, though, they're not likely to want to run renegade natives." "What's it cost to hire passage on a ship? Going near there, I mean, not an actual charter." " 'Going near' doesn't mean too much along the spaceways. An extra jaunt through subspace is an extra jaunt through subspace, even if you're at the next system over. Still, Luhra isn't that far from Aglaya. Rambler made the jaunt, at sublight of course. That may actually be a possibility. "They're still going to be dubious about the nature of the trip, though. And you don't want to know the cost." "We don't have it, huh?" "Neg. / don't have it, Pransa." Both remained silent for awhile. Then the man spoke without looking at her. "Tell me about your Promised." The woman looked both surprised and uncomfortable. Staring at his profile, toying with her drink (a Corsi Crush), she almost said, "Now who's jealous?" She thought better of it. It was evidently not a moment for joking. She opened her mouth, hesitated, then spoke. 82 "His name is Krontij. He was from another village, that you know." (Unconsciously and almost immediately she slipped into the past tense, as if the boy's existence were part of a life now gone.) "Both our families opposed the match. My parents thought he was too wild. His thought I was too headstrong." "Wild?" "Bad-tempered. Krontij would fight at the drop of a word." "The drop of a pin," the man said. "Hm?" He smiled, shaking his head. "Something Willie once said. Never mind, go on." "Krontij was hardly the image of a peaceful Aglayan. I mean boys his age do get into fights, but he was exceptionally poor in judgment. Defensive. Saw enemies everywhere. It was his parents, I think. And mine didn't help." "His seem to have been right about you, anyway. Headstrong." Like someone I knew on Resh. "I was that. Am that," she said, acknowledging his look. "But they felt that they had good reason to fear it in me. They said, not at all jokingly, that one headstrong girl in their family had been enough." "One? Had been?" "Their daughter. Had been, pos. 'Sky-demons' took her and her Promised. At least that's what was assumed. They never returned from a walk." She smiled wryly, but with a touch of sadness about her eyes. "Now that's what everyone thinks happened to us, isn't it! My poor parents. I must go back, you know. For them. They must know." "I know. I suspect you might stay on the spaceways if it weren't for that." "I suspect you're right, Whitey of Aglaya-or-whenever!" "Well. One would think that Krontij's parents should have been glad to gain another daughter, then, even if only in marriage." "Oh, I'm sure they wanted Krontij to wed. Just not me. I can understand their reluctance now. I guess I was a lot like Janja. She always acted-" She stopped. Rather she was stopped, by the look on her companion's face. What little color he had was gone and his mouth hung open. "Janja?" he whispered. "Janjaheriohir?" 83 "Pos. Firm, Whitey. Janja was Krontij's sister. Why? Did you know her at home?" The man said nothing. He looked as if he had been stoppered on Freeze. Neither he nor his companion noticed the reaction of the green-skinned woman down the bar. She nearly turned her face reflexively toward the two at mention of the name Janja. She stopped herself with a jerk so sudden that she spilled her drink. (A cyberarm with a wipe attached extruded from the inner edge of the bar and sopped up the wine.) "Whitey?" the short woman said with concern. At last he regained his ability to speak: "Pransa, Janja was-Pos, I knew Janja, but not at home. Not on Aglaya. Janja was the ex-slave I rescued on Resh!" It was Pransa's turn to be shaken. She put a hand to her open mouth, stifling a gasp. "And . . . Tarkij? Her Promised?" He shook his head. "Never a slave. Fried, on Aglaya." Before Pransa had a chance to absorb all this she saw out of the corner of her eye a figure standing at her elbow. "Pardon me," a voice said. A strange voice, oddly deep and resonant, nearly echoic. Pransa turned to face the strangest woman she had ever seen. Actually the sight shocked Pransa less than it did most Galactics, since Willie and Disco and scores of other people

had all been stunningly unprecedented sights for her. The same was true for Whitey, although to a lesser extent. He had been brainboosted before all but his initial encounter with Galactics. Still, green skin with purple hair and all-white eyes were a bit much. Following on the shock she had just had, though, all this failed to unnerve Pransa. She looked at the newcomer expectantly. "I am Khorundah," the strange woman said. "A genealogist, a traveling interplanetary genealogist if you will. Researching Imperial ancestry for rich and pretentious nobles. That's neither here nor there." She smiled as at some inner joke. The teeth were white, thank the Cosmos! "Khorundah is afraid she couldn't help overhearing a name you mentioned. Janja." (Whitey and Pransa came instantly alert.) "Khorundah believes she knows this Janja." 84 "From where?" Whitey asked. "We ran into each other out near Jasbir." "Jasbir? What was she doing there?" The strangeling named Khorundah flipped five. "Musla knows. She does get around, evidently. She is wealthy these days, you see. Has her own spacer." "Janja?" "Aglayan woman, short, pale-oh dear, Khorundah is describing you, isn't she, my dear?-and lots of others! Let's see ... she said she had been taken off Aglaya by the infamous slaver Jonuta" (she practically ground her teeth as she said the name) "and his mongrel crew. She had been enslaved to a priest of Gri, on Resh. She-" Whitey was nodding. "Firm! Pos, that's our Janja. Why are you telling us this?" She hesitated. Then, "Khorundah thinks she can help you. Help you, my dear," she said to Pransa, "to return to Aglaya." Whitey's eyelids lowered in instant suspicion. Strange Galactics did not discuss Aglaya with Aglayans. In a flat voice he said, "Why?" "Khorundah is of-Meccah," she said, with the slightest hesitation. "A follower of Musla. Among our ways is a solemn commitment to the returning of favors in kind. If not to the person who gave them and if not precisely in kind, then in equivalent manner to another in similar need. Janja assisted Khorundah when that help was desperately needed. Knowing our trails might never intersect, Khorundah made vow to help-if ever opportunity rose-any other ex-slave seeking passage home. Especially, of course, an Aglayan. Most especially one who knows Janja!" "I was never a slave," Pransa said very quietly. "Although I nearly became one." Khorundah flipped her fingers. "You are an Aglayan. Musla's Prophet, ever blessed, has placed you in Khorundah's path. Khorundah stands ready to assist you." The strange and strangely formal woman bowed-stiffly, formally. Whitey and Pransa exchanged astonished glances. Whitey turned back to the amazing . . . person named Khorundah. "How can you help us, Khorundah?" 85 "Khorundah has a ship. . . . Well, Khorundah is mate on a spacer whose captain is currently ailing. Khorundah is about to become acting captain for a time. Our cargo and destination are not settled as yet. It would not be difficult to make opportunity to travel to the vicinity of Aglaya." "Whitey!" Pransa said excitedly. "But this is wonderful! We don't even have to search for a way! It's come to us! And we can even tell Krontij and his parents that Janja is all right, too." Assuming that any of this is straight, Whitey thought. A genealogist who's a trained spacefarer-at the level of Ship's Mate? On the other hand, if an Aglayan ex-slave can become Ship's Mate . . . Or as Willie would say, "On the other hand, it had six fingers ..." Besides, she's the only game in port. "We have little cred, you understand." The woman looked mock-offended. "Please! We are speaking of a sacred obligation, in the name of the Prophet!" She smiled. "It doesn't do to take all this religion too seriously. Khorundah would nevertheless not accept your pay. Too, it is telemetrically obvious that you are a trained spacefarer-" "Ship's Mate. Another licensed spacefarer is traveling with us." "Excellent! Khorundah will be happy to accept your offer to crew on her vessel, as we will be one short in any case. Two can be accommodated, Khorundah is certain." "Then since I can speak for both of us-you have our offer to crew." "Then we are in harmony! Do we have a bargain?" "We have, I think. Pransa?" "Pos! Firm!" How can he ask? she thought. How can I not ask? I'm to return to Aglaya. To do what? To be the only Galactic there?-yet I must return. Mustn't I? I can always leave again, can't I? If they'll take me! The

eerie-eyed green woman was nodding. "Then there seems no reason for delay. Our vessel is in berth F-7. If you would care to assemble and stow your gear then, Myrzha- uh. . . , ?" "Whitey. I am Whitey, and this is Pransa." "Of course. Khorundah has met few Aglayan spacefarers, but surely ninety per cent of those were called Whitey. You may come and help Khorundah seek our cargo while Pransa goes onboard or waits at your in-station quarters." "Fine. Fine-oh, the name of your ship!" Whitey remembered, as she turned to depart. The white eyes may have held a twinkle. "Sapphire," their owner said. "Khorunda's spacer is-Sapphire." 9 As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. -A. Lincoln Of course, if I were forced to choose . . .

. -Trafalgar Cuv Slaver vessel Kirin, Captain Shieda commanding, came off the Tachyon Trail in the vicinity of the Slipher system, destination its second planet. Resh. The ship's occupants experienced the conversion from tachyons to their normal constituents, with accompanying nausea. The lone occupant of the Solitary slavehold found it not as bad as the first such conversion-into tachyons-out near Aglaya. He knew what it was now. He knew where he was: onboard a Galactic slaveship. He knew something of the universe into which he had been forcibly carried. He knew its language, Erts. He knew he was a slave. "Walking merchandise" bound for sale in the port of some planet or other. He knew all this because a slave who did not would have been useless in Galactic society. Hence slaves were given brainboosts by their captors prior to sale. Further education, if desired, was up to the new owners. In Krontij's case further education was a doubtful prospect. He had not even been given the usual level of boost provided as a matter of course to slaves bound for domestic or personal or (often in conjunction with the first two) sexual duties. Shieda, slaver, had spotted this one as a potential troublemaker. Potential troublemakers were not good material for 87 88 domestic, personal, or sexual slavery. Not, at least, until some of the aggressiveness had been worked out of them. Of course, by that time they were often no longer fit for anything . . . This one was young and strong, though. He might last awhile. And he might bring a good price even where he was bound, Krontij had been given the minimal brainboost provided slaves bound for service in the mines. That was not all he had been given, or forced to take. He had been the unwilling recipient of the sexual attentions of both Shieda and one of his crewmembers, a larger-than-normal (in all senses) Jarp called Hummer. Larger and meaner. An outlaw even on Jarpi. Slavery had been an escape for it. Once it had proved its worth to Shieda through several acts of betrayal and degradation, Hummer had been graduated to crew status. Other information than that conveyed by his brainboost had been given Krontij as well. Shieda had been careful to tell him of the fate of the Aglayan girl, just into puberty, who had been taken in the raid and who knew Krontij. She had cried out for him one day as she was being taken from the slavehold. He heard her in his Solitary pen, and inquired about her later. Shieda kindly informed him that the girl was unworthy of his concern, being unworthy of Aglaya. She had not the strength one expected of an Aglayan. Why, to be so little unable to stand a mere beating or two, in conjunction of course with entertaining the captain . . . She wouldn't have been of much worth as a slave anyway, Shieda said. Couldn't accommodate him anally without bleeding and screaming. Just as well that she'd died. Shieda had left the hold chuckling, although he couldn't be heard over Krontij's screams of fury. Krontij's vow of vengeance on Shieda was not so loud as his screams. Like Shieda's laughter, no one heard it but its producer. Once Kirin had docked at Eaglestation (its correct name, though many 'farers called it simply Reshport), its captain, three crewmembers, and a number of slaves took the shuttle-vator down to Grim. As Velynda had been for Pransa, so was Grim the first city 89 most of these unfortunates (the Aglayans; Shieda's merchandise was a mixed lot) had ever seen. Yet as shocking as the experience could have been, it was nearly obliterated by the drugs they had all been given to keep them docile. They scarcely noticed the urban sprawl around them. It was all they could do to stay on their feet and keep moving-when told. These slaves were bound for the mines. They were the

strongest and generally least intelligent of the lot. Shieda took no chances with such. True, undrugged slaves made better merchandise, more impressive to the buyer. But Shieda was a merchant with a reputation. He sold only prime merchandise, otherwise he'd not be welcomed back. His regular customers knew he would not dare misrepresent. (His occasional pick-up customers here and there found very much to their sorrow that he would misrepresent like a Suzite Shape-changer when it didn't endanger his repeat business.) His regular customer this day was one of his best: GriReshCo, one of the larger mining and manufacturing concerns in the galaxy. They took all the merchandise Shieda could offer them. They were especially desirous of these strong Aglayans who, being from a heavy gravity planet, operated better than most Galactics in Resh's 1.26-G. This batch of merchandise, however, would have an easier time of it. At least with respect to gravity. At the local GriReshCo office, Shieda sold them for top cred to work in the quartz mines of Resh's second moon. The gravity was a mere .2-standard, and Aglayans there worked nearly as efficiently as machines. Shieda received back his credcard from the GriReshCo official who had transferred payment to the slaver captain's account (which was in the name of one Terrin Stull of Suzi). He thanked the fellow in his usual unctuous manner, then moved to reclaim his stasis chains from the limbs of the newly-sold merchandise. (GriReshCo manacles had already been put in place next to Shieda's. No one was about to leave even drugged mining slaves loose for a moment.) As Shieda digitized the fingerlock on the chains of the last slave, the Aglayan boy looked him in the face. The drugged eyes struggled to come to consciousness. The facial muscles worked; tensed. Somehow through the narcotic Krontij called up Self and sense, and words. 90 "Shieda," he croaked, his mouth grotesque with the effort. "Shieda," and this time it was clearer. "I-will-get-you . . ." From behind Krontij a GriReshCo guard reached with a slavetube, applying it to the front of the Aglayan's throat. Krontij went to the floor with a hoarse bark, retching and writhing. "Continuing education, Captain," the burly guard said to Krontij's former owner. "Can't let up on 'em for a min or they just don't retain it. Even under drugs." "Po-os," Shieda said. He had stepped back from Krontij upon hearing the weak-voiced threat. Something in the boy's face . . . Now he spoke to the cringing, barely-conscious heap on the floor. "I don't think you'll be getting me, boy. Neg, I don't believe you'll be getting much of anything save more of the same, if that's what you want." His words were lightly spoken, but his face held no hint of a smile. Krontij heard not a word. Shieda turned to his mate as they left the GriReshCo offices. "From now on we use TZ on walking cargo, Phack. No more of these bargain-sale narcs just to save a few stells." "Firm, Captain." Shieda parted with his crew and went directly to a good bar/restaurant. Strangely shaky (Must be coming down with something. Should have checked in with shipdoc before I shifted planetside), the slaver proceeded to eat and drink the evening away. His last conscious thought was of a tensed face below white hair, whispering at him through clenched teeth. Later that night the crewmember oncon in Kirin received a call from Grim policers that he had better send someone to pick up his gross captain, who was completely stupo in the eminently respectable Hari's New York Bar. 10 AGLAYA (N175-2Gsl3 a,u,p). PROTECTD/UNDVLPD. . . . ONLY KNOWN VALUE: Phrillia (Q.V.) -Universography Edutapes Thus we live, forever taking leave. -Rilke, Duineser Elegien "There! In that field, Whitey. It's fallow at this time of the cycle. You won't damage any crops." Whitey nodded over his shoulder to Pransa, who sat behind him as he handled the controls of Sapphire's lander. Khorundah sat to his left, in the captain's chair. Since this was his planet, his village, she had suggested that he perform the landing. "The villagers are panicking, running in all directions," she observed. "They think it's Sky-demons-well, no, they know it's not that. They probably think we're slavers returning." He brought the in-G boat down to a smooth landing in a stubbled grainfield just outside the outermost ring of cottages. As he descended the steps of the dropped hatchway, he saw only seeming desertion. He put his hands to his mouth and shouted. "Ho the village!

Ho JI'ah! It is Fidnij. There are no slavers. We are friends. It's Fidnij!" He waited. Little haze obstructed his vision. It was an uncommonly bright day for Aglaya, probably the last before the coming hardrain. Soon a face peered from behind a 91 92 cottage, then withdrew. It returned, accompanied by another. Whitey stood and let them scan him. Of a sudden the owners of the two faces came out and began scurrying toward him over the open ground. They yelled. Others followed. As they came up to the lander Whitey caught their cries. It was his name they called. His Aglayan name. Soon two men of the village were greeting him at the foot of the ladder. Others joined them, including Pransa's parents. The chaos of that greeting was greater than had been for his own on his last visit. Pransa's parents thanked him ecstatically for bringing her back. Whitey had not thought that he would again see such shock as he had at his earlier revelations to his people. He saw it now, as Khorundah descended from the landing craft. He made it clear that she was a friend, which was all that was necessary for now. All that was possible amid Pransa's explanations of how Whitey (she called him that, even when speaking Aglayan) had saved her that night, and what had happened since, and who Khorundah was. And what the spaceboat was. The closest any of the villagers had come to a lander was on the night the slaves had first dared raid them openly. The night Pransa had vanished. That was from a distance, in panic. Now they swarmed around the first machine they had ever had contact with, and marveled. Somehow amid the confusion Pransa managed to have a clear word with her mother. "Janja is alive, Mother! Alive and prospering and not a slave. We must tell Krontij and their parents." Totenja reacted not at all as her daughter had expected. She looked grim and downcast. "Pransa, Krontij . . . you know it wasn't that we didn't like him or thought that your choice was wrong, just that you were-so . . ." she faltered, stopped. "Mother, what? What is it?" "Krontij was taken in the raid, Pransa. The night you left." "But he wasn't here!" "He arrived to visit you just after you went walking with Fidnij." Pransa looked abashed and guilty. "We were just walking." 93 The older woman choncelled her daughter and knew the truth of the matter. She took her aside, out of hearing of the others. "I know, child. And I know how things are between you and Fidnij. I also see much in you that is new and different. I see it can never again be as it was with you. With you and Krontij, with you and Aglaya. With you and us." "Mother . . ." "Does that surprise you, Pransa? That I so readily accept these things? You have not yet the chonceling, girl. Gaining that is probably not unlike what you have been through, learning a whole new world and way and speech. I recall when I was a girl and gained the chonceling. I was . . . staggered. All that had been alien to me was opened up. You have just gained other worlds. In gaining the chonceling you will attain knowledge of other minds. What could be more new and different, more alien, than that? No, child, I'm not surprised at your attraction to Fidnij, that night or now. Or at what there is between you." She smiled fondly at the younger woman. "Though as a mother I'm glad to see you haven't gained the chonceling quite yet." Pransa returned the smile, embarrassed. "I've often wondered how long you waited." "And you'll go on wondering until you can choncel me, for I'll never tell you." They both laughed and hugged each other. "Now come, girl, for we all have much to discuss and little time in which to do it. No, don't ask me to explain, for you'll see soon enough what I see too clearly already. Come!" They walked to the village. The others, villagers and spacefarers alike, followed. The former were eager to hear the stories that Fidnij and Pransa and their companion would tell them this time. They feasted again that night, and talked. A messenger was sent to the next village with word of the survival and escape of Janja and the death of Tarkij. Khorundah sat by the fire, discussing Aglayan genealogy with Kentoj. Whitey translated. ". . . so that direct or 'name' lines are only a fraction of your ancestry," Khorundah was saying. "The lines branch in many directions, doubling with every generation and . . ." 94 At least she wasn't lying about being a genealogist, Whitey thought. And she has this day become a Mindrunner in our behalf! "I have never thought of it before," Kentoj said. "And it is all very

fascinating. But now I wish to know what your plans are. Fidnij, will you be leaving us again?" Whitey looked at the ground for a silent moment. Then he raised his gaze to meet the older man's. "I will, yes. And . . . Pransa has elected to leave with me to search for Krontij. I concur with her. I will help her find her Beloved." He repeated in Erts for Khorundah's benefit. "But Khorundah gathered that you and Pransa were paired." "We are-together, now. I don't know what she feels for this boy. He is her Promised. Perhaps she doesn't know either, yet. Perhaps she needs to find him to find out. In any case, the tie of Aglayan Promise is strong. If he is alive she must find him." "And you?" "I help her because I am with her now. I-care for her. And for him. I would like to help rescue him if I can." Whitey surprised himself with those last words. It's true. He's an enslaved-Aglayan and I want to help him, regardless of the fact that he's Pransa's Promised. Why? There are many enslaved Aglayans. I can't rescue all of them. Why would I want to? I can't. "At any rate, Khorundah, if there is any chance you could at some point return us to Barbro we would-" She stopped him with an upraised hand. "Khorundah will take you wherever you wish to go. Khorundah came here to repay a favor. The act has proven not to be what the recipient desired. Therefore the act is incomplete. Khorundah will aid you in your search." Whitey was astounded. He could understand religious obligation and duty, of course. But he had never encountered it to such a degree in any Galactic. Quite aside from the obligation was the matter of expense. How could anyone, especially a mere acting captain, afford to ferry people illegally around the Galaxy on a mercy mission? With someone else's ship! He showed none of his astonishment to Khorundah. He 95 merely acknowledged the offer with a half-bow, which she returned. He then explained to Kentoj, who sighed and nodded. "It seems," Kentoj said, "that once one leaves Aglaya, for whatever reason, one is little tempted to return. I wonder why." "Pransa will doubtless return after she has determined Krontij's fate, Kentoj," Whitey said, although he didn't believe it. "Will she? There is Janja then. And there is you." Whitey said nothing. Again he cast his gaze to the ground. After a night's visit the three travelers prepared to depart. Pransa "did not hear from her family the expected pleas to stay. She realized now what her mother had meant the day before. She knew I'd want to leave before I did. Pransa carried Prot draped about her neck. In the group surrounding the three spacefarers at the bottom of the lander's steps stood a girlhood friend of Pransa's. Pransa moved to her. "Flensa-Flensa, I want you to keep Prot for me. I know you love him and will care for him. No, no. He hates and fears this traveling, and he would only be a hindrance in what I must do." She did not add what she thought: He might be in danger with us. She undraped the swinger from her neck. "There, Prot, sweet sillyswinger, you be good and remember Pransa till she returns, yes?" Pransa slipped into the third person, as people did when speaking with children and pets. As Khorundah did when speaking with people. Pransa handed the animal to Flensa with a last affectionate pat. Prot whimpered and looked miserable, but went. Goodbyes took little time. They always did, on Aglaya. There were formalities that, once said, were said. Lingering hugs and tears were unnecessary among those who could read and share the feelings of those from whom they were parting. As the lander rose from the field and gained forward momentum, Pransa's cherming of her fellow Aglayans faded. Only Whitey and Khorundah remained within range of her Aglayan sense. 96 Whitey feels as I do at this parting. Sad. Resolved. But Khorundah, Khorundah. Why am I never able to cherm anything from Khorundah? "We would do better, Khorundah thinks, to seek not the slaver ship which took Krontij, but to seek his sister, Janja. Krontij is no longer onboard the slaver at any rate. Also, we would be seeking a friendly, not a hostile, force. Khorundah says 'force' because that is exactly what Janja's wealth is: a force that could assist us in our search. It seems reasonable to assume that she would want to do so." Whitey and Pransa, sitting with their new captain-for that was, in fact, what Khorundah now was-in her quarters onboard Sapphire, agreed almost at once. Neither was particularly eager to tackle a slaver simply to



gain information as to where he had sold his merchandise. It had also entered Pransa's mind that somehow they should find Janja anyway, if only to tell Krontij of her whereabouts. Or her of his. Whitey was much less certain. Still, the argument about wealth and assistance was hard to refute. So it was that the three sat, with Willie, in the con-cabin of spacer Sapphire while her captain prepared to hit the Tachyon Trail for Barbro Transfer Station. Prepared very quickly. I've never seen a SIPACUM get a spacer into conversion that fast, Whitey thought. And it's the second time she's done that. Can we have had that good luck twice? Or is she taking dangerous chances? And did that last conversion affect my eyes as well as my stomach? The whole cabin looked as if it-flickered just as we went in . . . Pransa's thoughts were on the state of her converted innards, too. She was pleased to find, just as had her distant Beloved, that her succeeding experiences left her less nauseated than her first. Galactics do this as a matter of course. Convert. "Turn into something else." Now I, an Aglayan, am doing it. In more ways than one. 11 A little learning is a dangerous thing. -Pope, An Essay on Criticism The question, gentlepeople, consists in whether we perceive the slave as being half-educated or half-ignorant. For surely if it is one then it is the other. Further, and inescapably, is it not then half-civilized and half-barbarian! And which, then, is the more dangerous half? -Anon., The Chronicles of Endalkatchew, late Imperial period Quartz was not easy to mine even in .2 gravity. On Crystal, second moon of Resh, very little effort was expended to make it any easier. That would have defeated the purpose of having slaves. Slaves, after all, existed to do those things that "civilized" people found too odious to do themselves, even for money. This particular form of slavery was so odious, though, that in most places that tolerated domestic and even sexual slavery, the laws against mining-slaves were enforced. Not so on Crystal. Slavery was illegal on Resh and its satellites, as in many places. As in most places, it went on anyway. In most places it was ignored or overlooked. On Resh things were a bit more subtle. GriReshCo controlled mining operations. The priests of Gri controlled GriReshCo through its board of directors. Indeed, the priests controlled a substantial part of Resh's political structure. Among other things, they controlled Reshi Security. 97 98 All this gave them access to records. So slavery was not ignored or overlooked on Resh. It was disguised. Anyone who cared to look in the records (few did) would find every slave accounted for, listed as a bonded laborer, a perfectly legal status with pay accruing. This pay was there in the membanks for all to see. The "bonded laborers," of course, never saw a centistell. So much labor to mine quartz was actually quite unnecessary. Easy as it was to move the mineral in .2 gravity, it would have been far easier with suspensor lifts that canceled gravity entirely. Easier, and far more economical. The priesthood of Gri, though, would not then have had the tariff-in this case a polite word for "kickback"-that they received from GriReshCo for protecting the slave trade through Reshi Security. Thus they created an artificial situation in which their services were needed to protect that situation. So they continued slavery past its point of real economic usefulness. One of history's errors from which people failed to learn- and which history kept making. The low gravity did aid the work to an extent, of course. Still, it was the lowest form of drudgery. The days on Crystal were regulated to twenty-seven hours, a period that had nothing to do with the rotation of the little moon. Virtually the entire waking part of that "day" was devoted to work. Even eating periods were all but non-existent: the slaves were fed encapsulated nutrients rather than real food. Sleep was artificially induced and intensified so that a minimum was necessary. The slaves worked twenty-three hours a day. The open-face mining operations were carried out in the artificial environment enclosed within giant cyprium domes, transparent and interiorly lit. The slaves sent there were strong, never too smart, never too desirable sexually, and with a minimum of character. Most of all they must not be too spirited. Occasionally an exception was made, especially if a troublemaker turned up somewhere, a difficult piece of merchandise that

someone wanted buried and broken. Krontij was such a one. Nothing if not spirited, he had been assigned to the heaviest of the labor details. The one requiring the most youthful strength and vigor: hauling the huge blocks of quartz to the slidepath for transport. Luckier slaves-cutters-prepared the 99 blocks for the haulers. Using short-beam hand-held lasers, they made cuts in the rock face into which synthesteel hooks could be inserted. Other slaves followed to insert the hooks. Next the great slabs of quartz were cut away from the mining face by larger, stand-mounted lasers in the control of GriReshCo-paid employees (no slave would be trusted with one of these potential weapons). Then came the haulers' job. Dragging the slabs by means of the synthesteel hooks to the slidepaths. This would have been relatively easy in the low-G, except that they were required to drag the largest possible slabs, effectively neutralizing the advantage gained. Also, although movement was easy, the low weight of their own bodies acted against them by making it difficult to get purchase. A great deal of the hauling consisted of slipping, sliding, falling (slowly) and getting up again (more swiftly, under the guards' prodding). One responded when the guards prodded. They carried slavetubes and stoppers. Their captains bore plasma guns. Krontij, he of the limited brainboost and almost no experience in the ways of the Galaxy, knew, at least, about slavery. Or more accurately, about being a slave. He knew almost nothing about slavery generally. Certainly he knew little about the mentality of slaves in the aggregate. He knew even less of the history of slavery, having received no historical matter in his brainboost. He had never even heard of an edutape. He was a slave, and he knew about himself. Hence he assumed he knew how a slave, any slave, all slaves, felt. He assumed that they would risk all to be free, as he surely would. Especially when the alternative wasn't even remotely appealing or with any hope of becoming so. Krontij was wrong. His assumption led quite naturally (as historically it had for many) to the further assumption that a rebellion, once started by a determined few, would be fed by the spontaneous uprising of the enslaved masses. Having no knowledge of the history of rebellions, he was wrong again. Krontij planned a rebellion. He had begun by plotting an escape. It took no education, only Aglayan common sense, to see very quickly that escape was an impossibility. Particularly by someone who had no 100 notions of Galactic technology beyond the few simple tools used in quartz-mining operations! Hence his thoughts turned to rebellion. He was right about one thing: Wherever there was oppression or subjection a determined few could always be found, Krontij had found them. One of those he recruited was a trustee, who had access to company offices. This one managed to smuggle a few stoppers from storage. In addition, Krontij hoped-planned, as he naively believed-to capture tools and weapons once the uprising had begun. In this he committed yet one more time-honored error of revolutionaries. He assumed that the engine could be started first and the fuel found later. (The mentality of slaves was thus not far from the mentality of masters. Neither could read the lessons of history. Both supported outworn concepts. Some historians liked to say that both were slaves to the system, the masters brutalized as well as the slaves. (In the case of the Gri priesthood, the masters were quite happy to be brutes. In fact they reveled in it. So long as they remained free brutes; wealthy brutes. Controlling brutes.) Krontij planned to start his revolution at the slidepath. There the workers were most densely concentrated. Haulers came and went, cutters stood nearby, slideworkers who ran and maintained the path, keeping it free of obstructions, loaders who jockeyed the slabs onto the path, and drudges (mostly older slaves) who picked up broken odd pieces. These fragments went into carts that traveled the path. Krontij had secreted his small cache of weapons in one of these, and marked it. He waited only for the coincidence of this cart's coming by at a time when he could be as near to the nearest pathguard as possible. Twice he had failed: once when the guard moved off suddenly to see to some problem, once when the cart tipped over. Now he tried again. The cart had stopped for loading. Krontij had just deposited a slab of refulgently chalcedonic quartz next to the slideway and was within five meters

of the guard. Out of his stained drab tunic Krontij took a short-beam laser provided by one of his compatriots, a cutter. Walking 101 casually behind the guard (who was working overtime, his tired mind on an upcoming assignation with an onplanet hust), he stuck the device into the small of the man's back and actuated it. At the same moment he threw his free arm around the guard's neck. The man fell back into his assailant's arms without a sound, his spine severed. Krontij had killed his first person. He maneuvered the body behind the waiting cart and dumped it on the ground. Pulling from his belt the synthesteel hooks he had just taken from the slab of rock, he grappled the edge of the cart and tipped it over onto the guard's body. Jumping back as the cart slowly fell in the reduced gravity, he attained its opposite side before it had finished its descent. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw other guards blueshifting toward him. Kneeling, Krontij applied his laser to the bottom of the cart. A section fell away, revealing the cache of stoppers. He whirled as the nearest guard arrived, stuck the laser in her midsection and cut her open. Grabbing a stopper, he shouted for his fellow conspirators. At the same time he rushed for one of the large rock-face-cutters. One thing Krontij had learned without being taught, from observation: how to use a stopper. He used it now, set at its lowest setting, Freeze. It cleared his path, even though it was effective only so long as it remained trained on its target. Those targets stayed disoriented for just a few sees after coming out of the beam's influence. It provided enough time for Krontij to dash past them. He had no compunction against using the Three setting- Fry. He had simply not had time to dial it when he grabbed the cylinder. Certainly he would have been just as happy to kill some of these oppressors, given the opportunity. Reaching the cutting laser, he gained the opportunity. Actuating the big machine, he swiftly cut down any guard that didn't bolt for cover. Swinging the cutter around to cover himself from further attack, he yelled for the slaves to arise and fight. A few, his cohorts, were in the fight already-or had been until the remaining guards had taken cover. Now they stood, stoppers in hands, exhorting the others. "Weapons! Take weapons from the dead guards! Arm yourselves!" 102 "We can stop them! Get the ones who are hiding! You outnumber them!" "We have stoppers! We need your help!" And Krontij, over all: "You can be free! We can be free!" Most of the slaves, like the guards, had dashed for cover when the action began. Krontij expected them now to emerge, grab weapons, and flush out their oppressors. They did not. Krontij waited in confusion as nothing happened for long moments. Then the colossal voice of the open comm from the guardhouse drowned the shouts of the rebels. "ATTENTION WORKERS, ATTENTION. YOU ARE ORDERED TO ATTACK AND DISARM THESE REBELS. THOSE WHO DO NOT COMPLY WILL BE PUNISHED UNIFORMLY WITH THEM: ATTENTION. YOU ARE ORDERED ..." They complied. They could imagine what the punishment for rebellion might be. Besides that, they followed orders. It was what they did. They were used to doing so. They would have been terrified not to do so. They did so: Slaves attacked slaves with the aid of the remaining guards. A few were stoppered, a few lasered, but their numbers overwhelmed Krontij's dozen or so. Krontij observed all this in astonishment followed by dismay. Frozen into inaction, he saw his followers fall under heaps of struggling slaves, co-workers, presumed allies. At length frustration and anger brought him to himself. He turned the laser-cutter on the guardhouse. He never had the chance to use it. Of a sudden he felt as if terminal nausea had invaded every cell of his body. He could feel his brain shaking, his nerves shrieking. His muscles, while remaining under his control, felt as if they were shriveling in cold fire. He went to his knees, his mind filled with fear, his Self all but destroyed. Had he been able to observe, he would have seen everyone else in the area, guards and slaves alike, rebels and loyal workers in the same state of nervous dismemberment. The unseen denizens of the guardhouse had unleashed their ultimate device: a sonic scrambler field. It ripped the nervous system inside out while causing no permanent damage (within certain time limits). Nothing more debilitating existed, short of physical injury. 103 In fact the sonic scrambler was far more debilitating than all

but the most severe injuries. Krontij was an Aglayan. An Aglayan male, true, but still with strength of mind superior to that of Galactics. He was the last to give up the struggle. Driven to his knees, he rose again, fought it, but the fear in his mind proved too numbing, the needle-like pain to his ganglia too incapacitating. He went down a second time like a gored gamel. He curled into a ball and tried to whimper. His nerves would not even give his vocal muscles the proper commands. The revolt died. By the time the field had been turned off the area was surrounded by armed guards who safely covered every one of the rebels (who by then had helplessly dropped their weapons and fallen to the ground anyway). Mining slaves were fortunate in one respect. They were too valuable to GriReshCo to be executed or unprofitably incarcerated. They were in effect beyond civil law. Which is not to say that no action was taken against them. When Krontij came around he was, for quite a time, docile. He offered no resistance or even his customary token sullenness to being imprisoned. "First time in ages we haven't had to tube this one," a huge-chested guard commented. "We'll never have to again. Orders are to give him TZ." Krontij mustered enough spirit to look up curiously on hearing the unfamiliar term. "Don't know what that is, Whitey? Tetrazombase. Nice little medicine, Gylan. Makes you obey orders real happy-like. Won't that be nice? To be a happy slave?" "Jeel! Watch your language! That's a bonded worker you're talkin' to. GriReshCo 'plovee." "Oh. Pos. Sorry." Jeel chuckled. They left him alone. For the second time in his life he was in solitary confinement. He thought. He looked for reasons for what had occurred and found none. Not that the mind needed reasons in order to learn a lesson. Krontij had now picked up a bit more information at the hands of these Galactics. He had learned a lesson. And just as he went under the TZ, just as he lost not only his freedom but his will, the lesson formed itself in his thoughts: 104 Never rely on people just because they're in the same trouble you are. He learned no more and thought no more. Some thought, and occasional fast action, were required of a slab hauler. Krontij was transferred to picking up pieces at the slidepath and chucking them into carts. He was quite content. 12 Undue apprehension is like pain: it's a down, but it's there to tell you something's wrong. -Captain Jonuta of Qalara "You must do as I say!" "Why? Are you always right?" "No. But I am bigger than you." -The Play of the Alligator, early (middle Imperial) interactive holo (written by court committee). Whitey stepped from the navel tunnel into a wheel of Barbro Transfer Station. He stopped a moment to look up and down the corridor, uncertain which way to go. As he did so he glimpsed a figure walking toward him. The loose, angular stride seemed familiar. . . . "Achmy! What in Tao's name . . . ?" The grin was familiar too, although Whitey hadn't see it much in the recent past. "Hello, jacko," Achmy said quietly to his Aglayan former crewmate. "Thought I'd spot you sooner or later if I kept checking incoming spacers." "Is Rambler in port again so soon?" "Neg, it's not. Been and gone. I am, though. And I seem to have caught you rather sooner than later." "Been and gone? You haven't left Tachi too, have you?" "In a manner of speaking I have, pos." He paused, looking uncomfortable. "I, uh-jumped ship." 105 106 "Payday, Achmy, what . . . ? You stupid grat, do you know . . . ?" "Of course I know! Look, I-Tachi wouldn't let me go, see; I mean he really hit the overheads. And I had to get free. I had to see you." "See me? Why?" "To get straight with you, Whitey. We've been off-dock, you and me, for a long time now. Ever since that Aglayan cake on Resh. Janja." "Achmy, I've-" "Neg, now, let me finish. I've maybe tossed a career to say all this, so let me do it, huh? You killed three narcos in an alley in Grim for that cake. That scared the shit outta me. I saw a side of you I'd never seen before. Then you cozied up to her and took her soaring with you. Soaring and soaring. I saw another side I'd never seen. The Gylan side, I guess. I didn't like it. I didn't like you. I couldn't get prox to that, Whitey. And I couldn't get prox to that Janja, even being onboard with her and all. Course I didn't try. I thought you were completely frag and I guess I wanted to punish you, too. "Then you by Musla's mother went and did it again! This time you pulled a freshbaked right off the flaining planet and

made outlaws of us all!" "Achmy-" "Zip up, willya? I'm sayin' that I hated you even worse for that stupidity. Till I came to understand why, Whitey. Well, neg, I didn't do that till after you left. But this one was different, see. I mean, she talked to me. She told me about you, and about what it was like getting pulled onto the spaceways like that, and even some of the stuff she'd fought with you about, Glya and all-" "Pransa? Spoke to you?" "What am I tellin' ya? Anyway I thought it over-I think things out slow, you know that-and after you left I sorta saw what she'd been sayin' and besides she was nice to me, to everybody, and also maybe I found out I'd been scared of-uh-Glyanness, I guess. I mean you being different. I saw o'course ya couldn'ta just left her there and those bums in Dringle Pie Alley weren't any different than those slaver muths on Glya. I mean ... I mean I missed you, mate. I missed you." 107 Whitey nodded, just twice, and said nothing. "Sure is hard to get a rise outta you, isn't it?" Achmy said. "That was it, you see. It was like I didn't know you, this alien jacko with no feelings. You're like that. But not really. I mean I knew you were confused about this cake, even I could see that-" "You could?" "Anybody could, you magwart! And then she told me about it and I knew you were. And obviously you were feeling something and suddenly you weren't so scary anymore. More real. Y'see?" Whitey nodded again. He swallowed. "So . . . now what, Achmy?" "So, now, I don't know. Uh, what are your plans, mate?" "We are searching for Pransa's Promised. He was taken in the same raid when we rescued her." "Holy Musla's . . .! You mean she's still with you?" "Firm. Further, we are seeking Janja, who is her Promised's sister. She's wealthy now, and may be able to help us." "Oh, payday! Now I've heard it all. Wealthy! Who are you with, Whitey? What ship?" "The ship is called Sapphire. Captain is a woman named Khorundah. She owes a debt to Janja. She says." He flipped his fingers. "You haven't mentioned your plans." "My plans! My plan was to find you and say what I just said. Tachi's gone and probably hates my innards anyway. I dunno. Need an extra hand?" Whitey came very, very close to smiling. Not quite. "Sapphire is a large ship. Willie and I serve without pay. Indeed, since its captain serves us, evidently kindly, and since there is thus far no cargo-although we hope to rectify that-there's no pay to be had. This is not normal service. We seek Janja. At any rate, we certainly have room and I would welcome the assistance. Khorundah's regular two are pretty freshbaked. You'd have to see the cap'n, of course." "Where is she now?" "Oncon. She just relieved me. Probably making one of her longcalls. She does that. Calls stations and ports all over the Hub. I've no idea why. She insists on being alone during her calls. Why don't you go see if you can sign on? The ship's 108 not locked. I'll meet you later in the Star-flung. Buy you a drink.'" Whitey smiled at the other man. Well-almost smiled. "Firm. That's some kind of thanks, anyway. Not that I really deserve it. But I did jump ship for you, Whitey." Again Whitey said nothing. Achmy sighed. "You're as cool as a Corsi cuke," he said. "All right, firm. The Star-flung. Later." He turned and headed into the umbilical leading to starship Sapphire. He had gotten a few meters when he heard his former mate calling. "Achmy." He stopped, turned. Whitey stood in the mouth of the tunnel, one hand on the overhead, gazing after him. "You are worthy of the spaceways, Achmy." The white-haired man redshifted. Achmy smiled and again headed for Sapphire's lock. It was an impressive ship, he noted. Big, not huge, built for speed but with evidently respectable cargo space. Yet it didn't have the look of a freighter or even a fast merchanter. It almost looks like a fightin' ship, Achmy thought. But a cargo carrier too, firm. Make a good pirate ship! He noted many subtle signs. He examined the first letter of the spacer's name, which showed just within the ring of the attached umbilical. A huge blue S. New paint bond. Changed the name recently. Metal looks . . . odd, too. Feels odd. He entered and moved along spacer Sapphire's corridors. He continued to get a feeling that he could only describe as odd. Something not quite right. Spacefarers and seafarers were alike in many ways, but in one respect the travelers of the purple abyss differed from sailors. They were not as a rule superstitious. Generally only the unimaginative were superstitious. Spacefarers tended to be imaginative. It

was hard not to be, Out There. Space fostered imagination. Imagination fostered careers in space. Achmy was an exception. Achmet was about as imaginative as a bar-stool. Achmy was, however, superstitious. He picked up an impression of displacement from this spacer-The sense some people might absorb when entering an old house, of secrets past held not by a structure but a 109 sensate thing, a living entity that existed on two planes at once. If only one could see into that other plane, so close to this one that held only oneself and the structure, the quiet, remembering structure . . . Then one would see-what? What some people called ghosts? Spirits, remembrances of people and events that once took place there, or were taking place there still, on that other plane. So close . . . There's nothing wrong with this ship! This the apprehensive Spacefarer First thought (not to but) at himself, as people did when they were telling themselves to believe something. Telling themselves they were not Spooked. It's a good ship. And it was. The spacefarer in him could see that. He went to find its captain. He heard her before he saw her. The hatchway to the con stood open. Captain Khorundah was oncomm, obviously engaged in conversation. Achmy hung back just beyond the hatchway so as not to interrupt. That's what he told himself, and it was partly true. It was also true that he thought the voice he was hearing to be about the strangest he had ever encountered. He could not have said why. Like the ship, it was . . . odd. Unsettling. He hung back. He listened. "Satana, Satana! Neg, it's not Satana any longer, I tell you. The last name I have is Sunmother. The same ship renamed, or a new one, not clear. And she's calling herself 'Janjaglaya' now. Arrogantly transparent." "We've heard nothing of any Sunmother here at Murph, Captain Karenda," came a voice over the comm. "That's Khorundah, dolt! kH6-ROON-duh! You've had good stells credited to your account to seek information. The least you can do is get Khorundah's name right. What else have you found on the names Khorundah gave you?" "Neg on them all, Captain Kore-un-dih. No Trafalgar Cuw, no Quindaridi or Quindy, no Janja or Janja Glya. No Jarps called either Cinnabar or Raunchy." "What of the notorious Captain Hellfire?" "Latest scrute is that Hellfire's vanished from the spaceways. No one's heard a thing. Last report was that one from Jorinne. Then the trail just . . . stops." 110 "Damn! She is somewhere else, I'll wager. Not with them." She was silent. The comm likewise. Finally the latter spoke again. "Shall I keep trying, Captain Karr-" "Of course, you grunjok! What does Khorundah pay you for? Off!" Achmy heard a thump as of someone toeing a switch harder than necessary, followed by another "Damn!" He waited, holding his breath, trying to decide whether to enter or wait for a more propitious time. Then the strange voice came again, cold and low. "I'll find that traitorous Aglayan bitch if I have to spend years at it! Someone else may have gotten Jonuta, but that stash has to be somewhere! I'll find out where . . . and then- "And then, Khorundah is coming for you, Primeval Princess!" This was followed by a laugh so hollow, so distant-sounding that Achmy almost thought it must be coming from someone else, somewhere else. Somewhen else. He tried to digest it all. Clearly Whitey's new captain had undertaken this mission for reasons of her own, reasons not at all benevolent! Evidently she did indeed feel she owed some debt to Janja, but that debt was not return of a favor. Achmy, who had not liked most of what he had seen, heard, or felt since he stepped onboard this vessel, was completely unnerved. Being no intimate with intrigue and not knowing what to do, he did one thing he was sure he did not want to do. He made noise. Specifically, he sneezed. It is almost impossible not to close one's eyes when sneezing. Achmy's contorted face straightened itself and his eyes opened again . . . and the first things they saw were two eyes looking back at them. Two white eyes. In a green face topped with purple hair. An angry green face. "Khorundah gives you scant seconds to identify and explain yourself. He did, somehow. His voice shook, but he explained. Haltingly. Perhaps the faltering was a way of prolonging the explanation, postponing the inevitable, which had to be one of three things: he would either be taken prisoner, coerced into silence, or Fried on the spot. He had no idea what was 111 going on, but he was unfobbied enough to know

one thing. He was dealing with a vengeful and surely dangerous . . . person. He was therefore totally unprepared for what happened. The face before him softened, smiled, until almost it seemed friendly. The woman stepped out through the doorway to stand before him. She wore a white jumpsuit with ebonized zippers that ended in ring pulls running up the front, the arms and the legs. He saw nothing bizarre about the shape of her body, whatever its color. She put out a hand and lightly touched his arm. "Of course! Of course you may join us. Khorundah has come to admire your friend Whitey greatly, do you know that? A very competent fellow, and loyal too! Dedicated. Khorundah would take his recommendation without question. Besides, you have worked with him before. Doubtless you'll make a good team." All this time the woman had been escorting Achmy into the con-cabin, leading him until he backed up against a chair. She pressed him closely with her body. His gaze remained glued to those lactescent eyes . . . "Khorundah also welcomes another male member to her crew. Whitey is an attractive man, but he is quite attached to that Pransa. Quite attached! There are only two others in Sapphire's crew besides them and Willie, and frankly Khorundah has been thinking of letting the man go. Quite unsatisfactory. The other is a woman. And there it is." "Thank you, Captain," Achmy said quaveringly. "Uh, there it is . . . ?" "Pos! It is telemetrically apparent . . . plenty of crew for Sapphire. None for Khorundah." Achmy felt a pressure on his thigh and realized with a shock that it was Khorundah's hand. He looked down, then up, to see olive lips parted invitingly before him. The disturbing eyes were thankfully gone, covered by green lids. She's trying to tryst with me! Achmy always spotted something once it became obvious. She was indeed doing just that. It had never been difficult, moreover, to induce Achmy to tryst. The whole thing took on 112 quite a different complexion with those awful eyes no longer staring at him. And she did have rather a nice body . . . Very soon they lay on the floor of the cabin. That is Khorundah did, supine, her jumpsuit unzipped and off just enough to allow access to her body. Achmy lay on Khorundah. In Khorundah. On that awesome green body, his slicer buried in that amazing green-lipped stash. He had never seen anything like it, but it felt normal. All of her did, from her small-but-adequate warheads to her hairless pelvis to her silky thighs. All that was necessary, really, was that he keep his eyes closed . He'd had to do that before. There was that subcutaned Terasak he'd met on Luhra (pump), the one with the stripes, for Musla's sake, (pump) And the . . . His attention was drawn back by the lovely things his new captain was doing with her hands, on the backs of his thighs, under them and around his balls, up on his butt . . . Captain! Musla's fuckiri marbles, I've never made it with my captain before! "Slow down-mmm-or I'll flash too fast. Let go my-uh!" She did, sliding her hands back onto his butt. He resumed his gentle in/out stroking, when all of a sudden he felt a sharp sting in his left buttock and . . . "Yah!" he yelled. He tried to pull up and away, reflexively, but she held his legs with her own and her hands, astoundingly strong, pressed down into the small of his back. The sting began to fade. "Something stuck me!" He looked down and saw those eyes, that smile. "Khorundah stuck you, beautiful spacefarer. No further pain will result, as long as you do not reveal anything you think you overheard at the hatch of my bridge. And you wouldn't, Khorundah is sure." "What-what did you stick me with?" "A simple needle-like device. An injector. Only see!" She pulled a hand around before his face and held up her index finger. He watched, fascinated, as from beneath the fingernail a thin, needle-sharp tube slid out. She relaxed her finger and it vanished into the tip once more. "An injector," he repeated, stupidly. "Injector, pos. Genengineered, you see." Achmy dared relax-a bit. 113 "You just stuck me so I wouldn't talk, then . . .?" "Oh no dear boy, Khorundah didn't just stick you. She injected you. It's an injector, beautiful spacefarer." Achmy's voice almost locked in panic. "What-did . . .?" "Khorundah inject? A micro-implant bomb, my love. To, as I said, insure your silence. Oh, don't fret, sweet lover, it's not that sort of a bomb. Khorundah would not blow your beautiful butt off! She would only send a signal that detonates a

small-oh, small and quite painless!-capsule of poison. Why, Achmy, you're white as an Aglayan! Do not fret. You have but to do nothing, nothing at all, and you will be secure. Now, then ..." Again confounding Achmy's expectations (not that his mind was working well enough to expect anything), she returned to stimulating him with her hands. Her mouth. Her whole body. He required a great deal of stimulating, considering the circumstances. He had gone so limp by that time that he wouldn't have been surprised had she informed him that, by the way, she had also painlessly removed his slicer, so sorry. It had long since exited her body. She restored it nobly. And with it his ardor, somehow. He soared. Even more remarkable, she soared with him. Somehow he knew she was not faking. She genuinely enjoyed him. Later Achmy rationalized, as frightened people acting under duress rationalized. Whitey would be seeking Janja in any case. Hence he needn't know about Khorundah's personal vendetta, since it wouldn't change his course of action. At least, until they found Janja. Maybe by then something could be done, he thought, as procrastination walked hand-in-hand with rationalization. As fear excused itself. "I may be able to help," he told Whitey and Khorundah later. "You may not know it, Whitey, but Disco was once not quite the respectable Jarp it is today." "How so?" "It once crewed outside the law. For a slaver, in fact. And not just any slaver, but the great Captain Chicken himself.'" "Kislar Jonuta?" Khorundah said, with an untranslatable twist to her green face. "The same. Back in the days before Sweetface joined 114 Jonuta. Disco reformed and left him-friendly-like, I gather. It's a slim lead, but possibly Disco might know something that would help. Jonuta's hangouts or something, where he orbited. I mean Janja was taken from Glya by Jonuta and sold by him." "And Jonuta is dead." Achmy flipped five. "And Whitey and I met her after that. Like I said, a slim lead." "One worth pursuing, Khorundah thinks. There's no reason we can't seek Tachi's Rambler and have a talk with this Disco while we seek Janja. We have no definite destination anyway." "Uh, Captain, if we do find them, please don't tell Tachi or Disco where you got the scrute, or where I am," "Of course not. Would Khorundah jeopardize a member of her own crew? Especially one who has already been so helpful to her!" The two exchanged a look that made their Aglayan companion wish he were female. There's something going on here that I'd give worlds to choncel, he thought. Well, cherm anyway! 13 Of what race are you, White-Nose? -The Elder Edda What is the seed called, that is sown by men, in all the worlds there are? -The Elder Edda Starship Sapphire streaked through the parsec abyss on the trail of Rambler. Equipped with advanced sensing devices (Why? Whitey wondered), it was attempting to overtake the merchanter in deep space before Tachi could arrive at his next posted planetfall. Time passed at its seemingly normal rate for those onboard although the vessel outstripped time and Einstein in its hurtling passage. Those onboard followed human pursuits, not feeling at all like mere collections of walking tachyons. They spent their time with each other, in various groupings and couplings. Hoping to promote one such coupling, Pransa stopped by Whitey's cabin. She wore a white skinTite with a high, standing collar and no fasteners, so that it was an open V to the navel. Swirl-design SpraYon boots rose to just below her knees. She disdained jewelry or ornament of any kind. Whitey thought it was her way of keeping one foot in each culture: Galactic clothes and Aglayan lack of adornment. The mate's cabin on Sapphire was larger than that on Rambler, and had the potential for far more luxury than Whitey chose to possess. He kept it spare and spartan as 115 116 always, refusing the wall holoproj and comfortable furnishings offered him by Khorundah and leaving unused (save for INS newscasts) the inbuilt holovision. (Whitey had wondered anew at the offer of furnishings. If the vessel had been in use, why had it needed refurnishing?) Whitey's one indulgence was music. As Pransa opened his unlocked door she heard it wafting out. Odd music such as was almost unheard among Galactics. Primitive and yet-to Whitey at least-strangely soothing. He had found it among some old cassettes on Hawking on one of his two voyages to that cultural center. It was something called "Mote's Art," but no information existed as to who Mote was



or when or where his or her music had been composed. It must have been from Homeworld, Whitey supposed. He sat on his bed in lotus position, breathing slowly, using the music and the subdued roseate lighting to bring himself in touch with the Tao, the Way. Pransa had seen him like this often. At first he had been disturbed when she interrupted his meditations. Lately he had seemed to welcome her attentions even at such times. Perhaps he was mellowing. And she was so gentle . . . She sat by him and softly touched his knee. His eyes opened slowly but remained fixed straight ahead. He blinked a few times, then turned to her and smiled. "Sorry," she said. "No need to be. I'm pleased to see you." "I, uh . . . I wanted you." "I'd be pleased to have you have me. To have you." They smiled fondly at each other. Then Pransa looked away. A "normal" perversity existed in her; it made her willing to jeopardize romantic/sexual pleasure by creating a problem at the best possible moment. That perversity came upon her now. "Last sleep period you wanted Willie. You had her too." Immediately Whitey's soft mood vanished. His face darkened in the dim light. He rose from the bed and paced away from her. "I've never made any promise or commitment to you, Pransa. Willie and I are still what we were." "She is still what she is. An alien to us. How can you trust with non-Aglayans, Whitey?" 117 "You have no right to question me!" he said in a rush of anger. "Whitey, we are both of Aglaya!" "You would not be jealous, I suppose, if I were trusting with another Aglayan. Neg, you're not jealous at all; just concerned for my morals. You are worthy of the Galactics, Pransa," he said, his voice edged with sarcasm. "Jealousy does not cause this feeling in me that what you are doing is wrong and-and-" "Disturbing? Frightening even? Because Willie is an alien and you don't see them as people? Tao and Aglii, Pransa, Willie is your friend!" "Tao and Aglii? Listen to you! You don't even know who you are. You try to be of them yet you keep coming back to Aglaya. Then you criticize me for being 'worthy of them. How Galactic are you, Fidnij? Do you also trust with Jarps?" "I have never trusted with a Jarp! How dare you?" "You are insulted? You weren't insulted when I accused you of making it with Willie. Aren't Galactics just as alien as Jarps? Excuse me, aren't Aglayans just as alien as Jarps? Isn't that what you once told me?" "Pos. And you can hardly claim to be defending that proposition, after the accusation you just made. Why accuse me of soaring with Jarps if that's no worse than making it with Galactics like Willie? If you don't see Jarps as 'more' alien?" She opened her mouth reflexively, but found no words. He, calming a bit, went on. "Pransa, people-any people, of any species-evidently see degrees of 'alienness' in other species. It has nothing to do with biology, other than cosmetically, or with society. Or even relative intelligence-although all those have been claimed as reasons. The degree is determined by looks alone. By outward similarity to one's own race. In theory Galactics and Aglayans are just as alien to each other as Shirashites are from either. No one of either species would even consider sexual relations with a Shirashite . . . although that is possible and has taken place, due to force on the part of the Shirashites." (He felt his spine shiver at the thought.) "People even tend to enslave their own race more than any 118 other," he went on. "People! Any creatures. Look at ants. You may have noted more the enslavement of Aglayans, but enslaved Galactics far outnumber them, proportionally. As Aglayans outnumber Jarp slaves. Aglayans look more like Galactics. The fact is that the thought of trusting with Jarps turns my stomach. If that's bigotry I'm guilty. I can't help seeing a creature with a penis as being male! I supposed if I were a woman I'd see their breasts and think of them as being too female for me. Although it's especially difficult to overlook a penis." Pransa smiled. She nodded sympathetically. "I am jealous of Willie. I guess that's what all this is about. I can't help it any more than you can help your feelings about Jarps. You must understand that." "I do. Of course I do." Her next question took him by surprise, actuating the old danger signal in his mind again. "Was Janja the only Aglayan you ever mated with before me?" He hesitated. He contemplated his own fear of the subject. / have let this be a barrier too long. I must clear the air. She is being honest

with me. He told her then the whole story of his brief relationship with Janja. Of rescuing her on Resh and helping to smuggle her offplanet. Of accomplishing this by allowing her to disguise herself as his hust and travel with him. Of their trysting together. Of their arguments, so similar to those he had with Pransa, about Aglayan versus Galactic ways. Of the uncertainty about just who was arguing in favor of which. Inevitably, then, of the barrier that had come between them. "Janja insisted I allow her to deepkiss. I insisted otherwise, that that was reserved only for Lifemates. There I was, you see, demanding to be treated as a Galactic-I even withheld my true name from her until the very last! Yet I was vehemently upholding that which was sacred. And she, insisting I not abandon Aglayan-save in this one thing!" "And. . .?" "Oh, I 'won,' certainly. She even tried to deepkiss me while I slept. She was young then for a fact! Thinking that a man could sleep through that. I woke and stopped her. She never did have the act of me." 119 "Janja cannot choncel, then," Pransa said, although the relief in her voice derived not from that consideration. "Neg. Well, unless there's been another Aglayan since." Pransa stood. She glided lightly over to Whitey and stood against him, her hands resting on his forearms. "Whitey . . . I know your confusion. I am confused too! The feeling I have for you is obviously enough to cause me jealousy. Yet I still feel I must find Krontij. I am Promised to him, but I don't know what I feel for him. I haven't seen him since before I even knew of the Galactics and their ways. Of the spaceways. Before I even . . ." She faltered, searching. "Became a Galactic? In ways, anyway, if not in race." "Perhaps. I don't know just what I am now, Whitey, as you don't either. You have Galactic ways. You have Aglayan pride! But I think you are even more of a Galactic now than when you knew Janja." She gnawed her lip. "Consider this, too: you contend that Aglaya itself may yet be incorporated into the megasociety of the Galactic planets. Jarpi nearly has. What matters Aglayan law then? Can we even remain a separate race? Do you even know if Aglayans and Galactics can reproduce?" "Neg. I do not." What is she arguing now? She came in here defending Aglaya. He could hide the thought from her but not the curiosity. She chermmed it, treated it as a question. "I am trying to ask you if-you feel the same compunctions about the deepkiss." She expected the question to elicit a wall of adamancy. She chermmed no such, and went on in a rush of words: "Whitey, i know we aren't Lifemates, but we aren't on Aglaya, either! Janja had her purposes. Ours are mutual. If I could choncel, Whitey!" "You would be a superwoman among them." "Do you think that that would make me dangerous? I am not out for vengeance as Janja was. Whitey, how it might aid our search! Our understanding of these Galactics. The advantage would be Aglayan, don't you see? And I want it, Whitey, of course I want it. With you . . ." She realized too late that she had put her desires in the wrong order. Her excitement was clearly for the gaining of 120 the chonceling ability. Her desire for him came second. She couldn't help it. It had been her honest feeling. Well, better to be honest with him if they were ever going to get any of this straight. "You seem to have forgotten again," he said. "Janja's Promised was dead, Pransa. Yours is still alive." (He didn't say, "Possibly," but she felt the doubt.) "The law is therefore stronger." "And life is stronger than the law. That Krontij is still alive is precisely the point! I am more interested in finding him than I am in making Lifemates with anyone. What I feel for him is secondary. He is enslaved, possibly in danger." She knew he was weakening, and she realized that it had little to do with her arguments. Whitey was hoping desperately that she would go away-because he wanted very much for her to stay. He both wants it and is afraid to give it. "Whitey, Janja remained devoted to Tarkij's memory and sought revenge on his killers. I seek to save a life. Surely life is more worthy a goal than death. Have we not also broken tradition many times over? I defied custom in becoming Promised against my parents' wishes. I left Aglaya by choice, finally, as you did. You cast doubt on the religion of our people-" He shook his head with a jerk. "No! I cast light on it!" "-and for the matter of it we have both defied Galactic law utterly in our actions

toward home. Whose custom are we following, and what is sacred to us? You are important to me. Krontij and Janja are important to me, Whitey!" During all this last speech she had been touching him, his arms, his chest, his face. Now she pulled his head down against hers and held him tightly. She felt him tense, then relax. She cherved his almost childish helplessness and knew she had "won," if that were the word for something she sincerely intended to be for both of them. "Pransa, Pransa . . . you are becoming Galactic faster than ever I did, I fear!" "How Galactic are you, Whitey?" she asked again, very softly. "Enough to do what They do not reserve for Lifemates?" (She resisted the perversity this time, as it tried to make her say "To do what you and Willie have done?") 121 She never could remember, thinking about it later, how they had gotten their clothes off. They were just gone, and the two lay on the bed, embraced, impassioned, until they were aroused to a point that nearly made her forget her purpose and take him inside her. So involved were they that neither noticed the almost impossibly smooth conversion back from tachyons as Sapphire came off translight speed. No nausea, only a slight discomfiture of stomach that each attributed to passion and, possibly, nervousness at what they were about to do. She controlled herself. Sliding down his body, her mouth working the whole way, she came at last to the growth of pale hair and the stiff-standing slicer. So aroused that its tip seemed to swell and pulse, glowing pale pink against the white skin of its shaft. She took the tip between her lips and heard his groan from the other end of the bed. Almost she stopped then, in surprise. Cherving him deeply- something that happened almost automatically at this level of arousal-she realized that his caring, his desire for her, were more than physical. The realization excited her the more. Her tongue, then her lips, ran up and down the shaft, his hair brushing softly against her cheek. Finally she took the tip between her lips again, then opened widely, carefully so as not to scrape him with her teeth. She took him into her mouth, all of him, to the very back of her throat. She had never done this before. Yet she had no difficulty breathing. It came naturally to Aglayan women. A few strokes, too few, almost disappointingly to her, and it was done. He flashed. She felt the pulse of seed with her hand at his shaft's root, with her cheeks as it pulsed against them, with the roof of her mouth as it spurting into her. She drank, gratefully, deeply. And she knew. She knew how very much she cared for this man. Not for Krontij. Not for her Promised. Is this chonceling? I feel no different. Yet I know! So surely. But-/ cannot reach Whitey's mind. Should I not see more? She was about to speak her confusion to Whitey, who was lovingly stroking her hair. She didn't have the chance. An orange light and a bell simultaneously signaled a call on the cabin's commbox. 122 Whitey stabbed at the button. "Whitey here." Khorundah's voice came. "To the bridge, Mate. We've overtaken a ship of some interest to us.'" "Rambler?" Whitey snapped to a sitting position. Pransa came instantly alert. "Neg. Spaceship Kirin." 14 Any sufficiently advanced magic will appear to be technology to those who are too primitive to understand it. They'll be right, too. -Trafalgar Cuw I see my opponent has lost his head. -William Howard Taft, in a debate during which a cabbage was thrown at him. They dressed hastily and hurried to the con-cabin. Whitey's ill-defined doubts about his temporary captain came again to plague his mind. How does she know it's Kirin? Shieda wouldn't hail us. Unless Khorundah has Kirin's signatures in the banks . . . But why? Why would a genealogist!mate on a merchant spacer keep telltales on a slaver? There were no answers, so he gave it up as a waste of time and thinking capacity. He'd been called to duty and would need to stay alert. They arrived oncon to find Khorundah kneeling before a compartment in the side bulkhead. Willie sat before SIPACUM, tracking. A glance showed Whitey a ship out there, a thousand kloms distant. Sapphire was overtaking, slowly. Deliberately. "We need just a little time," Khorundah was saying. She hauled a great bundle out of the compartment, then another, then a third. "Khorundah intends to bluff a bit-as only Khorundah can. Only Khorundah, now," she added, stopping 123 124 and shaking her head. "We have fortuitously found the one person who knows the

whereabouts of your little lost Aglayan. We will now make full use of that opportunity." "Captain, that's a well-armed slaver out there," Whitey said. "Are we wise to try fobbing them?" He received a look from what were surely the palest eyes in the galaxy. "Wise? One gains peace through wisdom, Whitey. One gains results through daring. Willie, Khorundah wants you and Achmet on DS as soon as we're ready." "Firm, Captain. Do you want me to prepare to jam-cram-uh, just in case? You've, uh, never shown me which cassette it is . . . Khorundah snorted. "It is not. And you need not. Do not worry about jam-cramming on Sapphire, spacefarer. No one will go Forty Percent City with Khorundah." She turned back to the bundles and said, so low the others nearly missed it: "Ever again." Whitey saw the question on Willie's face just before she turned back to SIPACUM. He had no answer for it and shrugged. "These are aurasuits, Whitey," Khorundah said, ripping open the fasteners on one of the bundles. "Possibly you've never seen one . . ." "Neg, I haven't." "I've never even heard of one," Pransa said. "A full-body holographic projection, Pransa," Whitey said. "It covers you completely and a projector then casts a holo image that appears to be real. It moves with you, everything. Except talks. I mean your voice can be heard, but there's no way for your mouth to appear to move with what you're saying. Otherwise it's a perfect illusion. Replaces you completely.'" "How do you see?" "A telepresence on the forehead, feeding onto a screen inside. Gives you better vision than normal. Three hundred sixty degrees." "Advanced models," Khorundah said, "are available that do indeed appear to follow one's speech. Would that we had such! But these will do to fob a grunjok such as Shieda." 125 She knows Shieda, then, Whitey thought. Khorundah had all three suits spread out on the floor of the cabin. She pointed to one. "Whitey, into that. You'll have to strip completely, since it formfits. Pransa, into that one. Pos, Khorundah needs you here to listen. You know Krontij. You may be able to detect lies if Shieda chooses to tell them." Without further words Khorundah began to strip. Whitey followed suit. It was orders. Pransa followed his lead. She noted that Whitey was trying-and failing---to keep his gaze off his captain's nudity. For all its weirdness of coloration, it was a finely-formed female body. Pransa was also fully aware how much even her Aglayan lover was attracted to the hairless vulvas of these Galactic women. At least Khorundah is too busy to show much interest in Whitey. And Willie's not looking-not that it would be anything new to her! The first observation proved premature. Khorundah glanced at Whitey just before she pulled the telepresence/TP cowl over her head. "Ship's mate seems not to be excited in the presence of two, if Khorundah may say it, quite enticing nude women. One might think he had been recently satisfied." This last with a glance at Pransa. Whitey quickly pulled the suit up over his pubic area. He feared his embarrassment would show. Khorundah was right: He had very recently been satisfied. He felt his testes retract and was sure his slicer had retreated even further as well. Then there was no more talk; the tight suits covered all three bodies completely. Completely, even faces. Whitey and Pransa were amazed to find, as they pulled the cowls down to their chins and fastened the clinging fields, that they could see better than well. The TPs were set at two-to-one. That meant that a quarter-turn of the head enabled the wearer to see 180°. A look to the side gave vision to the rear. This produced giddiness at first, till the wearer learned to slow its movements so that it didn't get the sensation of its surroundings going by at dizzying speed. Khorundah solved the problem in short order by helping them adjust their TPs to one-to-one: normal vision. 126 "Now," she said. "Suits on." She twisted a small dial set into the chest of her suit. She vanished. In her place stood, apparently, a captain of TransGalactic Watch, the uniformed policer arm of TransGalactic Order. The illusion flabbered the two watchers. Perfect, from all sides! No flicker, no look of artificiality. The person stood there, a solid, middle-aged woman, a bit stocky but more muscular than fat. Dark-haired and blue of eye (that was a great relief to the others). In a TGW uniform of gray and maroon. "Well, well, don't let's keep the good Shieda waiting," the "officer" said. Only here did the illusion fall down: lip-movement was not in

synch with the words. "Suits on!" Whitey and Pransa overcame their astonishment and buttoned on their projection-suits. In an instant two more TGW officers stood in the con, a man and another woman. The man wore the uniform of vice-captain, the woman that of ensign. Whitey was the woman, Pransa the man. "Mixed them up! Ah well," their captain said, with a fingerflip. "You'll not be talking anyway. Just sit behind me and look official. Willie!" "Firm, Captain!" She toed open intraship comm and spoke. "Achmy: to DS, pres! Larion: strap down!" A moment's pause. Then, "Firm. On my way," came over the comm, followed by "Firm." Willie punched a key on SIPACUM, rose and headed for the door. She cast one bewildered glance at the three TGW officers and shook her head. "Con is yours, Captain. SIPACUM on standby for MaC." She was gone. The con was, to all intents and purposes, that of a TGW patrol vessel. Khorundah moved to the captain's chair, sat, motioned the others to their seats. They sat. Every move was perfect, the holos following the body motions of their wearers seamlessly. Khorundah inslotted a cassette that was unfamiliar to Whitey. (Several such existed. She had never explained. He had never asked.) She flipped a toggle. A screen came alive, showing Sapphire's exterior. The great blue letters of the spacer's name stood out on its gray hull. For a moment. Whitey watched in disbelief as the letters were slowly 127 swallowed up by a spreading mustardy coloration. It subsumed "Sapphire." It took shape. It settled and focused. It solidified. Whitey stared out at the glo-green identification numbers of a TGW patroller. Khorundah blanked the screen. "And now ..." she said. She put SIPACUM on Manual-and-Continue and began closing the distance between Sapphire and Kir in. At three hundred fifty kloms Whitey noted that SIPACUM's panel indicated they were being scanned. He said nothing. Certainly Khorundah knew it; besides, he had been told to keep quiet. "Ready gunnery and cybertrack, DS," Khorundah said, toeing open intraship again. Cybertrack? Whitey thought. On this ship? I'm mate! Why didn't I know? Did Achmy and Willie? The tones that came back over comm indicated surprise. They hadn't known. Like good troops, they accepted without comment. "Ready DS, Captain. And cybertrack!" That was Willie. "Ready, Captain," was all Achmy said. Clearly both were impressed at what they were controlling. Whitey looked again at the console. The light show there told him that Kirin's guns were tracking Sapphire as well, probably on automatic. What are we getting into? Playing spooks with Shieda's Kirin! Pransa cherved his nervousness, his efforts to calm it. Cherved it, but nothing else. If I had the chonceling ability I should be able to help calm him. What's wrong? Reflexively she turned and smiled at him, forgetting that he could not see her real face. She extended a hand and laid it gently on his arm. She sensed him calming, taking charge of his emotions. He was, after all, an Aglayan. He was, after all, ship's mate. Khorundah tapped a button. A jolt ran through the cabin as forward braking rockets fired, bringing the vessel back to a speed that matched Kirin's. The two spacers, like twin suns, traveled together through normal space, three kloms apart. 128 (Whitey would have been shamed, as a spacefarer and mate, to realize that he had not even questioned the fact that they were back in normal space, without his ever having taken note of conversion. He did not. Too much else that made no sense to him went on, onboard this ship. This one oddity of omission never occurred to him, then or later.) Khorundah swung the mike in front of her face and adjusted it manually. It would help hide her mouth from the slaver captain's view, covering the fact that it wasn't moving in synch. As further insurance as well as to indicate a casual attitude, she adopted a pose with her elbow on one arm of her chair, her chin in her hand. Her crooked index finger partly covered her lips. Khorundah tapped alive the ship-to-ship. "This is Jomo Turbuline: Captain, TransGalactic Watch. Please identify yourself." A heartbeat. Two. Then, "This is Shieda. Captain of Kirin, merchanter out of Luhra. Please show yourselves." His usual confident, oily self, Whitey thought. Luhra indeed! Khorundah keyed VISUAL. The screen above SIPACUM shook, jiggled, swam, then snapped suddenly to light. Filling it was the overstuffed countenance of

Shieda, slaver. The blue planet tattooed on his cheek stood out brightly. Whitey knew that Shieda now saw them: three TGW officers. Still, the slaver's face remained impassive. "Your first name, please, Captain Shieda," Khorundah said. "Shieda is my first name. My last, which I try never to use, is 2273480kW. Some call it a Galactic ID number. I call it a nuisance. Shieda is just-Shieda." Pransa smiled inside her aurasuit. I wonder which of them took lessons from which! "Noted, Captain Shieda. The comments are unnecessary." "Your pardon, ma'am," he said obsequiously. "Will you be kind enough to explain why TGW is interested in an honest merchant vessel such as my own? I trust I have broken no regulations or wandered into any restricted areas." "It won't work, Captain Shieda. You are well known to us as a slaver, so let's not fart around." "Captain Turbuline! I assure you I-" 129 "No games, Shieda! We are not interested in your profession per se, nor are we here to arrest you. We are here to discuss a recent . . . mistake of yours." "And what was that, ma'am?" Khorundah shifted her weight to her other elbow on the other arm of her chair, taking the mirror pose to the one, she'd begun with. "In your customary conduct of business you took captive, quite by error I'm sure, a slave-" "Captain ..." "-a slave, Captain, who was in reality a deep-cover TGO operative." She let that hang. Hang it did, for a full ten beats. Shieda's brow furrowed. Then his voice came, lower-pitched than before. "May I inquire who this 'operative' was?" Is he admitting- Whitey's thought was cut off by Khorundah. "An apparent Aglayan named Krontij." "That's impossible! The fellow was clearly an A-glayan ..." The voice trailed off confusedly. Shieda licked his lips. He had admitted it! Khorundah's fragging him. "If you need more convincing, the agent might have used a cover story about being from another village. Straight scrute?" Silence. Khorundah continued. "As I say, we are not here to arrest anyone. We seek only to recover our operative. It is quite possible that this mistake-' (she paused deliberately) "-can be overlooked if you can tell us where this 'Krontij' is at present. And, of course, assuming that we can firm your information." Still silence. Onscreen, Shieda's larger-than-lifesize jaw worked edgily. Khorundah's given him an out. Whitey felt again as he had in a similar situation onboard Rambler. As if at any moment they could be blasted off the spaceways. Sweat trickled down his neck despite his aurasuit's aircon. "Of course, if not," Khorundah was saying, "well, you know the penalties connected with slaving on a Protected planet. And with a TGO agent as witness ... It is just a matter of time, you know, till we find him. You could make it easier, and TGO would be greatly appreciative." 130 "'Captain, we-transported the individual you seek to Resh. He was left in the employ of GriReshCo. I believe they said something about his being utilized in some capacity in the mining operations on Crystal." While Shieda's voice stayed level, Whitey could see the tension in his face. "Noted. We shall hope that information proves to be straight." "Captain Turbuline," Shieda began, almost in a wheedling tone, "you understand I have no responsibility for this Krontij after our parting on Resh. I of course had no idea who he was. How could I? He played his part impressively. I do hope you were being honest with me when you said this-mistake-and mistake it was, I assure you-" "I thought you said you 'transported' him to Resh. You did mean of his own free will, I presume?" "Firm, Captain! Of course. I naturally have no idea what happened to him at the hands that is in the employ of GriReshCo. Now some of those fobbers are not exactly I might say savory you know and-" "You're afraid that I was only offering you clemency as a ruse to gain the information I wanted, is that it?" "Neg, Captain! A ruse? TGW? Would I accuse you of-" "Oh turn him off and let's go get Krontij and then find Janja for Aglii's-" Pransa's low-toned mutter sounded shockingly loud in the cabin. The silence following its abrupt cutoff was so total that Whitey felt sure his thoughts must be audible to all. Tao's grace! Her suit speaker was on! The form of the male TGW officer stiffened, looking about wildly. Sunmother's Light!-I thought I was talking under my breath! Her two fellow "officers" stared at her, dumfounded. No one needed words to communicate the obvious: Pransa's words had gone out over the

ship-to-ship. It showed in Shieda's darkly angry face. For a moment. Then they saw him reach up to button off. It was the last they saw of him as the screen went blank. In the con-cabin of spaceship Kirin, its mountainous captain snapped orders to his mate, seated next to him. 131 "Full mags, Phack, pres! Fore-and-aft!" "Firm, Cap'n!" Phayakhmer of Ghanji hit two keys on SIPACUM. It was a familiar drill, a rehearsed maneuver invented by his captain. Twin beams of invisible force lanced through space to grab hold of Sapphire and grapple it to the slavership. "Locked, Cap'n," Phack said. Shieda toed the intraship. "Tember, Hummer, stand by DS. Wusin, strap down. Don't acknowledge. Haul her in, Phack." Imperceptibly Sapphire began to move toward the other ship. Then faster, faster. Sapphire's, maneuvering rockets fired, to no avail. Shieda watched the screen, calculating. Gambling. Shieda was not an unduly brave man, despite his prodigious physical strength and risky profession. (He would have said that he was Extremely Careful). But he was good at what he was doing now. He knew it. He also knew he might be fighting for his life. He didn't know what kind of armament the unknown ship carried. He had already guessed that they were heeled enough to carry aurasuits. It would be imprudent to suppose that their DS was any more primitive. They might also possess tractor beams powerful enough to oppose his. Thus far there had been no indication of such. Closer, closer, waiting for the right moment, hoping it came before the other captain became desperate . . . As it happened, the right moment and the other captain's desperation coincided. Sapphire was blueshifting sideways through space at a good clip now, clearly on a collision course with Kirin unless one or the other maneuvered in the next few sees. Or unless . . .

. "Now!" Shieda gave the order just as Sapphire's, DS cut loose. Phack hit two toggles simultaneously, smoothly. The forward of the two invisible tractor beams instantly reversed itself, a giant hand pushing at Sapphire, while the rearmost beam doubled in intensity. Working against the asymptotic effect of mass and velocity, Sapphire began to come about. Grudgingly. Its first DS beams streaked wildly past Kirin's argent hull. Then with what seemed impossible speed Sapphire swung, its tail turning toward its antagonist, its nose away. 132 Shieda hit his main engines and emergency rockets simultaneously. His ship lurched, then jumped forward. Sapphire slipped off the viewscreen, looming large. Shieda keyed in the rearward viewer. The other spacer appeared again, reversed now, tail foremost. It was spinning drunkenly. Kirin continued forward, smoothly but oh so slowly. A behemoth in the uncaring vastness of space, unnaturally fighting natural forces . . . Sapphire spun by the emptiness where Kirin had been, passed astern of the slaver, and careened off to its starboard. "Inslot for soonest possible safe conversion!" Shieda snapped, only a little lower key than previously. "Firm." Phack inslotted SIPACUM with a guidance cassette he had held ready in his fingers. "With any luck we will hit the Tachyon Trail and not a shot landed-or even fired, on our part," his captain said. He was in luck, this day. Sapphire came under control at last and snapped off a couple of shots, but Kirin was already too far ahead and moving. Even as Khorundah prepared to start a pursuit burn, Kirin's SIPACUM found the requisite "hole" in space. The silvery craft vanished off the viewscreen. Converted to tachyons and streaking away through "subspace" to rival light, in clean escape. At least every spacefarer and certainly every Captain Whitey had ever known would have assumed it was clean away. It seemed that Khorundah did not. "Gone, Captain," Whitey said, feeling foolish immediately for stating the obvious. "Gone!" the figure in the TGW captain's "uniform" practically shrieked. "I'll show you who's gone!" The figure reached forward and slammed a square green palm-button on SIPACUM. The vessel shuddered and Whitey felt a familiar, sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach. O Tao! She's jam-crammed! He heard Pransa groaning at the wrenching nausea that threatened to pull her insides out. He experienced momentary panic at the thought of vomiting inside the aurasuit. It passed. He forgot his insides as around him he saw the whole cabin flicker. Not the lights; the cabin itself. It flickered as a faulty 133 glo-globe might, as if losing and gaining contact intermittently. As if trying to-go out. It did. The flicker

sped up to the point where Whitey had the sensation of blinking as fast as he could. Then all light went out. All sound. All feeling. He couldn't feel the chair beneath him or even the aurasuit on him. Totally disoriented, he felt as though he were in freefall in space itself. He could still breathe. He could still think. That was all. O Sunmother. Is this City? Is this death or just some limbo? Pransa . . . The gut-tearing nausea returned, worse than before. He felt the aurasuit seeming to grow around his body, the chair phasing into solidity under him. Sound returned. A whine somewhere, Pransa's groaning, Khorundah's voice, more distant than usual. "Neg, neg . . . Not that way, not now, not for him. That is not Khorundah's mission . . ." Whitey's brain spun, stopped spinning. The whine faded. The cabin returned to normal. Gasping, he saw Khorundah rising, moving toward Pransa. Or rather, he saw Captain Turbuline. That changed. The TGW officer raised a hand to her chest, twisted the medallion there, and vanished, to be replaced by a humanoid figure entirely covered in a form-fitting green suit. Its hands unfastened and lifted the cowl and the green face and white eyes of Khorundah appeared. If it were possible for those eyes to darken, they did. "Khorundah has very nearly been killed, Aglayan. Khorundah's ship has just very nearly been destroyed for the second time by a flaying slime of a slaver." Her voice rose in pitch as she went on. She began to de-meld the front field of the suit. Second time? Whitey thought. "Khorundah has also just been betrayed by "an Aglayan bitch for the second time. Worst of all, Khorundah has been pressured into making a severe error of judgment. Two, in fact. If you cannot keep your mouth shut on Khorundah's con, Primeval Princess, you may keep it any way you like off! Go!" By this time the aurasuit was completely opened. Khorundah let it drop to the floor where it lay crumpled around her 134 ankles. The bizarre green body stood, shoulders back, hands on hips, legs apart, olivine vulva exposed, breasts thrust forward. Sweat ran down her sides and belly and a drop fell from one crease of her groin. Her purple hair stood out crazily in all directions. She should have been ludicrous. She was not. Whitey thought he had never seen any captain with clothes on look so commanding, so . . . dangerous. Pransa scrambled to her feet, never looking away from that towering figure. Not tall, but towering nonetheless. She fumbled with the control of her aurasuit and turned her TGW officer into a female-shaped sculpture of green. She grappled with its closures, finally dropping it to the floor and standing naked before Khorundah. Whitey had meanwhile done likewise. The two of them picked up their clothes and, without donning them, scrambled. Naked they quitted the con-cabin of Sapphire, leaving its captain behind-an angry green statue. Whitey had received no direct order to redshift. He had decided to be included in the "Go!" directed at Pransa. Khorundah said nothing to contradict his interpretation. Never had he been ordered off a con before. Certainly he had never left anyplace at all so ignominiously. Yet that was not on his mind at all as the cabin door hissed shut behind them, mercifully cutting off view of that somehow frightening figure. What was on his mind was the inexplicable something that had happened to this ship. The something that could only have been a jam-cram into subspace-and yet clearly hadn't been. No ship can convert that fast without going City! Even if it could it couldn't get back that fast! Then what in all the Way was that? One other problem crowded his mind, one other mad conundrum that vied with this for attention. He wondered if the aurasuit or the-whatever had happened-had affected his vision somehow. Because when he had glanced at Khorundah while he was removing his own suit, he saw her--flicker- just as the ship had done. He had blinked and turned away. Bending over, stripping 135 off the suit, he glanced out of the corner of his eye at Khorundah. He saw her suit on the floor. And nothing above it. She was not there. His eyes told him she was not there. He blinked again, looked full at her, and she was there. But for a moment she had not been, he felt sure. It couldn't have been his vision. He had not seen a blur, not a darkness. He had seen SIPACUM, clearly, with nothing in front of it. He had seen the aurasuit pooled on the deck, complete. Just for a moment. Out of the corner of his tired, sweat-filled eye. But SIPACUM-clearly . . . Tao in



all the universe, what is going on onboard this ship? 15 Half to forget the wandering and the pain, Half to remember days that have gone by, And dream and dream that I am home again! -James Elroy Flecker, Brumana Beware of those who are homeless by choice. -Robert Southey, The Doctor Tachyons could dream. Tachyons in the forms of the people and objects they replaced could and did perform whatever functions those people and objects had performed. They remained indistinguishable from the people and objects. They did all this, and one thing more: they moved through the purple abyss faster than Einsteinian people and objects ever could. Faster than light. One such conglomeration of tachyons, replacing a strange olive-green female body with true purple hair, moved at faster-than-light speed through space onboard spacer Sapphire. Moved, and slept, and dreamed. Dreamed of-remembered events? Or previous dreams? Remembered nausea. The familiar nausea of tachyon conversion. No-worse. Much worse. Never this bad before! Horrible sickness, disconcerting all senses. Disequilibrium, disorientation. Confusion. Can't see or hear! No more up, no down. Grav systems out. But . . . can't feel! Where are my feet? His stomach felt as if turned inside-out. Not just sickness 136 137 now. Pain! Splitting pain, skin being torn. Stretching pain of unbearable intensity in chest and abdomen. Musla! Pain like being kicked in the crotch by a Meccan mulero. Then sight again, but non-sight. Sight of colors, colors that didn't exist, that couldn't exist, that O Musla mustn't exist! Impossible, horrid colors beyond the visible spectrum-became visible. In patterns that repeated and repeated and yet couldn't repeat. How could anything with no discernible form repeat? They repeated. They wouldn't stop repeating. They stopped. Rather he left off seeing them, as pain brought cool oblivion. But then they couldn't have been dreams. If I'm unconscious now . . . Is this a dream? How do I know I'm unconscious? Something was trying to wake him. That much he knew. A sound, a beeping. He knew that sound. It was familiar. No, it used to be familiar. (Everything used to be familiar.) He tried to focus on the sound and the pain hit him again. His mind told him he must stay conscious. The sound meant he had to stay conscious. He did. Somehow, he did. The pain became so much more than pain as he had ever known it that his mind put it outside itself, an alien object to be viewed in curiosity and horror more than experienced. He fought through the pain and came to himself. He tried to understand the sound, the beeping. He tried to remember what it was. He rememberd something . . . A viewscreen, gone crazy with dots and fragment-shapes, particles of something rushing like shrapnel at his ship (ship?). A mental picture of an airless sieve-like object that had once been a spaceship (his ship?). Of himself: dead in vacuum. Floating forever in the coffin of his ship (his ship!). Then a memory of panic, of calculation without thought, of weighing sure death against a chance, a slim chance, an unknown versus a known. An action taken, a button pushed. Then nausea, like conversion only worse, then pain . . . Jam-cram! He had jam-crammed! What did that mean? He had slammed his ship into conversion unprepared, that's what it meant . . . His ship! My ship is in danger! That was the beeping. The ADS: Automatic Distress Signal. 138 Warning him. Warning anyone listening. Going out on all channels (if comm still functioned). His ship was in distress. He fought his way to a semblance of full consciousness. In his condition it would have to do. He knew his condition was bad. No one could hurt this much without having suffered severe bodily damage. But his ship was in danger. That came first. Where was he? Could he see again? Firm, he could see. And hear: he heard the signal. And feel. He felt the deck beneath him. The deck-pos, of the con-cabin. The bridge, to him. There was his chair. He dragged himself erect against its arm, ignoring as best he could the agony in his guts. He blinked hard, looked around. The cabin was lit, though every light on SIPACUM was out. The console looked a dead thing, cold, uncaring. Jinni-dead. The mate's chair . . . The mate's chair was gone. Not torn loose. It was nowhere in the cabin. There were no holes in the floor, no ripping of hull to show it had torn loose. No exit hole, else he (and all else loose) would be outside, and dead. There was no sign that there had ever been a mate's chair. It was gone.

Not onboard. A shiver raced over his body, supplanting even the pain. Damage, trauma, distress; those were one thing. Understandable, quantifiable. This impossibility, this weirdness, hit him in the deeper part of his Self, the part that feared the eerie and the unknown more than injury or disaster. Injury. The crew. My crew! He looked around again. Hadn't one of them-his mate- been with him when . . .? Pos. He'd been killed in that maneuver into the gravity well of some planet or other, in the fight (fight?). He had been in that missing chair. Pos, he'd been strapped in, screamed during the turn around the planet, then stopped short. Killed, the G-forces, his neck . . . There, in the 'corner. A heap. A body. Sakbir. His body. But . . . just his body! No head. Gone, like the chair. Neatly, cleanly. No ripped flesh, no torn parts. Little bleeding. Gone. The others . . . no! Check on the ship first. Check systems, 139 check Jinni. He moved to the console of SIPACUM. He hit the button to power up. Nothing. Of course not, can't you see it's dark? He hit emergency power. The board came alive, lights glowing and winking. He scanned the telits quickly, checking ship's integrity. Intact. Secure. No hull breach anywhere. What next? The drive. He hit the engines, saw the lights wink on, heard the big whine way back in the depths of the ship. He keyed it off. Presumably functional, although at what capacity he couldn't know. SIPACUM itself now. No point in using it to report on other systems if it was non-functional itself. It could be wrong about the drive and vessel integrity. Simple tests first. Calculator mode. He punched in the order for STC (Self Test: Calculator), instructing it to begin at elementary levels and display results. The screen came alive and flashed numbers. Good. It worked, it was reporting . . . He looked again. It was reporting nonsense. On the screen were basic arithmetic calculations:  $2 + 2 = 0$ ;  $2 - 2 = 4$ ;  $3 \times 3 = 1$ ;  $3 \div 3 = 9$ . And on and on, at just-readable speed. Backwards. Reversed, all reversed! Fobbied, completely. SIPACUM: unreliable, though functional. Untrustworthy and uncheckable. He hit the exterior viewscreens, hoping they wouldn't lie to him. Get some view of damage, see if hull's likely to be breached. The exterior of a spacer was not smooth, not streamlined. It carried on its hull various sensors, receptors, struts for docking and cargo-trailing and additions of mods. A big ship, a fast ship, a high-quality advanced ship, was positively jagged on its surface. Prickly. This ship was a mess. Broken struts and bent fittings. Sensors gone as if they'd never existed. In their places receptors that were supposed to be somewhere else, twisted out of all shape. A few parts he'd never seen before. Yet the hull itself looked secure enough, although of course he couldn't scan all of it on visual. He moved the view forward, slowly, carefully. The same mess everywhere. SIPACUM couldn't be inventing this view. This had to be real. Even had SIPACUM been functioning to perfection, this damage meant that no sensing or reception could be relied on. 140 Even the Multispectral Thermal Stabilizer was-crushed into some weird . . . O Musla, no! That's impossible! The weird shape was not the MTS itself, but what was attached to it. Impaled on it. It looked like a twisted mess of metal, but it was not . . . It was not even metal. It was bone. It was a skeleton, but such a one as his mind could not account for. Huge, the size of a lander, with great fans of translucent bone. Ribs-or something like-going into each other, seemingly at odds to each other. As if two structures vied for the same space. Joints in places where they would seem to serve no purpose, in the middle of fixed bones. Jagged things sticking out everywhere. Like teeth. Or claws. But everywhere! No head. No focal point. No shape that could be seen clearly. Yet it seemed intact, complete, hanging there right above the name, the name painted in great shining red letters along the hull of the horribly violated vessel; his vessel. Firedancer. He keyed off the screens. He hit the intraship comm with one toe, nearly losing his balance in the process. The pain in his innards made itself felt anew. It ripped, and its color was red. "Captain-to all hands! All hands-report in!" He heard the echo of his words back along the corridors of the ship. Cabin door must be open. Then we're probably secure. And comm works. SIPACUM confirms, though that doesn't mean-where the vug are they? Wait . . . He instructed SIPACUM to

scan for lifeforms onboard. It refused to respond. Unreliable. He moved to toe off comm, recalled his previous lack of balance, glance'd downward to guide his foot visually. And saw himself. His chest. What was wrong with his chest? All swollen, protruding. His jumpsuit ripped and ragged. Must have taken a hit. Never saw such swelling! My ribs must be-Merciful Musla! My guts! His guts were outside of him. Not hanging out; there appeared to be no hole, no wound, no bleeding. Just-outside. Neatly, orderly, shaped as intestines should be shaped. Outside. 141 As if they were meant to be there. As if his lower abdomen had been not injured but-restructured. Turned inside out. And . . . something more. Down there, neatly placed, one on either side-what? He tried to get a better look, already so deep in shock that curiosity ludicrously replaced panic. He looked down in annoyance, looking down at-what? Ovaries. As a boy in school he'd seen dissections. As a man he had seen bodies of both sexes blown apart. Ovaries. His ovaries. The pain in my chest and stomach. And-in my . . . He reached down with his hand, felt for his crotch, gingerly. Felt nothing. No, not nothing. Something. A . . . smoothness. His finger slipped into . . . something, a tiny hole, and he withdrew it in panic. Blessed Prophet, I've been castrated! The knowledge of his apparent disembowelment was as nothing to this. It brought him back from shock, into fear. Shipdoc! Must get to shipdoc! If I get there fast enough there may be a chance for re gen. If I live . . . He turned to stagger from the cabin, then turned back to SIPACUM as another thought insinuated itself into his brain. The ADS! It's still sending! He was horribly injured, he knew that. His one chance was to get to shipdoc, hope it could save him, restore him sufficiently that he would be qualified for regen later. If there were anyplace for him to undergo regen. He didn't even know if he was in normal space, in his own universe. He knew that he had gone Forty Percent-City, that there was a . . . a Dark Universe beyond, that he had been there. Else how explain that thing on the MTS? How explain all this damage? His bizarre injuries? But was he back, or still there? He knew this, too: he was helpless. He had a corpse (corpses?) onboard. He had minor damage to his vessel. These disasters had come from going City. If he were back, he would be an object of intense curiosity to the entire Galaxy. The first known person to have gone City and returned alive. He would be the key to understanding the Dark Universe, the other side of City. He would be wanted, valuable to everyone. To TGO especially. A valuable object . . . He would not be an object. Furiously he keyed off ADS. 142 No matter how bad his condition, he did not want to attract attention if he had returned to the Galaxy he knew. If he had not returned, well . . . He staggered down the corridor toward the ship's automated medical facility. Passing his quarters he had a fleeting thought: I wonder, did it survive? Should I check . . .? He did not. He did check DS systemry as he passed, not so much for its own sake as to see whether anyone was alive down there. Someone was there. Not alive. Not even recognizable. It resembled a carcass of meat, skinned but not yet butchered. Head still on, but . . . funny. Brains on the outside! Bones curving inward, innards-heart, lungs, tubes, and vessels-on top of them. No sign of skin. No spilled blood. As if the whole body had been turned inside out. He retched, then, for the first time, and he had never tasted anything so vile as that which came up. He recovered. He took one glance as DS, enough to see that it was nonfunctional, as battered as anything he had seen outside on the hull. He was truly helpless. He wandered on, holding his guts now, afraid to touch them yet afraid not to protect them. He passed another crewmember. Or part of it. Then another part, and another. Some of the parts were recognizable. He reached shipdoc. He shuffled to it, collapsed into its enfolding fecliner. His last thought before the cybernetic med facility automatically anesthetized him was again of his ship. I hope Firedancer survives in drift . . . Then he was out. He didn't have time to consider what might happen if shipdoc were functioning unreliably. Dreams came. Dreams within dreams, as the womanly shape of tachyons onboard Sapphire dreamt again the dreams of the nearly-dismembered occupant of Firedancer's cyberdoc. Dreams of a planet, a home. Meccah. Greens and blues of countryside, of hills and

woods and uplands and sunlight. Of cool breezes and calm. Of a boy. A boy who wandered the moors and valleys of his family's land and the area about. Who loved the land more than he did people. A boy who kept to himself. A boy who painted. He painted the colors of this glowing land. He painted the trees 143 he loved, the grasses, the waters. The rains as well as the sunlight. He painted it all, and he painted it well. His soul softened in the doing. He was content. That is, he was content when he was doing. At other times, when he needs must deal with his family, his well-to-do (not rich) father-with People-his soul hardened and his flaw, his great flaw, came out. He struck back at the abrasion caused his soul by the people, always the people. His temper flared, and he struck out. And he was punished, and he ran, back to his woods and landscapes. He painted. He played, also. He played at being of a former time, a more courtly time. He affected the manners of former times, the courtliness. He spoke of himself grandly, in the third person: Khoranaddin. That was his name, although he signed his paintings "al'addin," a name he got from one of the old Homeworld legends and stories he was always reading when not wandering and painting. He grew. He improved. Despite his family, despite his father's disapproval, he succeeded. His paintings became admired. They sold. Till there came a day he had to follow them to the place where an exhibition would be held. To a city. The boy had never seen a city. The boy had no notion of how to live in a city. He made mistakes-silly mistakes, foolish mistakes, harmless, funny mistakes. And one big mistake. His temper, his striking out, his need to get back, his vengeful need, his flaw, brought on one big mistake. The boy found that the people in the city, the Galactics, civilized people, were not as forgiving as his family had been. There was no place to run in the city. No woods, no fields. He was caught. He was punished. The laws of Meccah were based on old Homeworld laws, laws of a hard religion, and they were hard laws. The enforc-ers of the laws took the boy's eyes. His very eyes, yes. Not as monstrous as it sounded, he was assured, save for his appearance of course. If his father had money, he could have implants, artificial eyes. No problem. He did. They damaged his looks, true, black as they were, like 144 pieces of jet in his sensitive face. But they worked. He could see as well as ever. Only he felt that he could not. Whether it was true or not there was no objective way to know. He believed that he could not, and that was enough. He tried. He painted, but the colors never were right again. He couldn't get them right! Thus he abandoned himself to his flaw. To vengeance. On everyone, on Civilization. To vengeance and profit, at everyone else's expense. He became pirate. He left Meccah, though his family stood by him after all, swore not to abandon or disown him. He left Meccah, the heir to valuable land. He left, and within a year owned that land, when his father died and left him all. He left, and took only a painting, one picture of that loved land. He left even his name, taking a new one: Khorun-doum, Hard, abrasive, corundum. He woke from dreams. What dreams? Meccah. Something of Meccah ... He couldn't remember. He lay dazed, trying to recall the dreams. He remembered one, not of Meccah. Something more-real. It was a dream, wasn't it? He shivered. More like a haunting than a dream. A haunting, in the eerie confines of this haunted vessel. Yet it felt like a memory, so real it was . . . The hideous apparition standing over him, all ghastly and magnificently, terrifyingly ugly. Yet human, or nearly. And evidently female. (What did she look like? That memory was gone. The terror remained.) The apparition was muttering. "Fascinating. Ab-solutely fas-cinating!" She made motions over him, around him. She touched him here and there. She made adjustments to shipdoc. She spoke again. "Give me that autoviglereza." Autoviglereza? What was-no, that couldn't have been it. "Give me that autovigler, Reza." That must have been it. But what was an autovigler? (What was a vigler?) What was a Reza? The apparition noted his opened eyes. "So," it/she said. "You're awake. Aren't you lucky I hear 145 a lot better in my head than most do with their ears! Your ADS snapped on as soon as you entombed yourself in this pitifully inadequate cyberdaktari. And now there are two of us! You will be all right, and more important I am sure-so will your computer. You will never see me again, in

either universe." (What?) "Too bad. Hand me the serconquillizer, Reza. "Oh-I was male, too. And I am not a Void." Her hand appeared over his face. She thrust a shining instrument at and-into!-his eye. He screamed and lapsed into unconsciousness. In his dream. He fell asleep in a dream that seemed a memory. Now he awoke. Into the dream again? No. Into reality. He knew it, felt it around him. He knew his ship was his, was real, was here with him. He felt it. He heard the minute sounds of its functioning. He thought himself over and found that he felt fine. No pain, no sickness. He sat up carefully. Still fine. A little weak. No dizziness, no nausea. He looked down at himself. He screamed. He was naked, and he was green. Olive green, all over. Worse-far worse-he was not a he. He was female. She had breasts (the swelling!). Her hips were rounded, not flat as they had always been in the masculine body in which he had always taken such pride. (She) looked further. She had no penis. She had no testes. She had-a ridge. And a slit beneath it. A vagina. Other than that she was fine. No extrusive intestines, no exterior organs that should have been interior. Green skin, unbroken save by female apparatus. She leaped out of shipdoc in a cold sweat. She crossed to the mirror and screamed again. Her face was green; she had expected that. Her hair was purple. Her eyes were white. White. And they were eyes. That is, they were not implants. Looking closely, she could see the pupils. She reeled. She sat on the edge of the cyberdoc and shook. She glanced wildly about in all directions. Her eyes-her eyes!-at length gazed upon the autochron that had been counting up the time since shipdoc had been activated. 81 hours. 146 It must be fobbied, too. Everything's fobbied. I'm sure fobbied! It hit her all at once. She laughed. Louder and louder, and longer, to near-exhaustion. She howled hysterically. Then she wept. And when she could cry no more she went to inspect her ship. It was what a captain did. She knew she had gone City, knew it had changed her. She did not know what the "apparition" had been. She did not know where she was, whether in the Dark Universe or her own galaxy. She soon found that all signs of damage had vanished completely. No bodies were onboard. DS was intact. She stopped by her cabin, this time. She looked at a painting that hung on the wall by the bed. She sighed in relief, then. She went on to the con. The cabin was intact, the chairs all in place. (The mate's chair looked new.) No body. SIPACUM was up on automatic and apparently functioning. She switched the Manual-and-Continue and ran the same checks as before. Perfect. Drive, comm, life-support-all fine. She keyed the viewscreens. Exterior damage-nil. Sensors, receptors, struts ... all intact. No skeleton impaled on MTS. It wasn't real. Nothing I saw there was real. She was back. Back in normal space, in the Galaxy she knew. SIPACUM showed that. The viewscreen showed that, showing her familiar star patterns. All readings were nominal. Save one. Shipchron showed that 17,673 years had passed. Fobbied still! A small price to pay. She keyed INS (Interplanetary News Service) into the comm. She picked up a broadcast emanating from the Tri-System Accord. She waited for their local date to be given, ordered SIPACUM to compensate and convert. Three months had passed. Three months since (he!) had dueled that slime worm Jonuta and been forced off the space ways. Three months and more since that Aglayan bitch Janja had betrayed him and caused it all. Three months of-what? Dreams. Memories, a few, but surely mostly dreams. Injury, severe, but shipdoc had handled it. Change, no doubt of that. So that was what happened when 147 one went City! Already it was beginning to feel normal. She was female. She was a woman. Whatever she had been, this felt right now. She didn't want to have what she had had. Why should she? She had what she was supposed to have. And she would have what she wanted. Revenge. Revenge on that sisterslicing slaver and that white-headed slut. She laughed and keyed on the exterior viewscreen once more. She gazed out at the great red molecularly-bonded painted letters that spelled out the spacer's name: Firedancer. "That will have to change," she said aloud. "We have been granted a disguise and must take advantage of that, ship and captain alike. Yes, that will have to change. Something more in keeping. Something hard, abrasive as corundum-yet not without beauty. Well, well-it will come! "And then we will

start anew." She laughed again, keyed off the screen. She sat in the captain's chair, began feeding instructions into SIPACUM. "Count your days and cover your tails, betrayers!" she said aloud. "Khorundah is back on the spaceways! "And she is coming for you!" 16 Am I not a man and a brother? -slogan on abolitionist poster, Homeworld, 19th century (Restated pursuant to Linguistic Rescue Act: Am I not a person and a sibling?) Now that's a metaphysical goddam question. -overheard in a cafeteria in city of Cambridge II, Homeworld "You saw it too, then?" Pransa, sitting on the edge of the bed, nodded. She hugged herself tighter about the knees, leaning her chin on them. "I saw it. Rather, I saw nothing. I saw her disappear. I was looking right at her and she disappeared! It was like- when your man was Poofed on Aglaya. Except she flickered first." "That's what I thought I saw. That flickering." "Like the cabin before ..." "Pos. Before it-whatever-happened. I must talk to Khorundah." "Why? Do you think she will explain to you?" Whitey sighed. "No. But I am mate on this ship, and things are wrong. It is my place to speak to my captain. And . . . I am angry, too, I admit." "Why? Because she sent us out naked?" Pransa flipped five. "She was naked too. If you are feeling humiliated it is because as mate you were treated like a passenger. Things 148 149 were kept from you: the cyberthing you mentioned, the changing of the name to numbers, the whatever-it-was that happened." Whitey smiled. "You know me well, Pransa. Or you are just perceptive. The main point remains, however: our captain was temporarily out of control. Her anger carried her away and endangered the ship. She said as much." "Perhaps you should not speak to her." "Pransa, someone must! It is my place." "I agree someone must. I'm just not certain it's your place. Consider: Khorundah was right about one thing. It was my fault that Shieda was tipped to our ruse. She was quite correct in ordering me offcon, regardless of whether she lost her temper and hence her control because of it. For that I take no responsibility." She rose and faced him. "But more than that, are we not on my mission here? It's not my vessel, nor am I chartering. But it is my business we are about. If I feel the captain is in error, endangering ship and mission, must I not bring it to her attention?" He closed his eyes. "Pransa, it's a voluntary mission. You're paying nothing. She's offering her services as a favor. She owes you nothing, legally." "You're a voluntary mate. She pays you nothing. You owe her nothing." "I've accepted the position!" "So has she. Whitey, Whitey ... let me talk to her. If I get nowhere, then you can. Fair? Besides, maybe when I get close enough, and alone. ..." "Yes?" "Whitey, I've not been able to cherm her." "What?" "Not at all, not once, not in the least. It's as if a part of her mind isn't there." She smiled, realizing how that sounded. "Well, that may be-I certainly hope not. What I mean is it's guarded, as if a part of it were elsewhere. Deliberately. Permanently. Untouchably." "And chonceling . . .?" She sighed. "No. Nothing." He paced silently awhile. Then he turned to her, lips set tightly, and nodded once. 150 "Firm. All right, Pransa. But then I talk to her in any case. I have to know what's going on before the cess hits the sensors." "Firm." Pransa buzzed the captain's cabin from outside its door. She received an "Enter" light. She had not the opportunity, not then. As she reached for the door a call came on open comm, loud-Up, from Willie. "Captain, Whitey, wherever you are, we've got a signature here you should know about." Whitey's voice responded first. "What is it, Willie?" "Looks like Rambler, Mate!" Khorundah's voice came over the comm. "Willie, convert as soon as safe. Whitey to con!" The captain's door opened and Khorundah rushed past Pransa, taking no notice of her. The door hissed shut. Pransa passed Whitey on her way back to her quarters. She knew better than to request permission to come to the con. Her lover said nothing, only nodded as he went past her. She had just reached the cabin and opened the door when she felt the familiar sickening sensation that told her she was again herself rather than a well-shaped conglomeration of tachyons. Not too bad, this time. Whitey had said it was better after the first few times. Still, he said, he'd never known it so smooth as on this ship. It should have been worse than it was. The stomach churning hit Whitey

just as he entered the cabin. Fast, again. That SIPACUM knows something I don't. Tao, they all do. This one knows something the others don't! He took Willie's place at con, next to Khorundah. Willie shifted to the rear seat. "Demon, Captain," he said breathlessly as he sat down. "Kinetic vector one-zero-zero-nine alph, bearing nineteen forward quadrant right, down." "Thank you, Mate; Khorundah has it. Starboard, five o'clock low." "Ma'am?" 151 "Old terminology, Whitey. From what you've told Khorundah your Captain Tachi would understand. Willie!" "Captain!" "Excellent job reading those emissions. Where did you learn that?" "Oh, here and yonder, Captain. I've been practicing right here at the console. Always like to learn when I have the chance. 'Make hay while the iron is hot,' you know." Khorundah's brows knitted. Whitey closed his eyes and shook his head. "Whitey, what is that woman talking about? Khorundah thinks you should put in some console time with language edutapes, spacefarer Jee. 'Make hay ...?'" "I concur, Captain," Whitey said. "ETI with Rambler twenty mins!" "You're not so perfect yourself, Flash, all that stuff you swear by," Willie said. "What is it, Dow and Ugly? And some mother-or-other?" "Willie, anybody but you, I'd-" "Not now, allies," Khorundah said. "Whitey, open to Tachi and request a gam. Khorundah thinks he will appreciate that." "Gam, Captain?" "Pos. Ship-to-ship visit. It's an old Homeworld term, used by sailors on the old whaling ships." "Wailing ships?" Willie had looked at Khorundah, frowning in perplexity. The falling sensation terrified her at first. Like falling forever but in no particular direction. Once she'd overcome that (swiftly: calling on Pransa2, her Aglayan Self) she was fine. She reveled then in the floating, the space around her, the deep luminous glow of the star-spatter here near Galaxy's core. She had floated weightless before, of course, onboard ship. There the walls both gave reassurance and restricted freedom. Out here, even in an miss (modular life-support system: a spacesuit), there were no boundaries. She formed a part of the universe as surely as did each of its myriad stars and planets. As surely as the two space vessels she drifted between, the great gray one with Sapphire in appropriately cerulean letters 152 on its side and the dingily stolid rust-colored one with Rambler in faded dark yellow. Beside her floated Whitey and Khorundah. Pransa, unused to this type of ship-to-ship travel (or any type; she had never transferred ships even via an umbilical or a boat), occasionally drifted sideways and bumped up against one of the other two. No matter. The suits' protekstasis stiffened instantly upon contact with any object, forming a rock-hard barrier against shock or damage. She was sorry when it ended and she had to return to the prosaic world of Rambler's interior, via airlock. She was sorrier still when she saw Tachi's mood. (She had no need to cherm. His excessive disgruntlement was written on his countenance like a neon sign.) He did not even deign to greet her, and barely offered Whitey a nod. Tachi was the first person (Galactic or otherwise) Pransa had seen who showed not the least bit of disconcert at first sight of Khorundah. Instant dislike, that was apparent. But no fear, no shock. Tachi truly took nearly everything in stride. The Way. Nearly everything except loss of his crew, which proved to be the cause of his current enhanced sullenness. "Well. You seem to have been bearing an infectious disease, Whitey. I have an all-new crew now, and believe me I mean new. They need shakedown more than the new conversion systemry.'" "What about Disco?" Whitey said as he sipped the skweez-pak of soft drink Tachi had supplied. "And Achmy!" he added hastily. Tachi slammed down his skweez-pak of Hi-tonyu.\* "Achmet! That mutinous motherbender jumped ship, do you believe it? Wanted to leave like the rest of you. Said he had to 'see you' or some such ccess. I'm surprised he hasn't caught up with you yet." Whitey made a non-committal shrug and looked, he hoped, appropriately surprised. "Disco," his former captain went on, "left just after the new converter was installed. No flaining 'leave of absence' this time. Permanent." \*genengineered hyper-proteined Terasak soybean milk. 153 "That is bad news. We were hoping to talk to Disco. We have reason to believe it could help us on our search." "That is bad news. I had hoped you had come to your senses and were

returning. Well, I am sorry things have proven difficult for you, and that you didn't get to stay on Aglaya." He gave Pransa a nod. "Imagine that scut Shieda having your boy right there all that time we were dealing with him!" He banged a fist into his other palm. "Not that we could have done a khazed thing about it. Tao!" "I am glad you finally obtained your converter, Captain," Whitey said. "Tao, boy, I wanted you to be here to share the moment with me. It was fine. Rambler's a fine old ship yet. Took to subspace like a whale to water." "Willie would be glad to hear that," Khorundah said to Whitey's grinning face. To Tachi's look of puzzlement she said, "Never mind, Captain Tachi. Private joke. Rambler is a fine vessel. Khorundah has seen many such." "As a genealogist?" "Ah . . . neg. Khorundah has traveled the spaceways in more than one capacity. She has ere wed when not on her currently-postponed genealogical pursuits." "It is good of you to assist these two in their search." "Khorundah's obligation, Captain Tachi, as she said. But Khorundah fears that part of our search may come to a burnout if we cannot obtain a further lead. We could of course go straight to Resh and Krontij. But finding him and prying him loose from GriReshCo are two different matters. Khorundah has some means at her disposal. She still feels it would be wise to find Janja and enlist her aid, though. True wealth there, and, Khorundah suspects, powerful contacts." "Janja?" Tachi said. He looked at his former mate. "Whitey . . .?" "Firm, Captain. Janja turns out to be our boy's sister. More than that, she has her own spacer now." "Tao take me!" "We've found a registration of a shipowner named Janjaglaya Wye, spacer Sunmother out of Outreach. Obviously her. But no destinations filed. The trail just-stops. You haven't run into a vessel by that name, by chance?" "Neg, Whitey. I'd surely remember." 154 "The Jarp was our sole slim hope," Khorundah said. "Well, as to that, I can tell you where it's gone. I shouldn't, mind! But I am not a spiteful man. The Tao allows no place for spite." "A little genteel spleen, maybe," Whitey said. Tachi scowled. "You wouldn't venture such comments if you were still my mate, young fellow. Mind you don't get too familiar. I'll be your captain again when you get back." "Where is this undocked Jarp, Captain Tachi?" Khorundah asked. "Not crewed out again, we hope. Khorundah grows wear of wild-Birdwing chases through space." "Neg. Disco's gone groundward, it seems. Jasbir. Looking for some old acquaintance, it said." "Jasbir. Another jaunt, Primeval Princess!" She smiled toward Pransa. "Yet farther into the Galaxy for you. Past the core, in fact. Past the Maelstrom and out past Ghanj. Even relatively near . . . Meccah." Pransa looked at the green woman. Pransa said nothing. "Jasbir, then," Whitey said. "As long as you're willing, Captain Khorundah." (Khorundah acknowledged with a half-bow.) "And speaking of willing, I know this trip has already taken far longer than I'd planned. I hope you meant what you said, Captain Tachi. About my coming back." "Oh, your flaining job's open, the current mate knows that," Tachi said grumpily. He took a swig of his Hi-tonyu and frowned. "Just when I've got her all trained you'll come limping back, doubtless the worse for wear. It had better be within a reasonable time, hear?" Whitey did not smile. "Or?" "Let's just say that 'Permission to rejoin will not be unreasonably withheld,' hmm? I will decide what is reasonable." Which means I have to catch you on a good day, eh? Whitey thought. "And," Tachi added, "if you should run into that Muslim mulero Achmet, tell him-tell him he's a damned ground-lubber!" Whitey stifled a grin, knowing Tachi was perfectly serious, and that he had just delivered what to him was a devastating insult. As they were leaving to suit up for the return to Sapphire, Tachi took Whitey aside. 155 "Whitey, that's a fine captain you've got there, as a captain. I can see she knows and respects ships and the space ways. "But I see something else there, something I can't lay a waldo to. Something sinister. I've gotten that feeling before, though I don't know how I get it, what signals I'm reading. But I've not been wrong yet. I got it from Shieda. And I've gotten it from pirates. Be careful." He sighed and frowned. "I'm also not entirely certain she's got all her airlocks zipped." Whitey nodded. "I know, Tachi. I've seen something myself. Someday I hope to tell you about it. I'll be careful." "Do. And live to tell me about it. Now redshift!



Before I soften up and feel I have to say goodbye to you." Pransa's knowledge of the Galaxy grew as they raced through its heart, curving charily past the great collapstar called the Maelstrom that lurked there, ready to suck in whatever bodies, natural or human-made, slipped irretrievably within its colossal gravitational domain. Her wonder grew as they passed between Ghanj and the dazzling hugeness of the Tri-System Accord, coming out of one subspace jump long enough for her to view the great packed mass of stars and light. Her doubts about their captain grew as the continued ease of conversion onboard Sapphire turned Whitey more and more to meditation to overcome his mounting unease. And her love for Whitey grew. She had done as she had said she would: conversed with Khorundah. To little avail. Pransa apologized for her mistake in the con-cabin. Khorundah apologized, with what seemed exaggerated graciousness, for her explosion of temper. No more. Whitey had tried to speak with Khorundah and gained little satisfaction. She had refused to explain the technical workings of the ship, reminding him-graciously-that this was the only vessel around that was likely to carry them on their expensive and highly dubious mission. What she would have said to an inquiry about her "disappearance" he never found out. He felt without asking that she would not answer. More than that, some inner sense warned him that such a question might provoke an outburst 156 that would irreversibly set back their working relationship. Or so he thought. The truth was that Whitey feared this woman. As a follower of the Way, he acknowledged that fear, and it shamed him. Thus his increased meditation, as he attempted to come back into harmony with himself and his universe. Thus also his increasing distance from Pransa, even as she sought to diminish that distance with the increase in her acknowledged love for him. They came to Jasbir. Jasbir, beneath sun Huygens. Jasbir, where slavery was open and legal and Khorundah insisted that everyone, Pransa included, carry a stopper (Whitey concurred). Jasbir of the rotten government and the better-than-good-brandy. A new space station, a new port city for Pransa, who had come nowhere near tiring of New. But no Disco. Not, at least, in either Jasbirstation or the port city of New Paki. Oh, Disco had been there. Picking up its trail proved simple, since as a Jarp on a slave planet it had been careful to register as a free personage upon arrival. It had landed a job as supercargo for Badakeacorp, makers of the finest calculators along the spaceways, Jasbir's main export. The company had sent it to the manufacturing center in Bada City. Now it faced Whitey, Khorundah, and Achmet on a shuttle loading dock at Bada's main facility. "Pos, I came here looking for Sweetface. I heard it had come to Jasbir. We were friends, you know, before it took my place with Jonuta. Naturally I don't talk about that too much. About either of them." "We know why you left, Disco. No shame with us," Whitey said. "Pos. The spaceways have made an honest Jarp outta you, we firm!" Achmy said, grinning. The orange creature grinned back, an oddly abbreviated expression on that oddly puckered mouth (in that oddly sweet-looking face). It laughed, a strange wheetl'ing noise that passed its translahelm intact. "That is shame, though, about Sweetface," Khorundah said. "It would no doubt have had more up-to-date scrute on Jonuta and possibly on Janja." 157 "Pos, I'm sorry I can't help you," Disco said. "Jonuta had lots of orbits, and I've told you all I know. But he used pseudonyms in most of them, all except Qalara in fact, and he didn't tell crewmembers what those names were. Except Kenowa. I hardly knew her." It flipped six fingers at the three spacefarers. "Why'd you stay here, Disco, after you found out Sweetface wasn't onplanet?" Whitey asked. "I wasn't sure what to do! Looking for Sweetface was just-I don't know, Poof ing time. I knew I wanted a change. Thought Sweetface might have a new berth for me. "I needed cred, so I took this job. And then I found what I wanted to do. I found I'd had enough of the spaceways for now. I met a couple other Jarps here who are trying to settle down and make it in Galactic civilization proper. My space experience got me a good job, and it seems-well-comfortable. I know that sounds funny to you. But I guess I just don't want to be an adventurer, with a lover in every port. I don't want to go back home, mind. Jarpi's just too primitive after what I've seen. But there

are other lives than 'faring.' " "Well, being the good Jarp you are," Achmy said, "I'm sure you'll have no trouble making it. Often." Disco gave him a thin frown, barely discernible on that rounded, pursed mouth in that heart-shaped face. "Cut me loose, will you?" it said. Whitey wondered if he were seeing the beginning of the realization of his prediction to Pransa. The assimilation of the "too-alien" races. Jarps were a common sight on the spaceways or as onplanet slaves. Jarps as working citizens were something altogether else. "Since you're here, I can offer you a valuable cargo," Disco said. "It was supposed to have gone on a vessel just reported disabled by pirates out beyond Suzi." "Ah, no. Khorundah's thanks but-neg. We are in too much of a hurry. Time is needed for our search. Time is a measure of distance, and we have much to cover." Whitey's eyebrows went up. Doesn't she even want to know where the cargo's bound? I thought one of the reasons we originally wanted to find Janja was to help finance the search for Krontij. Where does Khorundah get her cred? 158 We can't afford to go everywhere! Or can we? We can't make longcalls to search for a slaver. But Khomndah already makes longcalls. To whom? Where does she get her cred? Whitey of course knew nothing of a picture on Khorundah's cabin wall, a picture of green hills and blue foliage and dark woods on Meccah. Even if he had he could not have guessed that below that pastoral landscape on planet Meccah were extensive and very valuable mineral deposits. Deposits now being mined by one Khorundah, despite a boy's vow that they would forever remain inviolate in deference to the scenery in the cherished painting. Khorundah had . . . changed. Whitey knew that Sapphire's, disabled captain must be well off. Yet surely not wealthy, else he would have no need to keep his vessel crewed during his present illness. On the other hand, his ship was making him no profit now, despite the volunteer crew. Did he know that? Did he know his mate Khorundah was turning down valuable cargoes? Again Whitey knew he would receive no answer if he asked. He didn't. They took their leave of Disco with a promise to maneuver Tachi its way if they encountered him again. "I can finagle a good cargo for him, anytime. Maybe he'll forgive me for leaving!" Had Pransa been present to cherm Achmet as they returned to New Paki, what she sensed in him would 6nly have added to Whitey's confusion. Whitey's wondering what Khorundah's doing and how she's doing it. And why, probably. Musla! I don't know whether I want to get this mission over with or hope we never find Janja. Spacefarer Second Achmet el-Ghinna, frightened and guilty of fobbing a friend, felt that he must be the most miserable man on the space ways. Even if his captain was a good lay. 17 Never miss a chance to make a friend. Make enough, and you can afford to make enemies-which you'll have whether you can afford them or not. -Shjeda's motto Aurasuits don't come cheap. And neither did that vessel. That "TGW" spacer! I was dealing with a wealthy captain there, whoever she-or he or it-was. So Shieda thought as he walked along under one of Crystal's transparent cyprium domes. Crystal had few attractions for anyone, but it had one for Shieda (aside from the profitable business he transacted there). The little moon's .2 standard gravity was very welcome to a man who weighed 147 kilos.\* Not that Shieda was incapable of carrying his bulk gracefully and even with some alacrity when necessary. At over 193 sems\*\* height, the slaver captain qualified as not merely obese, but a near-giant. (Perhaps in a Galaxy that did not contain such specimens as the enormous ex-gladiator Songan of Harb, Shieda would have qualified fully.) More than this, Shieda was powerful. He was fully aware of the warrior traditions of his home province of Balto on Terasaki, settled so long ago by emigrants from Nippon on Home world. He honored those traditions through the ancient \*c. 326 pounds. Old Style \*\*c. 6 feet, 4 inches, Old Style 159 160 discipline of sumo, and the body building (and building and building) required for that form of personal combat. Of course, a great part of that body building was involuntary on Shieda's part. He ate compulsively; he grew accordingly. His size only predisposed him further toward sumo, wherein strength provided offense and bulk, defense. He followed that predisposition, and to his fat he added mountains of hidden muscle. Hidden, now, beneath his customary ballooning pirate garb. Green and

black vertically-striped pants, tucked into boots that came to mid-shin. (Black, of real leather.) A mustard-colored shirt of Terasak silk that shimmered with every movement. Dividing the two, his customary double-hammock-sized sash (cerise), knotted at the hip with tassels hanging to his knees. A stopper protruded from a hidden holster on either side, so that they appeared to be stuck rakishly into the sash itself. A chartreuse cloak floated to the backs of his knees. If I had been a pirate instead of a businessman I would have stayed and taken "Captain Turbuline" and her ship. Not safe, not safe . . . Fools, those pirates. There are better ways to make money. Find out what the wealthy value, and get it. Before they do. Then sell it-to them, if possible. "She" certainly valued this Krontij fellow for some reason. Thus had Shieda come to Crystal. He had come on an unheard-of errand: repurchase of a slave. Not that that would be easy. GriReshCo was unlikely to want to part with a prime Aglayan. No, this would have to be done under the counter. So he had come not to Resh but to Crystal, where the merchandise was being held. Shieda knew the officials on Crystal well. Like any good businessman, Shieda stood by what he sold. He checked in periodically with his regular customers, not just at the front office but in the field. It paid to have good relations with the people who actually used one's merchandise. Shieda had particularly good relations with one Dounce, warden of the prison in this dome. The prison, where unruly or otherwise troublesome slaves were kept. Shieda was not at all surprised to hear that Krontij was in the prison, a fact supplied by a guard with whom he also had good relations. That the Aglayan had actually led an abortive insurrection 161 raised the slaver's eyebrows a bit. He knew it might make the slave's repurchase even more difficult (which merely meant more expensive; any difficulty could be solved with enough stells). GriReshCo would be especially unlikely to want such a perpetrator released from its jurisdiction. Still, surely it could be done. "Phack, you stay here and keep Blossom company," Shieda told his mate. "I'm going down alone." He nodded at his latest barely-pubescent mistress, a blank-looking runaway from Nevermind who stood chewing a wad of Ginneh spineberry gum. "Pos, Captain," his mate answered. He didn't say what he thought: I'd be happier climbing the needle-spine tree that glop she's chewing came from! No one was allowed into the prison area save GriReshCo employees and prisoners. Shieda was not "no one." Shieda had good relations with those who (selectively) enforced those rules. He took the liftube down to the subcrystalline prison. There had been no real reason to leave his mate and hust behind. There had been Shieda's reason: he wanted to gorge in secret on the liftube. Shieda always ate before negotiating a deal. And after. (During, if discreetly possible.) He took paks of food from within his voluminous cloak and stuffed them into his mouth in record time. He was still chewing and swallowing painfully when the tube stopped. Happily no one was near the exit to see. Shieda and Dounce had done business before. Shieda had in fact once brought a GriReshCo slave from him, not a former sale of his own but a nubile young cake supplied to the company by that thieving Jonuta. The fool Captain Chicken, wasting such a stash on Crystal! She'd lasted Shieda for months before he dumped her, drugged on eroflore, on Front. This was different, Dounce said. "Impossible! It's impossible," the weaselly little man told Shieda. "Why impossible, good Dounce?" "Because! This is a rebel leader. The authorities take a special interest in him." "The authorities, good Dounce, take a special interest in cred, first, last, and always." 162 "Neg. Impossible. I'd have to bribe the higher authorities personally. Personally!" "Then do so." "I'd have to charge you an outrageous sum, don't you understand?" He waved his hands upwards at the slaver's face, far above. "Outrageous! Even then there wouldn't be much left for me." The huge man smiled. "Let me hear your outrageous sum. I assure you I will add on whatever it takes to make you happy." "Huh! Happy? Up here? On Crystal? 'Snot even anyplace to spend cred up here. Happy!" Shieda took the hint. "Good Dounce, perhaps then you will let me supply you with a little something in the way of merchandise, for your personal use. Something to help pass away those off-duty

sleep periods. It happens I have a suitable little item up above with Phack at this moment. Sweet little cake. No; more of a pie if you scan me. Young!" Dounce considered. His eyes rolled. Then he frowned, started to shake his head. "In addition," Shieda hastily added, "to the added stells, of course." Dounce decided. He whispered a figure to Shieda. He was impressed when Shieda didn't even raise an eyebrow, but merely nodded and smiled. Shieda thought it a bit high; still, he had come here prepared to pay. Somebody rich wanted that Aglayan. Shieda chuckled fatly. "You drive a hard bargain, good Dounce, and will surely make your fortune. Done! Now: where is the prisoner?" "It's his sleep period. He's in his cell. Sleeping!" "Then all is simple. Give him whatever you must to wake him, followed by TZ. Bring him topside in half an hour. Disguised of course." "Now? Before I've paid anyone off? You're fraggy. Fraggy! You can't sneak a prisoner off Crystal." "Ah, I fear I must, good Dounce. I am in a bit of a hurry." (He didn't add his reason for haste: the fact that someone else sought this prisoner, someone wealthy who knew exactly where the fellow was thanks to Shieda's own 163 stupidity in letting himself be fobbed.) "You can easily settle with your superiors later." "Neg. Not even for the amount we agreed. Neg!" "Good Dounce, the amount is very generous, I think. And do not forget the stash." "She can't pay me for the extra risk, Shieda. Risk!" "Oh, but she can, Dounce. You planetsiders-pardon me, moonsiders-are so unimaginative. Have you considered the extra income that would accrue if in addition to your own use of her you treated her as a rental property? Especially here on Crystal!" Bounce's jaw worked. He looked about as if expecting to be nipped on the spot just for harboring thoughts of agreeing to this mad scheme. Then: "Done!" he said. "Excellent! And your risk goes only as far as topside. From there and out of the dome I will escort the property. Don't worry! All will be well. Now shift! As soon as I am onboard I will transer the agreed-upon stells to your account. Now, now, you know I wouldn't go retro on you. Besides, the stash is waiting topside." Dounce nodded and redshifted. Shieda did likewise, heading up in the liftube. Too bad, he thought as he uncached another foodpak. She was rather entertaining. Dumb as a chair, but entertaining. Dounce and a guard (I'll have to pay him too! Dounce thought) went to Krontij's cell, a primitive affair carved from the living rock of Crystal's innards. Dounce palmed the lock, then stood aside to let the guard enter first, stopper in hand. Dounce followed and administered the waker that brought the prisoner around. Then Krontij was given TZ orally as he always was after sleep periods. Naturally Krontij was expecting to be taken back to work. He was surprised when Dounce and the guard left without a word. The periods when the TZ had been given him but had not yet taken effect, or when it was wearing off, constituted the only parts of Krontij's life that were still his own. He had learned quickly to guard them, treasure them, extend them. There was no stopping the onset of the drug's effects, of course. But TZ did go through the system very rapidly. Thus 164 it needed to be readministered several times daily. Krontij had learned to affect the symptoms of the drug when he felt its influence dissipating. Not for too long. That would have aroused suspicion. Just long enough that it fell within the possible variable reactions of different individuals to the substance. Krontij gained thinking time in bits and pieces. Added to that were the few mins it took for the drug to take effect, plus the few mins it took for the sleeper to take effect at the start of each sleep period. This latter constituted his only action time. The drug was administered and he was left alone in his cell. The few mins a day thus gained were hardly enough to plan, let alone work toward any coherent action. They had proven sufficient, though, to enable him to make some minimal preparations for-what? An emergency? Life was an emergency to Krontij. An opportunity, then. Any change, any variation. Now such a variation in routine had come. Krontij acted on his preparations without taking precious time to debate why. From a niche in the rock wall of his cell he took a small leather pouch of rock-lizard skin, fashioned laboriously over weeks of small pockets of time. In it he placed two sharpened stones. Then he reached gingerly into another

hole in the wall (but hurriedly; he felt the onset of the deadly calm). After a couple of abortive attempts that forced him to yank back his snapped-at fingers in frustration and near-panic, he extracted a live rock-lizard. The creature had been his sole companion these long months since he had killed its mate to make the pouch. He popped it into the pouch, pulled the drawstring, stuck the pouch into his undershirt, and sat down to await the inevitable. Whatever that might be. Soon Dounce and the guard returned, bearing a guard's uniform and a wig. Docilely Krontij donned the disguise at Dounce's orders. The prisoner had no idea what was going on now, or at least no interest in it. He likewise had no further thought of the lizard-skin pouch. Only sheer luck kept his captors from seeing its bulge in the undershirt beneath his half-opened work coveralls. 165 The three took the liftube topside, where they were met by the increasingly-impatient Shieda and his companions. "At last, Dounce," Shieda said, dropping the customary title "good." "Come then, Krontij. Dounce! Tell him to come with me." Dounce did. Shieda had turned to leave when he heard Dounce ostentatiously clear his throat. "Oh, pets, pos, of course. Blossom my dear, ah, you will be staying with Dounce. Take her, please." He gestured to the guard, who moved forward to grasp the girl by the shoulders. "What? Wait a min!" she said. "Shieda! What's this?" "Business, my dear. This is business. This fellow is worth more to me than you are, delightful though you've been. Stells are somewhat harder to come by than cake. Twas ever thus." "Whatta you talkin' about?" "Ah Blossom, you are so slow! I'm talking about a sale, my dear. Shieda has sold you to the estimable Dounce. Now come, Phack, we-" "Shie-" the girl tried to scream. She was cut off by the gloved hand of the guard over her mouth and a slavetube in her neck. The pain froze her into paralysis. The guard prolonged it for only a few moments. It was long enough for even the not-very-bright Blossom to get the message. She nodded in fear and complied when the guard handed her the TZ tablet and said, softly, "Take this girl, or . . ." Already her education had begun. Shieda, Phack, and Krontij had no trouble getting past the checkpoint to the lander docking area. There they nodded to the official and prepared to enter the umbilical tunnel that led from the great dome to their spaceboat. All would have continued well had the "good" Dounce done his job correctly. He had not. He had neglected to engage the clinging field of Krontij's wig. It chose this moment to slip, carrying hat and wig slowly to the ground. Exposing hair of a color no GriReshCo guards had ever had. Shieda and the official noticed at the same instant. The uniformed woman cried "Hey!" and moved for her stopper. 166 Shieda moved just that much faster, not for his stopper but for the woman. He shoved her off balance. Swinging her arms to regain her equilibrium delayed her drawing. Before she could do so Phack had his stopper out, set on Two: Dance. The GriReshCo authority went into the ugly shuffle-dance-jitter rictus, frozen in the beam's sway. "Hold her there, Phack. Krontij! Up the tunnel and into the boat." The Aglayan slave complied instantly, but with a dull slowness. Shieda tried to hurry him by shoving. That served only to throw Krontij off balance. Then he continued at the same moderate pace as previously. Shieda cursed and glanced over his shoulder at Phack in the tunnel mouth. Turning back, the slaver wrapped one meaty arm around his captive's waist and lifted him off the ground. Hugging the placid-faced Krontij horizontally to his side, Shieda loped up the tunnel in great low-G strides. By this time other guards had spotted the dancing officer. Two ran toward Phack, drawing stoppers. Phack took the beam off his victim and aimed it at one of the newcomers. Instantly the man started the grotesque clog, while the woman dropped to the ground, gasping and disoriented. That left the other guard. Stopper out, he hit Phack with a One-setting beam: Freeze. It was the wrong choice. Phack froze, but his stopper remained leveled at the first guard. The downed official was scrambling to her feet now, dazed but determined. She took stock of the situation before her: one man dancing, another frozen, one guard stupidly holding a stopper on the latter. She drew her own weapon and snapped: "Get ready to take that thing off him! I'll cover him on Dance. That'll get his

beam off Jabragel." The fellow nodded assent. Then he shimmered and disappeared. Phack dropped. The dancing guard dropped. The confused company woman looked about wildly, saw Shieda standing in the mouth of the tunnel. Too late. Before she could raise her weapon she, too, shimmered and vanished, turned to her component particles to drift infinitely slowly to the surface of .2-gravity Crystal. Other guards were running now from other areas. Shieda kicked at the fallen Phack. The guard who had been stoppered 167 lay on the ground, trying to shake some wits back into his head. "Phack! Get up, you slipsucker! Shift! Pull yourself together, later, man! Oh ... cess-" Shieda reached with his free hand. Grasping Phack's belt, the massive Terasak hoisted his mate into the air, held him at arm's length and shook him. The treatment proved more uncomfortable to Phack than his own jangled nerves. "All-all rr-riight . . ." he managed to get out through clattering teeth. Shieda set him on his feet with a flip of the arm. Phack stumbled, then reached for the stopper he had dropped while airborne. Dizzily, he managed to dial it to Three: Fry. (Where his captain's had been set. When Shieda ran into trouble, he made it a policy not just to Stop antagonists, but to Eliminate witnesses.) Phack backed up the tunnel after his captain, directing a steady beam of potential death down the umbilical and out into the dome. They reached the lander occupied by a very docile Krontij. Shieda fell massively into his seat while Phack sealed the hatch. By the time Phack was seated Shieda had the engines on and the lift program started. The boat took off without Phack's having had time to strap down-and without those in the dome having time to seal the airlock at their end. Two guards had pursued the fugitives through the tunnel as soon as the menace of Phack's stopper had ended. It was their mistake. They paid by being sucked into the vacuum of Crystal and deposited gently nearly a klom away, very dead. They were followed by the struggling body of the guard who had been stoppered. He was dragged across the floor by the outrush of air and blown through the tunnel just before the autoseal kicked in and saved the dome from further loss. Kirin's lander streaked away from Crystal, leaving five dead, a prisoner gone, a warden named Bounce (who would soon be demoted to inmate in his own prison pending GriReshCo investigation), and a guard (who would shortly join Dounce) in possession of a piece of drugged walking merchandise, very female. All this naturally made Shieda a mighty wanted man on Resh. 168 As the moon called Crystal diminished behind the speeding lander, Shieda turned to his still-shaky mate with a look of disgust. "Phack, will you please see to it that you carry your Outworld stopper at all times from now on, at least when we're groundside? Or carry them both, as I do. Had you dropped that woman at the outset we'd have been away clean." "Firm, Captain. Sorry." "Sorry! All my operations on Resh out the locks and you're sorry." He sighed deeply, following it with a belch. "Ah, well. At least we have the merchandise we came for." He turned to look at the hyper-calm Krontij. And it had better be worth all that whoever-it-was seemed to think! 18 You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time. It's a start. -Trafalgar Cuw It has been wisely said that we cannot really love anybody at whom we never laugh. -Agnes Repplier, Americans and Others Even those with a hand, or hands, in many pies did not necessarily control the whole bakery. So with GriReshCo, despite the priests of Gri. The company was not completely autonomous. Nor did the priests control the entire government of Resh. Sometimes it was a case of the left and right hands being in different pies, each unable to know what the other was about. Thus certain priests in Government would have been very disturbed to discover that there had been serious unrest on Crystal. Other priests, in positions of power within GriReshCo, were concerned to see that their government compatriots were spared that upsetting knowledge. Not to mention the fact that a slave had been abducted from under their very noses, a slave who had been the leader of the recent unrest. Precautions were taken to insure that word of these events did not leak down to Resh. Further precautions were taken to see that such unpleasantries did not recur. Precautions taken in fear often suffered a fatal flaw: they tended to go too far. So on Crystal. The

precautions had taken the form of severely intensified discipline and punishments. Further, they 169 170 encompassed not just the recent rebels, but to a degree all the slaves in the mining colony where the revolt had occurred. Chief among the punishments was a reduced food allowance. Crystal's encapsulated food was never exciting. That didn't stop its forced consumers from missing it, when the quantity was reduced! So-the record of not learning from history remained unbroken on Crystal. The authorities had missed another very salient point from the annals of revolution: people who would not fight for freedom would fight for food. The rebellion on Crystal had spontaneously reactivated shortly before merchant spacer Longlines put down a spaceboat to dock with the domelock. The lander's occupants received no answer to their request for permission to dock. They docked anyhow. Since the rebellion was quite obvious from outside the transparent dome, they didn't bother seeking further clearance. They fastened to a dock away from what appeared to be the center of action. From within the umbilical tunnel Longline's captain lasered open the dome's airlock. That left her lander the only seal between the dome and the vacuum. She had come to purchase a slave, an important slave. She had obliged herself to certain contacts on Resh to determine which dome housed her quarry. She would brook no barriers to her purpose. She and her two crewmembers entered the dome. Sounds of fighting came from far off to the right. Still they took a defensive stance upon entering through the unguarded lock: the captain in the center, the others to either side. Stoppers drawn. The captain scanned the area. "The action's way over there to the right. No danger here. Whitey, Willie-you two head over that way and see what the situation is. Krontij could be in immediate danger. Whitey, the aurasuit's secure?" She looked at the white-haired man in the formfitting green coverall that enwrapped him to the neck. The cowl hung loosely at the back of his head. "Firm. What and who will I be disguised as?" "A spacefarer, male if Khorundah remembers correctly, of nondescript appearance. No uniform. Anything would look out of place here, but you can tell the 'truth'-that you came in on Longlines. The point is to cover up your Aglayan 171 self! A wig in this chaos could hardly be relied upon to remain secure. For such contingencies, Khorundah keeps that suit in the lander." "Where will you be?" Willie asked. "GriReshCo field office, over that way." She indicated the opposite direction from the sounds of rebellion. "Ascertaining whether he is indeed here and acquiring him, if possible. Redshift!" She turned and double-timed away in easy bounds. The others did likewise, in the opposite direction. The two spacefarers stayed close to the perimeter, away from the rocks that could provide cover for an ambush either by defensive guards or irrational rebels. They had covered perhaps a klom and a half in their circuitous route when they rounded a high outcropping and spotted the scene of revolt. They stopped and crouched, trying to sort out what was happening. "They seem to be giving the guards a hard time," Willie said. "Pos, but it can't last. The poor fobbers could beat every guard here and they'd still lose. They have no way out of here, and GriReshCo will just ship in reinforcements from one of the other domes." "Uh. The rebels have evidently taken the guardhouse. That's probably why it's gone on this long." "Tao, they're fighting hand-to-hand, can you believe that?" "Nobody's going to use plasma guns or lasers in such close quarters, Whitey. Or too near the dome. There's a few stoppers being used, see?" "Pos. Willie, all we know is that Krontij is probably down there somewhere. We're going to have to go in and search for him." "Oh, me! Strike while the sun shines, I guess. I thought to myself before we left that I shouldn't have worn my clothes." Whitey appraised Willie's jumpsuit, a glo-gold affair with eight-pointed cerulean stars blazoned on it. "You'd be less conspicuous if you were Aglayan! Look, I'll go up and over those rocks to the left. You go on around the perimeter and come down from the outside." "And what do we do when we get there?" "Search. Carefully. From hiding if possible. If you find 172 Krontij-if you see an Aglayan male-try to separate him from the crowd, speak to him. Call his name--'Krontij' I mean-and see if he responds. If all else fails, stopper him. If it doesn't endanger him. At least

the guards'll think you're on their side. Just don't let him get hurt." Wildorado gave him a look. "Sounds absurd. Sounds impossible. But, you know what they say." "I'm afraid to ask." " 'Fools rush in, but angels die many times.' " He tried to grimace, but smiled fondly instead. "If ever there was a foolish angel, it's you. Not that I believe in angels." "You're the angel, Snow-top. You know I like you this way, away from Tachi. You're a lot less grim." He looked at her for a short moment. Then he took her chin in the hand not holding the stopper and pulled her close enough to kiss her. "Now shift," he said. They started. He watched her out of sight around the rocks and began climbing. Reaching the top of the embankment, he peered down at the scene of rebellion. He could see a knot of struggling figures directly below, and farther on some slaves hidden behind an outcropping, beaming stoppers out across an open space. He was too far away to make out whether any of them might be Aglayan. Have to get closer, thread my way down through those rocks. First the suit. He pulled back behind a wall of rock, bolstered his stopper, and pulled the cowl of the aurasuit over his head. Fastening the field and checking the TP and aircon, he dialed it on. The greenclad Whitey of SapphireLonglines vanished. In his place stood a naked woman. A very fine-looking and, in fact, a rather famous naked woman. He was surrounded by the image of the holomeller star Yemutha Valvolex, the Panishi Pash Flash, the Sip 'n' Soar girl. Chocolate of skin and cherry of hair (where she had it, which was only on her head and her eyebrows, the latter curled to match her coif). On her right warhead twined a tattoo of a dragon, in white. Her fans knew it flapped its wings when she moved that 173 warhead in a certain way. The story was that Yemutha's dragon would perform on request. The story in some places was that Yemutha would too. No such hyper-star as Setsuyo Puma, still she was well enough known that even Whitey (who never indulged in such entertainments as mellers) would have recognized her had he been able to see her face. He couldn't, of course. All he was able to see when he looked down at himself was the nude body of a beautiful woman. Oh, payday! Khorundah gave me the wrong image-cassette! He could not imagine why Khorundah even had such an image, and right now he didn't care. He reached to dial the suit off. Before his hand reached his (impressive) chest, three rebels, males, came around the edge of the rock wall. They carried stoppers. Whitey froze, uncertain whether to reach for his own weapon, dial off the suit, or stay as he was. The rebels froze as well, uncertain whether to shit or go blind, as an ancient expression had it. They were also uncertain as to just what it was they had been doing that seemed so important a few moments ago . . . "Gri on a grat!" the first one said. "Now just don't move, Sweetcakes. Orbit right there," the second said, pushing past the one in front to get a better view. "Just hold it a min!" The first one pushed back and started forward. "Never mind that, I'll hold it myself," he said, reaching for the apparition before him. The second man started for it at the same time. The third, younger, got his first clear view. He spotted the white dragon and his eyes widened. "Hey! 'At's Yemutha-" He never finished. A larger group of rebels, mixed male and female, had been trailing the first three. Now they rounded the corner. They saw what their fellows were about and joined in eagerly. Men and women alike. If the imprisoned would fight for food, they would positively destroy for sex. Destroy they now did, ripping Whitey's aurasuit to shreds in their frenzy to grab what wasn't there. Feeling nothing in their hands but fabric, they started tearing in all directions, 174 inevitably at each other. Being of both sexes, they found even greater satisfaction in that grapple. Yemutha Valvolex was soon forgotten in the general grope, although Whitey was not. Two slaves, one of each sex, had hold of various (happily not too vulnerable) parts of his body as he struggled at the bottom of the human heap. He managed to get one hand to his side . . . to find his stopper gone, holster and all. It was definitely time for the cavalry to arrive. Willie came around the rock wall from the same direction as the slaves just as Whitey had freed his head and one arm and was attempting to crawl out from beneath the wriggling mass. She spotted him and hauled him free-knocking one exceptionally tenacious



female in the ear with the barrel of her stopper in the process. She helped him to his feet. They scrambled around the wall and back the way he had come. When they had reached a seemingly safe distance and heard no sound of pursuit they stopped. Breathless; Whitey from the exertion, Willie from laughter. "What-are you-garphing at?" he asked. She tried to answer, unsuccessfully. She merely pointed, doubled over. Whitey looked down at himself and again saw a naked body. His own. The aurasuit had been completely demolished. "Tao! My back's all scrubbed up from those stones and you laugh. I've never suffered so much loss of dignity on any voyage in my life. This can't be in accord with the Way." Willie caught her breath. "Come on," she said. "Krontij isn't down there and the whole thing's drying up anyway. Let's find Khorundah and get outta here. I'd share my suit with you but there's barely enough room in here for me, Flashdoll." At the bottom of the escarpment they met Khorundah. She looked her mate up and down, not missing the tentatively rising hint of embarrassment. "You seem to have lost Khorundah's aurasuit." "You had me disguised as a naked woman!" "Ah!-the Yemutha Valvolex program! What a shame. And used only once, to gain the attention of an unfortunate minion. Ah well." Khorundah heaved a sigh. "Captain, Krontij isn't-" Willie began. 175 "Pos. Shieda, it seems, for all his bulk, has moved faster than we. He has the boy." "They told you that?" "Khorundah as well as Shieda has contacts and friends. There are many places she can obtain information. And favors. Now come. We must redshift this place before those Khorundah does not hold friend encounter us." "Like this?" Whitey gestured at himself. Khorundah flipped her fingers. Greenly. "Our docking area was still clear as I came by. You have an alternative? No? Then ..." They went. The docking area was indeed free of people, which proved fortunate for more than "merely" Whitey's dignity. "Khorundah, there's no way to seal this hatch from our side," Willie said. "How we gonna close off the dome?" "We're not. The automatic will seal it within seconds. They will lose a little air, no more." Khorundah was definitely not concerned. They hustled up the tunnel and into the lander. And so the beleaguered third mining dome of Crystal had its second blowout. Despite all their desperate measures, GriReshCo officials found that they had much to explain, both to their own company and to the civil authorities. "Krontij supposedly made an 'escape,' they would have us believe," she informed them as they lifted toward the ship. "It was bogus. He was in fact abducted by Shieda. Reshi Peacekeeping attached Shieda's credaccount and found it closed out. Either he bribed someone with all he had here or, as seems more likely, he drained it precisely to preclude attachment. At any rate he is quite unwelcome on Resh. Small help to us." "What do we do now?" Willie asked. "What we have been doing. We search. We seek yet again to encounter the great Shieda." Willie shook her head. "Zipping around the spaceways searching for a single lost slave. What a wild goose's errand." Khorundah, still not yet fully accustomed to interpreting Willie's malaphoristic phrasing, furrowed her brows in 176 puzzlement. Willie looked to Whitey for the expected reaction. She saw no sign that he had even heard. I wonder, he thought. Can we be the only ones? There must be others combing the spaceways for enslaved friends, relatives. Once I told Janja that nothing could be done about it. It was the way of the Galaxy, the way of the spaceways. And what do I do while all these people are enslaved? I crew on a merchant ship. I steal phrillia from my own planet for the benefit of these Galactics I have adopted and who will never fully adopt me. It is Their way. It is not the Way. But I can't do anything about it! I was a slave, too. I have to live, I have to survive. Things are as they are. I can't fight the Galaxy. But someone should, somehow. 19 You taught me language; and my profit on't Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you, For learning me your language! -Shakespeare, The Tempest Life is just one damned thing after another. -Dennis O'Kelly Captain Shieda stared at nothing and chewed his lip, pondering. That fool Aglayan has no idea why anyone would be seeking him or that he might be worth anything to anyone! Nor does he know Yanya or why they seek her. (Shieda had been led into error by his own action in giving Krontij

a limited brainboost. Not yet comfortable with the many dialects and accents in which Erts was spoken, the slave never realized that his Terasak captor was saying "Janja.") So I must seek those who would know. The estimable Captain 'Turbuline' is the logical person, whoever shelhelit may be. I could chase her all over the inner galaxy trying to pick up her spacer's signatures which my so-wonderful SIPACUM registered even as we parleyed and dueled. Or I could find someone else who might know, someone not nearly so likely to be hiding. Captain Tachi of Rambler! As I recall, it seemed more than likely that he had this Krontij fellow's Sworn or Intended or \whatever-they-call-it onboard. Pos! Perhaps she still is. And-hm! Might not the mysterious value of this already-ill 178 so-expensive-to-me slave be enhanced if I have his beloved in hand, too? Firm! I think Kirin will seek a rendezvous with Rambler. Shieda set course for Barbro Transfer Station. Finding a merchant spacer was no problem. One simply called up on one's terminal the current posted schedules from Galactic Merchant Administration and there it was. Rambler was due back at Barbro at just about the time Shieda would arrive there. Tachi was nothing if not reliable. Rambler was indeed in port. Shieda was nothing if not prudent. Barbro was no place to have a try at coercion or any sort of strong-arming. Nothing overtly illegal. Covertly illegal now-that was something else again. A little bribery, perhaps . . . Shieda found Tachi at Rambler's docking bay, checking faxes of bills of lading for cargo just offloaded. The huge slaver approached the merchant captain affably and introduced himself. His manner had no visible effect on Tachi, who maintained the same frown occasioned by the bills of lading. "Shieda, if I had the evidence I'd have you nipped on the spot for slavery, not to mention attempting to pirate-aye, pirate-my ship in deep space to remove one of my passengers, and never mind what they'd do to me for a little phrillia-collecting. What the vug do you want?" "Captain! Such harsh words between two businessmen. I merely wish-" Tachi stared up Shieda's length. "Oh cut the cute-fob, Captain. If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise let me go about my business." Tachi made a move as if to leave, then. Shieda touched him on the arm to detain him. "Wait, Captain," he began, and broke off when Tachi turned to remove the hand with two fingers, as he might have picked a bug off his clothing. He gave Shieda a significant look, and waited with no show of patience. "Captain Tachi, I said I had business with you. Here it is. I offer you whatever price you name-within reason-for the 'passenger' that you took off Aglaya. And a sizable bonus for information as to the value of the slave Krontij." Tachi's eyebrows rose. 179 "Oh-ho! There's something more to this than just wanting that same Aglayan again, eh? You wouldn't be pursuing a single Aglayan all this way just to buy her as property, Shieda. And as for information, I wouldn't give you any if I had it. Which I haven't, including the whereabouts of this Krontij. Furthermore, you're soliciting my complicity in illegal matters. Since I have no witnesses there's nothing I can do about it. Other than to tell you that I can and will be of no help to you, sir. Good day." Tachi had a great deal more on his mind that he longed to say, but he was known for his prudence as much as his reliability. The man before him could have fragmented him bodily and Tachi knew it. As it was Shieda's narrowing eyes and darkening countenance throughout Tachi's last speech presaged some sort of retort or retaliation. The slaver never had the chance to deliver it. Just as Tachi began to think that he might have gone too far, Shieda's expression changed to one of surprise. He had felt something prod into his back. A voice came from behind him. "This stopper is set on Three, Fats. Don't move. That includes you, Captain Tachi." As Shieda left Kirin to find Tachi, Phack had headed for the Solitary slavehold to feed their captive. Stopper in one hand, Phack set down three foodpaks with the other. He had begun to back toward the door when the seated prisoner spoke to him. In Aglayis. "Your captain wants to know why I'm so valuable, Phack. Has he found out yet?" Phack, startled at being addressed in his second tongue (Krontij has thus far conversed entirely in Erts, his own second tongue), replied unguardedly. "No. He's, uh, gone to find out." He regained his caution. "Are

you ready to tell me now?" "You don't really think I was lying, do you? After you used that tube on me? I would have told you if I knew. No, I just thought you might tell me." "If I knew I wouldn't tell you. Now eat your food." "Would you like to know how I can be valuable to you, Phack?" 180 "To me?" Krontij nodded. "To you. I have something you might want." "If you think you can tell me anything that'll get you out of here, forget it. I don't betray my captain." "You think you're very loyal, Phack. I like that. I don't believe it, though, even if you do. Anyone would sell out his loyalties if they began to cost him too much. That much I've learned in your Galactic civilization." He said the last two words in Erts, with a scornfully exaggerated Aglayan accent. "No, Phack, I have nothing to tell you. I have something to give you. And I don't ask freedom, just a little consideration. A bit more food, a bit less slavetube. Surely that wouldn't compromise your loyalty, Phack. I grew practical in the mines, you see. I don't seek the unattainable-only something to make my lot a bit more bearable." Phack eyed the pale man with the pale hair. "Something to give me, you say." "Yes. I took something more than just this great wisdom away with me, Phack. There's more on Crystal than just quartz, Phack. Gems, occasionally. Lovely, Crystalline gems. Valuable Crystalline gems." "And you have some of these?" "I might." "What's to keep me from stoppering you and searching this cell for them?" The Aglayan smiled lazily. "Wouldn't do you much good if I'd swallowed them, would it? Shieda would surely want to know why you were rooting around in the bowels of his favorite property." "Then I'll just wait until-" "I never thought of you as a cess-rooter, Phack. Shieda, yes. Anyway, by then I'll offer them to Shieda himself when he next comes to torment me with his plagued questions or his fat grat's body. Or, if you should find them and take them from me, I'll simply tell your captain you have them. We make a deal now! Do you want the gems or not?" Phack considered. "They can't buy you freedom, understand," he said. "Nothing can buy you freedom. But preferential treatment, now, maybe ..." "Phack . . ." 181 "All right, done! If they're valuable. Where are they? And you'd better be talking straight." Krontij reached behind his back with one hand and withdrew the leather pouch. He held it lazily out. Phack shook his head. "Neg," he said in Erts. "Toss it on the floor." Krontij complied. Phack bent and picked it up, his gaze never leaving his prisoner. Krontij only sat, relaxed, half-smiling. Eyes half-shut. Phack kept looking at the seated Aglayan as he brought the hand holding the pouch over to that holding the stopper. Without letting his aim waver he undid the drawstring. Dangling the pouch from the last two fingers of the stopper hand, he reached into the bag with the other. Rock-lizards weren't venomous. They weren't even particularly dangerous. They did have needly little teeth and became positively vicious when they were hungry. Since this one had been fed only occasional scraps since coming onboard Kirin, it was ravenous, and feeling very vicious indeed. The nip it applied to Phack's finger had a great deal of sincerity behind it. Phack yelped and yanked his hand out of the pouch. The lizard came with it. Reflexively the man spun, trying to shake the tenacious creature from his finger. His other hand went flailing into the air in the opposite direction. And Krontij sprang. Leaped, as only an Aglayan in low gravity could leap. Too fast for Phack to react. Krontij had the wrist of Phack's stopper hand in a tight grip before Phack had given the lizard more than a single shake. Krontij's other hand doubled up, swung back and came forward, hard, into Phack's crotch. Phack dropped stopper and pouch, made a noise that sounded something like "G-hiihhhh!" and went to his knees. Almost immediately thereafter he went to his forehead. He brought both arms under him and hugged his abdomen. Forgotten because of the greater pain, the lizard was scraped off his finger onto the floor. It scuttled quickly from the room. Krontij saw none of this. The instant his fist connected his gaze went to the stopper. Releasing Phack's wrist, he dived for the weapon. With it in hand he whirled back to face Phack. He aimed at the huddled figure, then relaxed. 182 It was clear that Phack would put up no resistance. Krontij reached down-still carefully, carefully-and took that mate's slavetube from his belt. He dialed

the instrument to its fifth setting and stuck it between Phack's legs from behind. The mate let out a groan of mixed agony and disbelief that he might be about to feel worse. It couldn't be possible. "Where is Shieda, Phack? Where's he gone, to 'find out' why I'm valuable? Now, or I turn this thing on! And it's on five." "Oohh-uhh-O Kreeshna-T-Tachi-ship Rambler. Berth D-45. Please ..." "Why this Tachi, Phack?" "Shieda-thinks-had your woman. Might know-why they wanted you." Krontij waggled the slavetube. "Who wanted me?" "Don't know. Some-ship. Disguised. Tried to find you. Don't know who, don't know-oooohh ..." Krontij considered, nodded. He straightened, backed toward the door. "I'll be leaving you now, Phack. Be glad I don't dislike you quite as much as I do Shieda or Hummer, or there'd be nothing left of you to groan and retch. Remember, the pain means you're still alive." That was of course precisely the reason Phack was groaning and shuddering. Right now he would have preferred to be dead. Krontij sealed the door behind him. He turned, slipped the slavetube into his waistband, and dialed the stopper to its Three setting. He set out for berth D-45 and soon had the stopper in Shieda's door-sized back. Krontij moved out from behind the statue-still Shieda till the stopper covered both him and Tachi. "Into the tunnel, both of you. Pres!" Tachi turned and entered the umbilical extending to Rambler. Shieda hesitated. "I want you where I can see you and nobody can see us, slaver," the Aglayan youth said. "I just Fried two of your 183 crew back at your own hatch and I'd love to do the same to you here. Except I need you. Now move!" Shieda followed Tachi. Krontij entered after him. When they had walked far enough into the tunnel to be obscured from view at either end, he ordered them to halt and face him. "I want information. You've given me nearly all I need already. I overheard you talking. I need to know one more thing. Tachi, what was the name of the Aglayan you had onboard your ship?" "Her name was Pransa." Krontij's eyes went hard, his jaw set. "Then you didn't lie to me about that anyway, Shieda. You told me my Promised was onboard another ship. You didn't destroy the ship, though. In that you lied, one more thing I owe you for." He looked at Tachi. "Where is Pransa now?" "The last I saw her she was on spacer Sapphire, headed for Jasbir. She is safe, lad. And free. You need not do this." "As you will be safe, Captain Tachi, when I find Pransa. Until then I trust the word of no Galactic." "Uh, and me, boy? What about me?" Shieda said. "I owe you, slaver. We shall see how I pay that debt. Until then you will do as I say, and leave off calling me what I'm not." "Ah. Pos. So it would seem. Would you tell me-which of my crew you killed?" "Tember and the woman. Wusin." Shieda heaved a great sigh. "Lucky Hummer, eh?" "I owe that orange beast, too. Its time will come." Krontij gestured with the stopper. "Now both of you-into the ship. Pres!" "May I ask what you intend, young man?" Tachi asked. "I intend to find Pransa, Captain. I intend for you to take this ship to wherever this 'Jasbir' is." "There are other ways. You-" Krontij's eyes went scary. "I have killed two spacefarers, Tachi! I killed guards, on Crystal. I can't walk off free and go legally searching for anyone. Now stop talking! I've had enough of talking. Into 184 your ship, straight to the-what is it? Where you run the ship?" "Con-cabin," Shieda supplied. "Con-cabin. Then call your crew together and tell them I'm in charge and to follow orders." "Only two are onboard." "They'll do. Shieda is our new crewmember. Let's go!" They went. Krontij forced Tachi to assemble his two crewmembers in the con-cabin, inform them of the situation, then lock them in the hold until they were free of Barbro. That way Krontij could sit in the rear chair and keep an eye on Tachi and Shieda, at con as they separated from the station. "When we are in space, Tachi, we will head for Jasbir," Krontij said as he strapped himself in. Never once did he take his gaze off the two. "And you will search for Sapphire as we go, in case it is headed back here." Tachi spread his arms helplessly. "Krontij, I'm not equipped to search for a vessel in deep space! That takes sophisticated apparatus which I don't have." (The observation was not lost on Shieda, who had been bluffed by this very captain with the assurance that Rambler did indeed possess such systemry.) "My SIPACUM's not that advanced. Besides, they could be headed anywhere after

Jasbir. I certainly doubt they're still there." "What is SIPACUM?" Tachi sighed and shook his head. He gestured toward the array of controls before him. "This. The computer that runs the ship. Do you know what a computer is?" "Pos. That was in my learning." "Well, this computer can't track ship signatures through space." "Mine can, of course," Shieda said. "That is, my vessel's can. If we were to go back there-as your prisoners, of course-" "Another thing I've learned is never to listen to you, Shieda. Neg! We stay on this ship. We go to Jasbir. We find out if Pransa was there and where she's gone. Meanwhile you, Shieda, will fix this computer so it can do what yours can." 185 "Impossible. Need parts, mods. Can't just be fixed!" "It is not impossible to kill you now." "I-will try . . ." "Pos. You will. Tachi! Let us leave." So it was that Rambler, much to the surprise of her planetside crew, her consignee, and Barbro Control, cleared for Jasbir unsheduled and unannounced. So it was that a fat slaver named Shieda came to the muttered conclusion that surely Aglayans were among the most ardent and devoted worshipers of the great god ODTAA. ("Who?" Tachi asked. ("ODTAA. One Damned Thing After Another." ("Oh. And who brought him to that pass do you suppose, Captain Shieda?") So it was that the star-glittering spacelanes were triangulated by three specks, three hurtling human-made capsules seeking each other: Tachi's Rambler in search of Khorundah's Sapphire (briefly Longlines); Khorundah's Sapphire in search of Shieda's Kirin; and Shieda's Kirin, Phayakhmer of Ghanj acting captain, in search of Tachi's Rambler. Phack was a loyal mate. 20 Tao invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone. -The Way of Lao Tzu The salvation of mankind lies only in making everything the concern of all. -Solzhenitsyn, The Nobel Lecture It took some juggling on Krontij's part, that journey. Keeping four people prisoner on a trip through space was more than a challenge. He stayed in the con-cabin at all times. Save when he moved his prisoners to and from the lockup in the hold. This he did at the beginning and end of each sleep period-"night." During Krontij's sleep time only Tachi remained unincarcerated. Krontij chained him to his own captain's chair. During waking hours Krontij remained tirelessly alert, stopper in hand (on Three, always on Three), seated in the corner of his con. No one could enter or leave outside his vision. As additional insurance, he had rigged an alarm to the door. Even should one of the crew escape the hold during Krontij's sleep, he would be unable to take him by surprise. He allowed no more than two in the cabin with him at a time. He marched all four to the hold when he was locking up three. He never allowed Tachi out of his sight, or to have any conversation with his crew out of his hearing. He watched. He waited. He nursed his hatred of Galactics. Not incidentally, he earned Tachi's grudging respect. 186 187 It was incredible that one with Krontij's limited knowledge would dare to travel the spaceways, to challenge Galactic law and society this way. Certainly among the few things Krontij did know was what punishments could and would be inflicted upon him if he were caught. Also, the youthful Aglayan learned. Tachi never touched SIPACUM without Krontij's demanding to know precisely why, and what he was doing. The business of searching for a ship by its signatures was explained to him in detail. So was the impossibility of doing it on this ship. Yet he stubbornly insisted that Shieda try. So Shieda spent his free hours programming and repro-gramming, tinkering what few spare parts and modules Rambler carried. Trying to urge Tachi's computer to do what it could not do without the necessary external sensors. He also spent those hours going fraggy because he had access to no more food onboard Rambler than Krontij allowed him. Krontij's (anyone's) idea of "a normal amount" did not coincide with what Shieda considered his needs. And their captor was tireless. He never let down his guard. When he had to use the sitter he marched all his captives all the way to the lockup, deposited all but Tachi, took Tachi, manacled, into the sitter with him, kept him covered the whole while, then marched everyone back again. He did it no more than twice a day-standard. The stopper came to be a part of his hand. But it is not the Way, Tachi thought. The boy is determined and courageous and unwavering, but it is not the Way. And who drove him from

the Way? What are our ways, that they can produce this from the peace and harmony of primitive worlds? Krontij held them, and Rambler, all the way to Jasbir. Only then did he let Tachi from his sight. "You will go see this Disco. Find out where Pransa has gone. At the first hint that you have betrayed me, the first sound or sight of voice or person not your own, I will Fry your crew." Tachi nodded. He could think of numerous ways to enlist aid in regaining his ship--none of which precluded the risk of the boy's getting just enough warning to do exactly what he threatened. Better to follow the Way, shift with events. Play 188 this out. I doubt the lad's even thought what he'll do when he finds his woman. Tachi saw his former Jarp crewmember. He told it nothing of the duress under which he acted. He only inquired after Pransa and those off Sapphire. All this, plus Tachi's gloomier-than-usual demeanor, puzzled Disco. Yet its former captain affably wished it well upon parting, which gratified the Jarp. Tachi mumbled something about No Hard Feelings and Good Luck and took his leave. Disco's offer of cargo was turned down, making it fear for Tachi's sanity. Back onboard Rambler, Tachi filled Krontij in on what had transpired on Jasbir. "Disco says it was unable to help them so they headed for Resh. The logical choice." "Then we head for Resh." "Not exactly the safest place for you, son." Krontij shrugged. "If I may say something?" Shieda said. "The only thing they are going to find on Resh or Crystal is that I've been there and departed with you. They will then be seeking me again. The likely place to pick up my trail would be back at Barbro." Back where Phack and Kirin are waiting! Krontij looked from one captain to the other, chewing his inner lip. At last he spoke to Tachi. "Captain? Your opinion?" "My opinion, if you'll trust it--" "I'll take note of it." "Then I concur with Shieda. They're as likely to go there as anywhere. That's where Whitey would go to get scrute, I know." Krontij eyed them with that horribly cold-eyed stare. "You could want to get me back to Barbro because they'll nip me there." "They'll nip you on Resh," Tachi pointed out rather wearily. "In that we are equal," Shieda muttered. "We could continue to search for Sapphire," Krontij said. "Where, in the name of all the Galaxy?" Tachi exploded. "Haven't you learned yet how big space is? Are you never going to 'note' my opinion on the capabilities of my own vessel? We can't find the ship! We can't find any ship in 189 deep space! We can't find a pisshole in a one-door sitter, for Tao's sake!" "The captain is quite right, as I've been telling you for what seems like the past thousand years--ess," Shieda said. "I can do nothing to this SIPACUM. If you think I'm fobbing you go right ahead. But if I am I can go right on doing it and you'll never know the difference, will you?" Krontij considered. For an instant his eyelids sagged, in the first overt sign of fatigue he had shown. Then he nodded, tiredly. "To Barbro, Captain Tachi." Shieda let his breath out heavily. "Well, then," he said. "What, by the way, were they seeking of this Disco in the first place, Tachi?" "Scrute as to the whereabouts of someone they felt could aid them in rescuing Krontij. Some friend of Khorundah's with wealth and influence who owns a spacer.'" Seeking someone wealthy with . . . Janja? Shieda hid his startlement. "This friend, Captain. Did they mention a name?" "I don't believe they did, though I can't recall for certain." And how far off the Way is a lie like that? But I'm not about to unbalance this boy's fraggy emotional state any further by telling him his sister's involved in all this! "I wouldn't have inquired in any case, of course. Why?" Shieda flipped his fingers. "I thought it might have proved helpful in finding them, that's all." It all begins to come together! Sapphire must have been the "TGW" spacer I dealt with. Searching for Krontij and Yanya, pos. "Turbuline" would be this Khorundah, then. Shieda's eyes narrowed. Khorundah . . .? Janja and--neg, it couldn't be. Odd coincidence, though! Now what does that pirate's must have to do with Krontij? Janja! With her own spacer! Gri in a groundcar . . . Sapphire swung gently past the outer edge of the Carnadyne Void, hard docked to one of Barbro Transfer Station's great synthesteel/cyprium wheels. Whitey sat oncon with Pransa 190 beside him. He stared blankly at the darkened visuals and telits of SIPACUM. There was nothing to monitor save routine life support

systems. "Why did Khorundah want someone oncon?" Pransa asked. "She thinks Shieda will be trying to contact us. Sometime." "Shieda? Shieda doesn't know who we are!" Whitey slouched in his seat, resting his booted feet on the edge of the console. His arms, loosely bent, lay along the chair's armrests. "I gather Shieda is very resourceful, especially where cred is involved. He has Krontij, probably because he believes Krontij to be worth something to the 'TGW people who fobbied him. He'll use every resource to uncover our identities. Such as Tachi, maybe. Shieda knows Tachi had you onboard from Aglaya. Well, not you, but an additional Aglayan. From the same raid." "You think he'll try to hold Krontij for ransom?" Pransa asked. He nodded. "Firm. That's the only way he'd be worth money, though Shieda doesn't know that yet. He will if he finds us." "I wonder if Khorundah will pay. Can pay." Whitey shrugged. "At this point I wouldn't be surprised if she bought Barbro, Pransa. Where does her cred come from?" He turned to look at Pransa. "You never did get any more out of her, did you?" "Neg. And now I have more questions than ever." She sighed. "Such as?" "Such as why we needed to chase down Disco to get a lead on Janja to help us regain Krontij from GriReshCo. After that show on Resh and Crystal, where Khorundah just walked in and talked to mysterious 'friends' who told her all she wanted to know ..." She shook her head. "Firm. And she was prepared to strike a deal with those 'friends' right there, and buy Krontij." "And you're still a loyal mate and won't question her, eh?" Her voice held just a hint of bitterness. "Pransa, you know what is in my mind; how I feel. I am shamed at letting things go as far as they have on this ship. Yet this is what I do, and I do it well and carefully and 191 loyally, yes. Honestly. We are still trying to find Krontij, after all. Or Janja." "You're right. I'm sorry." She sighed again, reached over to touch his arm. "I was about to lead us into the same old routine. The 'being-pulled-in-two-directions' act." Whitey smiled at her. "Pransa, we could pull that interactive together and take it on tour.'" She laughed, reaching for him with both hands, leaning across the arm of her chair to kiss him. A low buzz and a blinking chartreuse light on SIPACUM interrupted her. "Ship-to-ship," Whitey said, his face showing surprise. He dropped his feet to the floor and booted open the comm. "No visual." "Spacer Sapphire, this is merchant vessel Rambler-" "Tachi!" Whitey said under his breath. "-docked at Barbro. Request to speak to your captain or mate." "Captain Tachi, this is Sapphire, mate oncon. Whitey here, Captain. Will you key up visual?" "Uh, neg, Sapphire. I have someone else here who wants to-" "Where is Pransa, you on Sapphire? If you care about Captain Tachi you will tell me now!" "Krontij!" Pransa blurted, recognizing his voice. "Pransa? Pransa, is that you?" The voice sounded shaky. "Krontij, yes, it is Pransa!" she said in Aglayis. "Are you all right?" "I am-tired, but well. Are you well?" "I am fine. Fidnij is with me. A man of my village." "Fidnij. Wasn't he taken by Sky-demons, I mean slavers? His family lived next door to yours." "Yes, that's him! He is a spacefarer now. He was Tachi's mate. The one Tachi called Whitey." "His mate?" Krontij's voice came quietly, as if he had turned from the comm. Then, loud again: "An Aglayan serving with Them? And you trust him? Pransa, what have they done to you?" "Done . . .? Krontij, no one has done anything. Whitey has been helping me search for you. And for Janja, Krontij! Janja is alive and free, and wealthy! She has her own ship!" 192 "Janja! My sister is alive? And-she too has become like Them . . . , ?" "Yes! No! Oh, Krontij, I must see you. We must talk. There is so much to be told." "Yes . . . Yes, we must meet. We will talk. I will find out how they have done this to you, and Janja, and Fidnij." "They have done nothing to us, Krontij. Janja and Fidnij were slaves, but they are free, now. I am free, and safe." "Free? Janja free, and not returned to Aglaya? With her own ship? And you, and Fidnij? You are with Galactics. I was with Galactics, a slave, and I would have said I was free if they had told me to, with their drugs and their painmakers. Free? We shall see." Pransa's brows knitted in confusion. That is not the voice of the Krontij I knew! So hard, so cold. What have they done to him? / must get close

enough to cherm him. And tell him-what? That my heart no longer leaps at the sound of his voice? And why? Because that voice has changed, or because I have? "Krontij, this is Fidnij. When can we meet you?" "You can meet me now, both of you. Just you." "We bring our captain, Krontij. She is planetside. We will call her-" "No Galactics will come!" "Krontij, she can help you. She is our friend. She has helped us search for you. You are a fugitive from Resh and I assume from Shieda. She-" "Shieda is my prisoner. I repeat: no Galactics." "Shieda . . .! Krontij, did Tachi-" "Tachi is my prisoner, too." "What? Krontij, this is absurd! Tachi-" "Tachi is Galactic! I trust no Galactic, nor any Galactic pet, FidnijIWhitey. Do we meet alone?" Whitey looked at Pransa. She chermmed his apprehension and knew he had detected what she had: something in Krontij's voice, his attitude, as much as in his words. Something not quite . . . normal. Not quite sane . . . She shook her head. Whitey nodded agreement and turned back to the commsender. "Khorundah is my captain, Krontij. This is her mission. She comes." 193 For an endless time the comm was silent. Then Krontij's voice came, more quietly. "Tachi comes, too. As my . . . captive." (He sought the Aglayan equivalent of hostage, came as close as he could.) Whitey chewed on his lip, considering. Again he looked to Pransa. She nodded her trust in him. He spoke. "Agreed, Krontij." "You know this place and I do not. Where shall we meet? Remember, I have Tachi." "Do you speak Erts, Krontij?" "Firm." "Then put Tachi on." "Tachi here, Mate." "Captain, do you know that small cargo bay on this wheel, the one where we picked up that load of berbun that time?" "Firm. Forty-seven, upper level." "There, one hour. No! Beanstalk comes up in forty-five, and Khorundah can catch that. Hour and a half.'" "What is this beanstalk?" Krontij said suspiciously. "'The shuttle down to the surface,'" Tachi answered. "'Don't worry, boy, it's no attempt to fob you.'" "We shall see. We meet, Fidnij. Pransa. One hour and a half-He: keyed off with no further word. "Holy Tao, Pransa! What's happened to him?" "Do I have to answer that? You know what he's been through." "Pos. But how could he ever have seen Tachi as the enemy?" "Both you and I found friends in the galaxy, Whitey. Evidently he hasn't. You weren't enslaved by Shieda." "I know. Things can be a lot worse than I had 'em. Uh. I'd better call Khorundah." While he contacted their captain, Pransa considered an aspect that had just occurred to her. I've been wondering about my changed feelings toward Krontij. What does he feel for me? Expect from me? Does he want me to return to Aglaya with him? Will he throw the Law in my face? Or will he see me as one of Them? 194 Krontij held the stopper on Tachi while Rambler's captain closed and locked the door of his spacer's cargo hold on his two crewmembers and the slaver captain. Krontij motioned Tachi to one side, stepped nearer to the door and spoke through it. "Almost time, Shieda. I will see what I will do, what Pransa and I will do. Then I will return. Whatever my course, I will settle with you." No sound came in reply. Krontij turned back to Tachi and motioned him onward with the stopper. As Tachi walked ahead of his captor he spoke over his shoulder. "I've played straight with you, son. So have your friends. You've no call to mistrust or threaten us." The voice might have come out of a mausoleum. "You are a Galactic. Your kind has enslaved and tortured Aglayans. I would not turn my back on you. I would not wish you cool winds were you bound for Sunmother herself.'" "I have never been a slaver, Krontij. I had an Aglayan mate, for Tao's sake! He and I are friends'." "What have you done to oppose slavery, Tachi? When did you help a slave escape? When did you spend your money to buy and save one? Has your cargo never included parts that went into a slaver spacer? Food that fed a slaver belly? Products of slaving companies? Crystals from Resh? "How are you who stand by not guilty of aiding slavery, Captain Tachi?" "Lad, there is nothing I can do." "Who then?" "I can't fight the whole Galaxy!" The voice behind him said, flatly. "I can." "You can get killed, is what you can do! Krontij, I have lived at peace with the universe. I have accepted the Way-" "Was it such a hard way to accept? I too have lived at peace, till it was stolen from me. Since then I have seen nothing that anyone should accept." Tachi sighed. Ah, you poor, poor lad! "We shall see who I can



trust, Captain Tachi. Pransa will go with me, if they let her. If they have not destroyed her will. I intend no harm to any of those we go to see. I have no 195 desire to harm you. I just dare not trust anybody! We shall see." "And if you don't like what you see?" Relentlessly, with a chilling flatness, the voice behind Tachi said, "This stopper is set on Three, Tachi." Tachi gave it up at last. Not because he saw no chance of getting through to the young Aglayan, although that was certainly true. The fact was that Krontij was getting through to him. Tao keep me on the Way, I have the horrible feeling the lad's right! "We have to talk before you go, Whitey." Willie stood in Whitey's cabin, facing him with something on her face he had never seen before. Concern? Neg; that he knew. What then? She didn't often call him Whitey. "It could wait till after the meeting, Willie. I'm not going to be hurt, you know." "Negatory, jacko. I don't know! It sounds like you're dealing with a half-frag adolescent who's armed and exhausted from ferrying hostages across maybe half the galaxy. Shieda's involved, maybe his crew, in some way we don't know. That's not why, though. Why is because of how things might be changed after. I've been thinking to myself-" (she gave him a little half-grin to let him know the stupidity was deliberate) "-about you and me, and you and Pransa. I think maybe what's been between us was as most as it could be. I think it's probably best, you giving me up for her." "Giving you up? Willie, I've-" "You've had plenty of other women before, all over the Galaxy. I know, Flashdoll. And I didn't mind them. I know they were just a soar in the hay, back-seat-of-the-floater stuff. I also know Pransa isn't. This isn't just some spur-of-the-cuff affair, even if you think it is. I don't believe you do, though." "I-don't know what I think, Willie. Why do you think it's best for me to be with her?" She looked directly into his eyes, with a little smile. "Because I think you're an Aglayan, first, last, and foremost." "Tao, Willie, if you knew how I've agonized over that 196 with Pransa!" He ran a hand over his short-cropped sunlight hair and his face showed his anguish. "I do, you stupid grat! Don't you think we talk? That's the point. You haven't done any agonizing with me." He took her upper arms in his hands. "Willie-in all likelihood I'll have to give her up to Krontij. They are Promised. The Law . . . oh, I don't know, Pransa and I have already broken the Law! I'm more confused than ever." "I know. I know, Flash." "Do you know what I felt when Krontij said he would trust no Galactics? Pride! A surge of adrenaline! Why? Aglayan kinship of spirit? Or a vague hope that Krontij is no longer the peace-loving boy Pransa loved?" "That's no vague hope, from what you said." Whitey compressed his lips. "Willie, I have to go." "I know. I'll see you again, after. It just might not be the same. Take this with you then." She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him, lightly. He felt the kiss try to linger, become more definite. Like two magnets of the same polarity forced together, they could not hold despite their touching. Willie wouldn't let them, quite. It was one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do. "Careful, Flashdoll." "I will be." He turned, stopped in the doorway. He smiled fondly. "Love your outfit, Wildorado." Willie looked down at herself. She wore the crazily-checked/striped affair she had worn at Hari's. The kilts and the other plaides. She looked back up at him and smiled, blinking. "Pos. Nice colors, huh?" Whitey redshifted. Willie stepped through the sitter into her own cabin. She took her belt, holster, and stopper from their stasis hanger and fastened them incongruously about her waist above the bright-hued kilts. I have to go now, too, Flashdoll. Captain's orders. See you sooner than you think, I hope not! 21 Not easy to achieve freedom without chaos. -Anais Nin The loss of enemies does not compensate for the loss of friends. -A. Lincoln Krontij and Tachi stood waiting in a corner of upper level cargo bay 47. Tachi forward and slightly to one side, crates to both sides of them, a clear field of view in all directions. Pransa, Whitey, and Khorundah came into view from one of those directions. He's chosen his ground well, Whitey mused. He's acting carefully, not fraggy at all. No way to get behind him. Stay on the Way, Tachi. Follow our lead. He looks so hard! Pransa thought. And so tired. That's not my Krontij. My Promised! Aglii, I feel . . . nothing. Pity,

maybe. What has he been through? "Hello, Tachi. Are you well?" Whitey said. "Fine, Mate. Careful now. Let's all just talk peaceably." "Firm. Cool winds, Krontij." "You are Fidnij/Whitey. I have nothing to say to you or your Galactic captain. Unless you want to return home with us, proving you are still worthy of Aglaya. Pransa, come to me! We can return. I have a ship." "It is stolen," the white-haired woman said. "I was stolen!" "Krontij, no! Not this way. Krontij, I can return whenever 197 198 I wish. I have done so and left again! I am free, don't you understand? We can be free!" Krontij stared. "Fine, you are free. Then come to me." "I don't know if I want that, Krontij." "Pransa, we are Promised!" "The Law has been broken. I have broken it, I admit that. But ... I know things I never knew before. I feel things . . . Krontij, I need your understanding. I am confused, as you must be. It is not the same as it was. I-" Krontij's pale eyes blazed. "I am not confused, Pransa! If you are it is because of these . . . aliens! They have poisoned your thoughts. They have drugged you-they must have. I know what it can be like." "Young man," Khorundah said. "No one has been drugged or controlled. Khorundah has been to Aglaya with your friends. She has tried to help them find you, and your sister Janja." "My sister! Did you think Pransa could help you find her? Or that I could? Janja has wealth, I hear. A great love of you Galactics! Doubtless you hoped to take that from her. And then you could enslave us all as well." "Khorundah intended nothing of the sort. Khorundah is Janja's friend, and intended only to help her brother, to repay a debt." "Firm, Krontij," Pransa said. "She's telling the truth." Pransa looked to Whitey for further confirmation. He remained strangely silent and expressionless. She chermmed his doubt. No. More than that. Disbelief. He doesn't believe Khorundah! Krontij ignored her, turning again to Whitey. "And you, Fidnij/Whitey, former Aglayan. Are you a victim of this monster too, this demon? Or have you helped to poison my Promised's mind against me? Perhaps you are the more to blame. Perhaps it is with you that she has broken our Law. Is that it, Pransa? If you will not come with me it doesn't matter what more I do. I have broken their law already. Far worse to break ours! Perhaps I should punish this changeling right now ..." "Neg, wait, now, wait!" That voice came from behind the crates to Khorundah's 199 right and rear. Everyone turned to stare save Khorundah. Her lips set in a tight line and her eyes narrowed. Krontij's stopper moved toward the sound of the interruption. Achmet stepped from behind the crates, lowered stopper in hand. He wore baggy coveralls, pine green. "Now just stay docked, just don't do anything," he told Krontij. "I don't mean you any harm and you're wrong about Whitey and just strap it till I can talk." His voice and hands alike shook. Pransa chermmed him. Sunmother, he's terrified. But there is courage there. And . . . resolve. "You mean no harm!" Krontij shouted. "With weapon in hand you mean no harm?" "I'm not here to use this on anyone. It's just captain's orders, see. Khorundah had me follow her and stay outta sight, just in case." Krontij tossed back his long hair, the color of white gold. Pransa chermmed . . . chaos. Her mind leaped back from the tangled emotions inside her Promised's mind. "You, green Galactic," Krontij said to Khorundah. "You sought to betray me." "Neg, now wait, strap irt!" Achmy ordered. "She didn't try to betray you. I was here just in case." He took a deep breath, started to turn his gaze toward Khorundah, flinched, never finished the move. Then he spoke. "But she did try to betray somebody and she's fobbing you all now. She, uh, I knew it all along, see, but she-well, I let her scare me into being quiet. But nobody's gonna try V kill my friend while I stand by like a mute." Achmet swallowed hard. "She's right about Janja. She wanted to find her, and she sure owes her some kinda debt. I heard one of those longcalls, Whitey. She hates Janja! I don't know why. But she was out to get her, straight. "Whitey was being fobbied for the whole jump, Krontij. They all were, except me. I was too much of a slinker to say anything." Whether Krontij heard that last directed at him would have been hard to say. His upper lip had begun twisting, working, upon hearing the accusation against Khorundah. He stared at her with danger in his eyes. He tore his gaze from her and directed it at Pransa. 200 "Pransa?" She

chermed Achmy. She nodded. "Pos. Yes, Krontij," she went on in Aglayis. "He's telling the truth." An angry snarl came from Krontij's twisted mouth. He stepped suddenly out from behind Tachi and snapped his stopper out at arm's length toward Khorundah, then toward Whitey, then back toward Khorundah. Khorundah took a reflexive step backward, her hand jerking for her own holstered stopper. There was no way she could draw it before Krontij beamed. The normally-drifting Achmy was this time decisive. He squeezed the grip before his stopper had reached level. For an instant the beam touched Tachi's foot. Tachi had barely snapped rigid when it was off him and on Krontij. The Aglayan froze in the One beam, stopper stiff before him, unactivated. Khorundah did not stop her arm's movement. Rage showed on her own face as her hand seemed to grasp air in the vicinity of her stopper, then reached up from her side, holding something. She swung the something toward Achmy. "Achmy, plasma gun! Flash, eat the floor!" Willie broke from cover of the crates on the opposite side of the group from Achmy. She swung her stopper back and forth, seeking an opening through the barrier formed by Pransa and Whitey. Whitey reacted. He dived forward without even looking to appraise the situation. He had heard Willie's command. That was enough. Willie's stopper beamed over him at Khorundah. At where Khorundah had been. As Whitey fell, Khorundah seemed to flicker eerily, then . . . vanish. Willie's near-invisible stopper beam warmed the crates against the far wall. Khorundah appeared, crouching, two meters forward of where she had been. In her hand she held a leveled plasma gun, ribbon cable snaking in toward her waist and-disappearing. Ending in thin air. She fired. Her target was clear, over the prostrate Whitey, past the shrinking Pransa. The plasma beam took Willie in the lower abdomen. She felt the agony of heat and rupture as internal organs boiled and dissolved, followed by the numb- 201 ness of shock. Her gaudy wrap-around kilts came apart and what was left of blood and tissue flooded out. She went sideways to the floor and lay moaning and retching blood. Whitey kicked as hard as he could. His legs were Aglayan and he could kick very hard and fast indeed. His boot slammed into Khorundah's ankle and she lost her balance. Her form began to flicker as she fell-but she hit the floor solidly after Achmy swung his stopper barrel backhand into the base of her skull. She lay still. The plasma gun bounced on the floor and lay there, ribbon still vanishing into nothingness near her waist. Krontij, released from Achmy's stopper beam, dropped to the floor, weak and shaking. Tachi ran to join Pransa at the side of the dying Willie. Whitey had scrambled to his feet to fall on the unconscious Khorundah in a frenzy. Achmy pulled him off. He fought in Achmy's grasp, nearly breaking it. "Whitey-jacko, neg! Willie-" Whitey's face cleared. He ceased struggling and turned to look at Willie. Achmet released him and he moved to her side. Achmy turned to Khorundah. He reached for the fallen plasma beamer. What the vug . . .? He lifted it, ran his hand down the ribbon cable. He felt it continue past the point where it vanished, where his hand vanished as it followed the snaking cable. He felt its power-pak at the other end, groped further, found some sort of dial. He turned it. The still-holstered stopper at Khorundah's side winked out. The power-pak and the rest of the cable came into view. Musla! Mini-holoproj! Angrily he ripped the cable from its power-pak and flung the gun high over the nearby crates. Whitey held Willie's hand as she tried to focus her gaze on his face. Her head rested on the floor between Pransa's comforting hands. Whitey looked down at the incomprehensible ruin of what had been Willie's insides. He couldn't believe he was seeing it. Nobody, Tachi thought, can be hurt that badly and still be alive! 202 "Fla-" Willie began, and choked. Blood ran from the side of her mouth. "Flash." "Here, Willie." "You-snow-topped iceberg, can't you even shed a tear for a-crewmate?" "I cry, Willie. I cry." "Inside, huh? You-Glyans, all inside, everything inside. Pos. I know you do." She squeezed his hand, or thought she did. He barely felt it. "Be as good to her as you have been." She got her eyes in focus, looked into his. "I love you, Flashdoll." A boot appeared in the corner of Whitey's vision. He turned foggily, looked up, froze in shock. Krontij stood over Willie, stopper pointed down. Whitey dropped her

hand and leaped clumsily up. Pransa and Tachi fell reflexively back in surprise and confusion. The stopper beamed even as Whitey threw his arms around Krontij's midsection and shoved against it with his full weight. The torn mass that had been Willie shimmered and vanished. Whitey fell on the downed Krontij, raving, screaming, punching. Pransa rushed to him, pulled at his arm. "Whitey, no! She was dying, Whitey. He meant to be merciful, Whitey! He was helping her. Whitey, I charmed his sympathy. Stop! Fidnij! Stop!" The voice calling his name in Aglayis registered. He slowed, stopped, breathing heavily. He stumbled off the unconscious Krontij and fell to his knees again on the floor, shaking his head. Fidnij of Aglaya, Whitey of the spaceways, dropped his head into his hands and wept. Tachi covered Krontij with his own fallen stopper, then dialed it safely to One and tucked it in his belt. He saw that Whitey's fists had been effective. Krontij lay still. Achmy joined them. "Uh, people . . . oh, jacko, I know but-we made a lotta noise and Barbro Sec is gonna come and we gotta-oh, Prophet, that plasma gun! If we get nipped on Barbro with that thing, even the power-pak . . ." He turned to Khorundah. Khorundah had disappeared. "Musla, Captain, she's gone!" 203 "That vanishing act she pulled, you saw that?" Tachi said. "Tao, she's done it again!" Footsteps and voices rang from the other end of the bay. "BTA, people," Achmy said. "We gotta shape up and make nice. Whitey, please, jacko . . ." "Fidnij," Pransa said softly. "Fidnij, your Self. Reach your Self and hold it, hold it tightly. We must show Them nothing." It was nearly second nature of Aglayan females. For males it was harder. But Fidnij had help; Pransa held him, reached out to him, thought him strong. Somewhere down inside Whitey found Fidnij2 and held him, brought him out, gained control over the emotion he had never before suffered in his life. He calmed himself-just as two uniformed representatives of Barbro Transfer Authority came running up. "What's the disturbance here? Why's this man on the floor?" The BTA man indicated Krontij. "Leftenant," Tachi said quietly, "this man abducted me and threatened me with bodily harm. These others are my friends." "A Gyan, huh? Plaining aliens'll do-hey! These two are Glyans, too!" Whitey stiffened. Pransa pressed his arm tightly. He remained outwardly impassive. "As I said, these people are my friends," Tachi repeated. "Pos, well, we'll sort this all out back at headquarters and see. For all we know they could be escaped criminals." "It will be no problem for me to verify their identities and status." Tao forgive me another lie! Pransa will be a . . . problem. "But before we waste time doing that, I think I should tell you that I have the notorious slaver Shieda imprisoned in the hold of my ship.'" The paunchy policer blinked. "Holy sunuvavug. The one the INS says is wanted on Resh?" "The same. I, uh . . . I think that this young man would be willing to testify against him-in exchange for consideration in his own case. Should Barbro wish to extradite Shieda to Resh." "Barbro's got no extradition treaty with Resh," the leftenant said. 204 "Hold it, Obtrugo," the other policer said. "We may not have a treaty, but Barbro's never been too happy about flainers like that Shieda slug. I don't think they'd put up too much resistance to sending 'im back to Resh if Resh wants 'im." He lowered his voice. "I see bars in this, Leftenant Obtrugo, if you get my meaning." Obtrugo did. He considered, nodded. "This, uh, abductor," he said. "What's he got to do with Shieder?" "He was abducted himself, by Shieda," Tachi said. "Off Aglaya. And later off Crystal." "Y'mean this is the Aglayan slave Shieder took off Crystal?" "He was a slave on Crystal. There are no slaves on Barbro. And no-extradition, I believe? No fugitive slave treaty." "That's firm." Obtrugo was nodding, considering again. "All right. All right, let's go see what you've got in your hold, Captain . . .?" "Tachi. Nagzhong Tachi, merchant spaceship Rambler." "Captain Dotchey. Let's go see this fierce bad slaver." Obtrugo turned to his sergeant. "Criminalichi, call Medsec and have them send someone for this Gyan." "Possir!" The younger man doubled-timed to a comm-terminal on the wall. He made the call, returned. The group waited uncomfortably until two Medseccers appeared, bearing a gravpallet for the now semi-conscious Krontij. Bearing stoppers, also. They were medics; they were

also Security. "All right, then," Obtrugo said as Krontij was borne off. "The rest of you in front of us, please, till we untangle this." 22 Laws are like cobwebs, which may catch small flies, but let wasps and hornets break through. -Swift, A Critical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind\* Our true nationality is mankind. -H.G. Wells, The Outline of History "I've never seen anything like it, Captain Tachi," Spacefarer Second Chundar said. He and Spacefarer Second Seminonya stood outside the broken door to Rambler's cargo hold. Facing them were their captain, their Meccan former crewmate Achmet, two Aglayans, and two very unhappy-looking Barbro Transfer Authority officers. "But how the vug did he just walk out?" Tachi said incredulously. "Like I said, you woonta believed it. Just after you all left, y'know, he starts foolin' with his hair," "His hair?" "Pos, one o' those long burok ringlets o' his. And he pulls a piece out. I mean a strand. Well it looked like a strand o' hair, only a little thicker, y'know. Well then he proceeds t' take a little button outta his sash. He attaches it t' this hair-thing, see, an' it stiffens-" "Stiffens." \*Ancient attribution considered doubtful; may actually be plagiarism from one Solon, another Homeworld writer (q.v.) -Universal Edutapes 205 206 "Pos, stands straight out. Same as protekstasis in a miss, I guess. Turns out it's a cable!" "Unipolymer plasteel, probably," Tachi said. "The button's a mini-powerpak, Zeeth!" Chundar nodded enthusiastically. "Pos, that's it. And with little rough things all over it. Then he turns on the power and this thing starts to vibrate." "Back and forth!" Seminonya said. "Like a saw, a vibrosaw.'" "Where'd you ever see one o' those?" Chundar asked him. "That husthouse on Ghanj, remember? The time I got stuck in the-" "Would you please . . .?" Tachi said. "Pos, sir. Sorry," Seminonya said. "Well, I guess that's what it was, a vibesaw, 'cause he just cut right into the door and sheared off the palmlock. Dropped it right onto the floor!" Tachi's brow furrowed. "That shouldn't have gotten him out. I've got that extra safety hatch, the manual one, on the outside." He turned to Lieutenant Obtrugo. "Got robbed once, in port. Once too often." Obtrugo nodded. "Good thing you're so careful," he said flatly. Tachi harrumphed and turned back to his crewmember. "What then, Seminonya?" "Well then he tries to push the door open and can't. So he starts in to doin' those exercises of his, like he done a lotta the time we were locked up together. Stretchin' his legs and stampin' on the floor." "Then," Chundar broke in, "he goes back t' the door, nudges it with 'is shoulder a coupla times, like he's testin' it, see? Then he rares back, hollers like a grat on a burner, and slams into the door with 'is shoulder, bam\ Then again, an' again. An'-the latch pops." "Never seen the like," Seminonya said, shaking his head in awe. "But that's not all," Chundar went on. "Then he sticks a hand through the hole where the lock was, grabs the edge and pulls. Holdin' 'is wrist with 'is other hand." "You mean he-" Tachi began. 207 "Firm, sir! Bent the door open! Peeled it, like a vacseal crate cover." "That big boy is strong, Cap'n! He ain't all fat, believe it!" Seminonya said. "I got the image," Tachi said drily. "We were pretty glad t' get out, if I might say so," Chundar said. Tachi shook his head. "And you just let him walk off." "He had that thing, sir, that vibesaw! Pointed it at us so we couldn't get near 'im. And, uh, we, uh, didn't really want to, Cap'n, if you get me. Told us t' be glad we're free and don't follow him." Tachi sighed. "Did he say anything about where he might be going?" Lieutenant Obtrugo asked. "His ship, one would assume," Tachi said. "Not in port, Captain," Whitey informed him. "T' answer your question, officer," Chundar went on, "he only muttered to 'imself as he went off. Nothing about where he was headed." "You remember what he said?" Obtrugo said. "Pos. He'd been bitching about it all the time we've been locked up together. He said, 'Oh, for some decent food!' " "He can't get far without his ship," Obtrugo said. He turned to his partner. "Come on. Let's go alert Security. You people will all hold yourselves available for questioning in this matter. Rambler will be held in port till we have the facts, Captain Tachi." "Shieda's gone," Whitey said to Pransa as he joined her in her quarters-Willie's quarters-on Rambler. "Gone. How, without a spacer?" "He

stole a ship." "With a vibrosaw?" "Neg. He used the saw to steal a stopper, the stopper to make a hostage of some Company factor, the hostage to steal a ship. He put off the factor and all but two crew and broke away without alerting Docking." "He got clean away?" Pransa's eyes widened in disbelief. "Well, not yet. I'm told they sent patrollers after him." 208 Whitey frowned. "I wouldn't really care, to tell you the truth, except that if he were in custody it might go easier on Krontij.'" Pransa looked away from her lover, stared at nothing. "What will happen to him?" she asked softly. "There will be a hearing, a trial. Shieda would help, but Barbro isn't too fond of slaving so I'm not very worried that they'll send Krontij back to GriReshCo. Shieda they probably would. He knew that or he wouldn't have taken such measures to get away." Whitey sighed. "Abduction, though-that's another matter." Pransa faced him. "We'll do what we can to help him." "Firm. Tachi's not vindictive. And there are extenuating circumstances. But I don't think Krontij should be running around free. That's why Tachi charged him. Of course there is nothing in the law that will allow him to return to Aglaya." "That's always what it comes down to, isn't it?" Her face flushed in anger. "Once you're taken, a slave, there's no way for life ever to be right for you again. No way home." "I wouldn't want it," the man called Whitey said. "Like Disco, I've seen too much. You wouldn't, either, would you?" She shook her head amid a flurry of sunny hair. "Neg. I don't. But some do. Krontij did. Does. There should be a way, Whitey. Someone should make a way. Or help those people even if there is no way." "Pos. You're right, Pransa. There should be." "You sound surprised." "At myself," he said. "That I've come to believe that." "Who do you believe should do all this helping?" Whitey smiled at her as if with a shared secret, unspoken. "We're going to have to talk about that, aren't we?" he said. "Pos. I'm glad to hear you feel that way." "We have to stay here for now to help Krontij. After that perhaps there's someone else we should find and talk to about it." "Janja." "Firm." They went silent. Whitey looked around the cabin, at the locker that contained the gaudy apparel of their friend and 209 crewmate, at the bed of Whitey's former lover. Pransa looked uncomfortable. At length he spoke. "Pransa, what she said at the end-" "About me, pos ..." "I intend that. I want to stay by you. Don't ask me now what I mean by that, please. I don't mean as your Promised. But I do mean something more than a casual . . ." He groped for a word. "Galactic?" she suggested. "All right. More than a casual Galactic relationship." Her smile was tiny. "Something less than Aglayan but more than Galactic? All right. I can live with that for now." "Don't be bitter. Say just something between the two." "I'm not bitter, Findij. Say a mixture. Maybe just a change, for us Aglayans. Maybe that's the way for Aglayan to remain Aglayan. We can't stay the same forever. You and I are already a mixture." Again that tiny smile just touched her lips. "Perhaps by evolving in response to Galactic civilization we can still retain what makes us unique. So our ways won't completely disappear. Be absorbed by Galactic ways." "The Galaxy as catalyst rather than displacement," he said. "Pos. Maybe, even, our 'alien' ways-and others-will have an effect on Galactic . . . civilization." He smiled wryly. "Meanwhile we try to help Aglayans, eh?" "As you said, we'll talk. Meanwhile what do we do?" "I go back on Rambler. With Achmy, by the way." Pransa's eyes widened. "Tachi has softened! How much has he softened, Whitey?" "Oh, enough to allow his mate to bring a ... friend onboard, I think. Particularly now that Rambler's other owner, whoever it is, has kindly supplied you with a legal Galactic identity." She laughed. "This friend is not going to be baggage, or just hust. Nor is she going to be free. She will pay her way, but she demands a high price for her services. You are going to help pay both debts by teaching her the rudiments of spacefaring. This 'hust' aspires to be crew, Mate Whitey!" "Tachi already-uh, I said something to him about that 210 possibility. Who knows, maybe we can even get him to call you by name." "He never could with Willie, could he?" "Neg. Well, it's just his way." The mention of Willie put them both in a somber mood again. For a long time neither spoke. Then Whitey, looking at nothing directly

ahead of him, said: "Cool winds to thee, Willie. You were worthy of the space ways." "May your soul be forever at one with Sunmother," Pransa said. "You were worthy of-Aglaya." Again both were quiet, till the moment passed. It did. There was no need for protracted mourning. They had said the words. They would carry the feelings. They were Aglayan. "I wonder, though . . ." Pransa began. "What?" "Why I never gained the chonceling. Do you suppose Galactic ways could somehow affect us to such an extent? Already?" "Neg. No. It's a mystery to me. Something else must be at work that we don't know about." "Something wrong with me?" she asked. "Or . . .?" "No, Pransa! There is nothing wrong with either of us. It is something we will have to think out. Look for reasons." "Yes. And, while we're at it . . ." "Yes?" His eyebrows went up. "It can do no harm to keep making attempts to gain it. It would be so useful, after all . . ." He smiled as she moved toward him. Epilog The report of my death was an exaggeration. -S.L. Clemens Somewhere along the spaceways a darker-than-olive-skinned woman with purple hair and milky eyes smiled as she sat before the control console of her spaceship's SIPACUM. "Ah, Jinni," she said. "Ah, lovely Sapphire," She laughed aloud. "Lovely Safiredancer! They have undone us only temporarily. He was not the route to our Aglayan betrayer. She will yet come within our purview." And how could Khorundah be unhappy, free and whole, with her ship free and whole? Even that distressing news cannot throw her out of orbit. Indeed, who knows? It might even hold promise of future amusement! She laughed again, head thrown back, as she thought of the INS broadcast she had just picked up. The one telling of the pursuit of the slaver Shieda from Barbro Transfer Station by two Barbro patrol vessels. Of how they hemmed in his stolen ship and put it in tractor beams. Of how they threatened to blow him off the spaceways if he dared open fire, hostages or no hostages. Of how he pulled on them a variation of the maneuver (so well known to Khorundah!) he had invented, the tractor-beam maneuver. Of how he sent one patroller careening into the other before they knew what was happening. Of how he escaped clean from the two crippled policer ships. Of how they watched helplessly as he converted "his" ship and its occupants to a mass of tachyons (his person a rather greater mass than most) and slipped neatly into subspace. 211 212 "Would that you had been forced to jam-cram, fat sister-and brother-sliced" Khorundah said aloud. "What sex would you be? Would you stay so fat that one would be unable to distinguish? The expression on your face alone would have been worth worlds to Khorundah. Khorundah, who alone in all the Gal-the universes-might have been able to see it! She could have come to visit you, perhaps!" It might have been even more amusing than the look on the face of Khorundah's Beautiful Spacefarer when he discovers he never had any poison capsule implanted in his so-worthy bottom! She laughed a third time, almost manically. A weird light played around the outline of her form. Almost she seemed to flicker. Then on impulse she reached forward and banged a button on SIPACUM. Spacer Sapphire and its captain transformed into tachyons and popped into City ... the Dark Universe, of which they were a part.

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