

Slaving was not legal everywhere, but TransGalactic Watch understood the facts of economic life. As long as the raids were not on member planets or too blatant, TGW looked the other way. Piracy was different. Since property was more difficult to obtain than people (who reproduced automatically) TGW took a dim view of any activity that hindered the legitimate acquisition of wealth. Trade was sacred. Life was cheap. 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 BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK The poem Scarlet Hills copyright (c) 1982 by Ann Morris; used by permission of the author. SPACEWAYS #12: STAR SLAVER A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with the author PRINTING HISTORY Berkley edition / July 1983 All rights reserved. Copyright (c) 1983 by John Cleve. Cover illustration by Ken Barr. This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission. For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York, 10016. ISBN: 0-425-06074-8 A BERKLEY BOOK " TM 757,375 The name "BERKLEY" and the stylized "B" with design are trademarks belonging to Berkley Publishing Corporation. PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA to Kelly P. Cast, M.D. A: AH planets are not shown. B: Map is not to scale, because of the vast distances between stars. SCARLET HILLS Alas, fair ones, my time has come. I must depart your lovely home- Seek the bounds of this galaxy To find what lies beyond. (chorus) Scarlet hills and amber skies, Gentlebeings with loving eyes; All these I leave to search for a dream That will cure the wand'rer in me. You say it must be glamorous For those who travel out through space. You know not the dark, endless night Nor the solitude we face. (reprise chorus) I know not of my journey's end Nor the time nor toll it will have me spend. But I must see what I've never seen And know what I've never known. Scarlet hills and amber skies, Gentlebeings with loving eyes; All these I leave to search for a dream That will cure the wand'rer in me. -Ann Morris One: ZO 1 Three things are necessary for the effecting of Witchcraft: the devil, a witch, and the Divine permission. -Part 1, Question 12, Malleus Maleficarum: Kramer & Sprenger Candila was bathing in the river just below Daresslam. Her home took its name from the calm water just below the big bend in the river, which permitted krill netters to dock with some relief from swift current. The port was usually sheltered from the storms that ripped up from the gulf. A half-klom upstream from the cloud of shrieking birds that hovered, diving for the offal from krill stomping, brush had been cleared to leave a thirty-meter stretch of bank where some geological accident had left more sand than mud. Here the Daresslamites bathed. Men monopolized the tiny beach on Mondays, Wednesdays and, most important for ritualistic reasons, on Fridays. Women, being (by God's Grace!) of a lesser nature and more unclean, had the run of the beach on the other four days. This generosity also allowed them time to do the laundry. Candila Suhay was three and a half (fourteen and a half-ess) and living proof of an ancient proverb to the effect that it is extremely difficult for any girl to be ugly at fifteen. Lucky Candila was also possessed of what was once known as "good bones." 3 4 Unbound hair was as unthinkable as an uncovered head for any girl of her advanced years but here, at the village's combined bath and laundry, she was permitted total nakedness. Because she was here helping her mother wash clothes. And because (after some stormy midnight sessions at homes a century ago) the elders had reconvened at the djeme and had acceded to their wives' demands. Now the guard who sat in the bamboo and rattan tower four days each week to warn off intruders (and oversee the bathers) was a woman. She was also too old for more vigorous work. Too, like most Daresslamites, she had a skinful of boils from their high-iodine diet of krill. Like any Daresslamite of advanced years, the old woman also suffered from trachoma. Candila's mother, at twenty-eight, was constantly laving bleary eyes with the river that had already flushed a continent larger than most inhabited planets. Village

boys knew the old watchwoman was practically blind. Village girls knew it too. They were torn between modesty and the need to capture a husband. Waist deep in the water and with unbound hair like a shawl over the upper half of her burgeoning pubescence, Candila was a lost cause to the village voyeurs. Understandably, they persisted anyway. Enduring shrew bites and the myriad humming, buzzing, stinging bloodsuckers that infested the canebrake around the beach. Someday maybe Candila would forget . . . straighten up for a moment . . . stretch. With God's Grace anything was possible. And Candila's skin, by village standards, was flawless. She bore a few minor scars but only one major disfigurement. Still, the cavity in the middle of her forehead had been turned into an asset: the scar made a convenient carrier for the topaz gleam of her caste mark. The watchwoman was near-blind and the gawkers came so close that it was impossible to pretend they were not there. Mothers flung gobs of mud at the tower where the old woman dozed. She dutifully whanged away at her gong. Disappointed, the village voyeurs scuttled back 5 through the brush. All were very busy when the imam came sniffing through their customary workplaces. With no reason to delay or display, girls finished the laundry in record time. Mother and daughter pairs came from the water and stood for a moment sunning themselves dry before donning all-encompassing chadors and balancing bundles of clean clothes on their heads for the stroll home. Most of the voyeurs had departed. Not all. Candila's mother was feeling her years. They finished last. Standing on the bank, waiting to dry off, Candila was abruptly frightened out of her fourteen-and-a-half-year-old wits. Her mother, tired, bleary-eyed and worn, lay prone. Umm's nostrils were nearly in the water. It had happened with such suddenness! Umm was twitching and jerking. Candila knew the signs. She did not like her father but abruptly she knew that like him or not, from now on all the housework would be hers. Before she had time to shriek her despair, a stranger appeared. He was not a villager. Not in those skintight black clothes! Anyway, his eyes were wrong and his skin too golden-yellow. He was putting something she had never seen before back into a sheath at his belt. "She'll be all right in a few minutes," he said. His voice was not villager either. Candila heard a mechanical quality, as if the words were coming from one of those talking machines the elders reminisced about. Abruptly she realized that she was naked, displaying her frontal all to this apparition. She grabbed at her chador, pulling its tentlike shape over her head as she knelt by her mother. Then abruptly Candila lay twitching too. When she awoke in a pod, Candila Suhay knew another language. She also knew that she was no longer in Daresslam. Captain Katushiro, who was barely taller than Candila, initiated her with brutal swiftness. Sobbing and bleeding, 6 the girl knew that even if she could go back, there was no longer any place for her along the river. In spite of this knowledge, that was exactly where she went. "Wear these," Katushiro said. Candila considered the filmy hareem pants and twin prass cups. Since she wore nothing at the moment, she put them on. The cabin was all mirrors. She saw herself from in front, from behind, from the sides, and from above. Looking down, Candila even saw herself from the bottom up. Externally, she could see no change. Nevertheless she was intensely aware of the unique treasure that had been stolen from her. Only gradually did she become aware of something else. Her scars were gone! She felt . . . "It's not just the lighter gravity." The slaver was not reading her thoughts. He had been through this sort of awakening many times. "Your skin has been cleaned up and you'll never have another of those sores," Katushiro went on. "You've been wormed and immunized and will live three times as long as anyone else in your village. You'll look much as you do now until the last year or two of your life." Candila didn't believe it. But . . . could mirrors lie? The mirrors of Daresslam had been hand-polished bits of metal and she had never seen herself with this clarity before. Studying her slim body in near-transparent hareem pants and twin prass cups, she knew she could outshine any village belle. "That strange feeling is known as good health. You've probably never experienced it before." Candila had not. Nor had she ever been allowed to speak with strange men. This man had just raped her but still she

did not know what to say. What was she supposed to feel? "You will learn to thank me," the short man with the narrow eyes said. "But at the moment there's work to do." 7 Candila Suhay learned to fly a lander. She learned how to get about without gravity and how to become comfortable with the augmented visual angles and waldos of a spacesuit. Between lessons Katushiro relieved his frustrations between her shapely thighs. Candila still did not know what to think about it all. Nothing in village life had prepared her for this. Village life had, though, prepared her to submit to a dominant male. She endured his huffing and grunting and realized that this was what women married for-what they raised children and husbands and washed and cooked for. To Candila it did not seem a sufficient reward. Not that it didn't feel nice sometimes . . . when Katushiro was not too tired and could take his time. But how many years would she have to put up with it? ' 'You've been wormed and immunized and will live three times as long as anyone else in your village. You'll look much as you do now until the last year or two of your life." Candila sighed and struggled to master the foot controls of the jetboat that Katushiro insisted she learn to handle. The inflatable craft lay low in the water, virtually invisible. It was capable of some twenty kloms at best, barely able to stem the current of the river. The engine was totally silent and it left no wake. "You go sleep in crew's quarters tonight," he said. Candila had not really enjoyed Kat's nightly rapings. Still, she was puzzled. Accelerated learning had taught her some things but she could still not understand a ship. Nor could she understand men. "So he's found a new one?" The girl in crew's quarters was taller than Candila. She wore the usual skintight spacefarer's shipboard clothes, designed for ease in zero G and not to snag while diving down some passageway. Ships did not normally operate under zero G but it was often turned off to facilitate handling heavy cargo. Also, some gravity generators broke down so often that crew, fed up with nightmarish awakenings, left them turned off. 8 Crew wore this skintight style out of habit-and because Suravomaru had an ugly habit of losing G unexpectedly. This crewmember's suit was grass-green. Candila stared. She had seen the girl before. Including Jarps-who had frightened her half to death the first time she saw one-Suravomaru carried about twenty crew. Candila had no way of knowing this was unusual. "I've been on board at least a month," she said. "I know," the taller girl said. "I'm your predecessor. My name's Onesima," Candila did not understand. "Now you're some other new girl's predecessor." "Oh!" Onesima looked sympathetic. "Don't take it so hard." Candila considered this for a moment. "Half the time it wasn't hard at all," she said. "I think he just does it out of habit." "Captain Kat does nothing out of habit," Onesima said. "He considers it his duty to educate girls but his real love is cosmetic surgery." Candila stared. "Who do you think fixed your skin and your nose? Who wormed you and immunized you?" "Katushiro did that?" "The Earl of Scheib raids planets no other slaver would waste fuel on. He's the only one that knows how to touch up damaged bodies fast and cheap." "But I-" "'Was the village beauty and all that crap? Compared to most places in the universe, the mouth of that thirty-thousand-klom open sewer you Alachins call a river is not exactly a breeding ground for pulchritude." Onesima laughed. "Don't take it personal, kid. I come from a pretty lousy planet too. But at least he didn't sell us." "Is . . . is that what he does?" Onesima gave her an unbelieving look. "What do you suppose happens to slaves?" They showered and fixed each other's hair and Candila slept unraped for her first time in a month. Toward morning she awakened to find Onesima in her bunk. The tall 9 girl kissed her. Candila liked it. Unlike Captain Kat, Onesima was neither male nor abrupt. She discovered that Onesima knew how to do all kinds of nice things. "Time to go to work!" Katushiro's voice came tinny over the comm. Yawning and stretching luxuriously, Candila forced herself back into reality. Onesima grinned. "Ain't love grand?" "Today you go out for the first time," Katushiro said when they had snatched a hasty breakfast of vaguely food-tasting ship's stores. From tubes. Candila felt wary. Though she had been coached in her new role, she had

never actually worked at it. Despairingly, she wondered: could she do it? "Onesima will go with you this first time." Onesima raised her eyebrows. "Sometimes you can do even better in pairs," the captain said. It was the same river. Candila stared, never having seen it from above. Onesima explained that, although they had been away while she was in a pod learning the ways of space, Suravomam was now back orbiting Candila's native Alachi. "We'll land about ten thousand kloms upstream from where you grew up," the taller girl said. The silent-running inflatable jetboat was now surrounded by reeds bound into highpeaked bow and stern. It looked very like those rafts the Alachins of this middle stretch of river used to fish wherever the stream widened and the current permitted. Wearing filmy hareem pants and prass-cup bras, Candila and Onesima drifted downriver. Candila guided the raft away from obstructions with gentle nudges of the foot controls and tried not to giggle when Onesima tickled her in unexpected places. "There!" Around the bend four men in a reed raft were pulling themselves slowly across the river as they baited a trot line. 10 Onesima stood. Bright yellow sun glinted off prass breast cups and diaphanous pants could not conceal the shape of buttock and thigh. "Oh sirs!" she wailed. "We have no oars." "Save us!" Candila added. Men accustomed to long skirts and high collars stared unbelieving at this miraculous bounty. Half-naked women and no man to protect them. Actually begging them to come! They immediately lost interest in fishing. Rowing furiously, they headed for the girls. Candila guided the camouflaged jetboat unobtrusively, never actually going against the current. That would arouse suspicion in the most sex-starved of river men. While Onesima held her most appealing and helpless pose, stretching out arms in desperate invitation to the sweating, panting men, Candila kept the reed boat just a meter beyond grabbing distance. Two kloms downstream three more fishermen joined in the chase. When eleven exhausted men still panted after them, Onesima actuated the comm. "Ready?" "Another klom," Captain Kat's voice came in her ear. "Past those old women on the shore." Safely out of sight, Candila guided the jetboat toward a bank. The girls stepped ashore and walked slowly up toward the edge of the forest. Gasping and panting men threw down oars and paddles to lope after them, eyes so lust-inflamed that they never even saw the businesslike little man with a stopper set on Number Two. "You girls can have some lunch now if you want," Katushiro said. "But you'd better get drifting soon. I'll be back in fifty minutes for the next load." Nothing had happened aboard Suravomaru for the first thousand kloms downriver. After the first day Onesima had gone back to her more risky work in the narrow tributary streams. There it took more skill and occasionally a stopper to escape the zeal of her passion-fogged saviors. Candila worked the main stream. 11 Since she had never been taught to think, thought did not come easily to her. She was nearly fifteen now. For the first time in her life she was not constantly busy. It was a troubling period. She gave little import to Captain Katushiro's abrupt sexual initiation and his equally abrupt abandonment of her for the next apprentice. Even less, once she got to know how nicely she and Onesima could get on without any men. Floating downstream, she tried to decipher what was happening around her. Am I becoming more used to this upstream dialect? Or is the language coming closer to Daresslamite? Meanwhile, she did her job. The reed boat and its scantily clad lorelei drifted lazily toward the sea. "You'll end up in your own village if you're not careful," Onesima had joked. That was impossible. Candila was still at least nine thousand kloms upstream unless Katushiro was faking maps- and he had no reason to do that. She had bagged nearly fifty head of ... cargo. Working the backwaters and tributaries, Onesima was doing better. Suravomaru's holds were about full. Your own people. You're helping to sell them. It sounded just like Umm's voice. Candila looked around, startled. She was alone on the river. Was her mother still alive? Or had Captain Kat lied? Candila knew about stoppers now. She decided that he had not lied, that Umm was probably still alive. Her mother would be alone now, with no one to help her with the laundry. Umm was going blind. So was her father. Her father's predicament affected Candila less. "Of course they're

your own people," Onesima said. Not really my own people-not yet. "Why doesn't Katushiro use me on some other planet?" "It doesn't work." "Why?" Onesima shrugged. "Only reason I have any luck here is that I look like an upriver native-a slightly taller and lighter-skinned version of you. Ever notice that it's not really the nakedness that 12 drives them insane? What always flushes them out of the cattails is to start combing your hair." Candila still did not understand. "Men and fish are extremely conservative animals," Onesima explained. "Strange, offplanet bait scares them away." Though Candila had not been educated and would have been unable to explain it in formal terms, she saw now that something was wrong with Daresslam. Another time or another culture might have laid it all onto male chauvinism and talk of pigs-whatever they were. That contributed, of course. But Daresslam's problems stemmed mainly from an unhealthy climate at the end of a thirty-thousand-klom open sewer. Daresslamites were darker than their upriver neighbors. Their noses were more tipped. Daresslamites professed an orthodox belief in the indivisibility of God, but still retained caste marks. They ate krill and other foods the upriver people considered unclean. They drank water into which upstream neighbors had . . . Your own people. Candila could not feel guilt. Perhaps one in a hundred out of all that . . . cargo would have rescued her and let it end there. Providing he was a eunuch. She remembered the village boys and how she and the other girls had known they were being spied on at the bathing place. Some had endured it. Others had gloried in it. With gulf storms that decimated the krill fleet each year, with two and a half girls for every eligible boy, no one could blame some poor girl for trying. Now the men were all chasing Candila and they were all getting their just deserts. She experimented with total nakedness one day and discovered that her luck was better with the hareem pants and prass nosecones for her warheads. "Always hold something back," Katushiro had advised. The captain was an expert in his field. 13 "Don't come up to the ship tonight." "Why?" "Don't ask," Onesima said. "Just comm Kat that you're onto a big haul. Tell him you'll be busy and for him to zero in on your transponder in the morning." Undercurrents had flowed on Suravomaru since before Candila's capture. Used to the petty grudges and feuding of Daresslam, she had accepted the tension and the smiles that turned into fingerflips when a back was turned. It was just a normal part of life. Candila had been happy under Onesima's wing. She preferred not to know about what was going on among the rest of crew. She accepted the wiser girl's advice. The river was dangerous for reed rafts in daylight. No sane Alachin ventured on it after dark. Candila slept at anchor in midstream under a plass canopy and waited for a signal from the ship. Morning came and she dismantled the plass canopy before some early-rising native could become suspicious. Then she remembered that she was still close to yesterday's fishing. She was traveling downriver barely ahead of a growing grounds well of legend. She and her associates had done their best to harvest captives only out of sight, and to make sure no one escaped. In spite of all their efforts, the story grew: the river was possessed of a lorelei on a raft who combed long raven tresses-a Circe who lured men into some swinish oblivion whence none returned to the everyday annoyance of family. She had to keep ahead of the stories. By the dawn's huge yellow light Candila sped a hundred klorns downstream, adding the jetboat's speed to the current. She waited for Katushiro's morning instructions to home onto the inflatable's transponder target. Nothing happened. Nothing would ever again happen to Captain Katushiro. Nor to Onesima, nor any of their newcaught flesh, nor any of those whose plans for mutiny had ended in a brief flash in the sky on the other side of the planet. 14 After a week Candila stopped trying to contact Sura-vomaru. She was more than halfway down the river. Somewhere ahead lay Daresslam. For the first time in her life Candila was alone. Nobody was raping her. Nobody was comforting her. Nobody was telling her what to do. The inflatable held months' worth of emergency rations, She didn't know how long the power pack would last, but who cared? The river was taking her home. She gave fishermen a wide berth and kept the far side of the stream from any village. She wished she'd

had the foresight to bring along some clothes. No, that would have tipped off Katushiro. She folded away her hareem finery. Floating downriver was no different from doing laundry. As long as she kept low and held the camouflaged raft beyond the grasp of would-be saviors, nothing would happen. Daresslam came as a surprise. Candila had been napping and the excited voices had awakened her an instant before the proximity radar would have given its silent alarm. Peering through the reeds that camouflaged her inflatable, Candila gasped. One of the men who rowed frantically in an effort to capture the drifting raft was her father! She almost rose to greet him. Then she saw the hardness of his aging face. Abruptly she realized that Daresslam might have been a mistake. Still, it would be nice to see Umm again, if only long enough to assure the old woman that her daughter was still alive. Candila activated the silent jet and kept beyond reach until the men gave up and resigned themselves to the long upstream row back home. After dark, she scooted upriver and turned into a tule-infested rigolet off the main channel. She noted the alignment of three huge trees in the swamp, maneuvering her craft until it was centered on an imaginary intersection. Then she pulled the plug and sank it. 15 "You!" Umm stood naked, waist deep in the bathing place, her hands filled with Candila's father's dirty thawb. The thirtyish crone splashed water into her milky eyes and stared. "Apparently the dead eat well," she said at last. "I'm not dead, Mother," Candila said. "You ought to be." "I'm sorry." "Now what am I to do?" Umm wailed. "It was bad enough to lose a daughter." "I'm back." "You can't come back." Candila had really known it all along. Women were surplus in this man-scarce village. Katushiro had destroyed the negotiable capital between her thighs. Who would want a stranger's rape-leavings? "But it wasn't my fault," Candila protested. "What did I do wrong?" "Girl, for the love of God, get some decent clothes on!" "I don't have any." Umm sighed. "He'll not have you," she warned. Candila knew that he was her father. "I can help everyone," she said. "I know things now that can make life easier in Daresslam. I can help drive away the slavers so that what happened to me will never happen again to anyone." "It should happen to me," Umm snapped. "How did you get rid of all those scars? What have you done to make your hair shine like that?" Abruptly Candila realized that Umm was probably younger than lovely, lissome Onesima who had been her friend and protector-and no girl at all! "It's a long story," she began. "Most stories are," Umm said briskly. "Do you think anyone's going to believe it?" "Why shouldn't they?" Umm sighed. This time tears washed her bleary eyes. "Daughter," she said, "it makes no difference what story you tell. You're damaged goods." 16 "What am I supposed to do?" "Do you suppose widows commit suttee from love of their dead husbands?" Candila did not know. She had witnessed funerals and had often puzzled at the way a woman whose life had been one constant bicker would shriek an outraged farewell and throw herself alive atop the ghat where a husband's corpse-fat hissed and smoked. "With your man gone," Umm explained, "you can starve or you can whore." "Is there no other way?" Umm gazed at her daughter with bleary bleakness. "Maybe your new friends taught you another way. Maybe you'll change Daresslam. Maybe krill will fly." "From my sight! I have no daughter!" Umm and Candila exchanged a look at her father's words. Candila slipped into the black tentlike folds of her chador and went into what served Daresslam as streets. There was no point in making things worse for her mother. She considered the tiny stock of plunder that had been kicked aside in Katushiro's disarming of his captives. Upriver knives had always drawn a good price in metal-short Daresslam. She went to the suq. An hour later Candila had a secure room at the inn. Secure because she still had some bits and snippets of security devices from Suravomaru that could impart a holy terror into anyone who came prying at her door. She did, too. Within hours the rumor spread that a strange sorceress had come to town. It startled Candila that no one recognized her after half a year. She had grown some. Matured a little. It was her skin mostly, she decided. She had the only unblemished skin in this town. She began to wonder why she had come here. Mainly, she decided, because I had nowhere else to

go. But I can save them! I sold a lot of strangers up the river but I can warn my own people-keep it from happening to them. 17 The length of time that a small room at an inn could be endured depended on temperament and on climate. Candila's was wrong and so was sweltering Daresslam's. She donned her chador and was forced onto the streets. Nobody recognized her. Everyone saw her. Women stared openly at the sorceress. Inside the all-encompassing chador Candila's cosmetic improvements over her already high local standard of beauty were totally invisible. For this reason she became of an even more unholy and unattainable loveliness than if she had flaunted her flawless body in Katushiro's work clothes- and been immediately stoned to death. Women stared, wished, dreamed, and made furtive gestures lest their dreams come true. Umm and her father lived on the far edge of town and kept their silence. Men averted their eyes. They all knew that trachoma and blindness came from looking on unholy things. But why did unholy things have to be so compellingly eyecatching? Candila informed herself of the day. It was one of the women's days. She had once been comfortable in this climate. Now . . . the black chador was suffocating her. She went to the bathing spot. Immediately every workplace in Daresslam was deserted. The imam left his study. The muahh'din abandoned his bamboo-framed minaret. "Sorceress!" a woman accused. Standing naked and kneedeep, Candila turned. "With God's permission such things may be possible," she said quietly. "But if God permits me to exist, perhaps He allows me to take the sores from every skin in the village and visit them all onto someone who displeases me." Gasps rose as the women suddenly understood how this stranger had achieved an unflawed body. Those whose eyes burned as they endured creeping, stinging things in the bushes and tules around the bathing place did not hear Candila's voice, but that evening the whole village knew. 18 "' Sorceress!" His spittle landed on the skirt of her chador. Candila opened the latticework veil and blasted him speechless with the smooth perfection of her face. Emitting a faint mocking smile, she continued down Daresslam's principal street toward the djeme. When she was half a block away, the muahh'din began screeching an exorcism from his tower. At the entrance to the mosque the imam stood stern on the steps. "What do you here?" he demanded. "'If I am unholy or unclean God will strike me dead for entering this holy place," Candila said. The imam's jaw dropped. No woman had ever stood up to him this way. Before he could improvise a reply, Candila had brushed him aside and was within the sacred precincts. With that all-encompassing chador the old man could not even see whether she had any shoes for obligatory removal. He hurried in after her. "Tell that screeching old buzzard up in the tower to call everyone to the djeme." Candila was peremptory. "By everyone I mean women too." "You cannot-" "God strike me dead if I defile this place!" Candila's in-mouth bullhorn made her clearly audible out in the street. The imam rocked in the holy thunder of her voice. "And God blind any of His servants who presumes to interfere with my holy work!" Clear across town Umm heard the voice. She muttered and made the proper gesture. Candila faced the old man down. Thought she did, anyhow. Then, with surprising speed from a man of his age, the imam was driving a knife into her face. "God will stay my hand if you are truly holy," he gasped. The pain was so sudden, so sharp that Candila could not even gasp. She felt viscous fluid running down her cheek. Then, as the old man's knife sought her other eye Candila again became the little girl she had once been. She was not holy. 19 She was blind! "Since you are not dakhil," the old man muttered, "perhaps that smooth, firm body can now be used for God's intended purpose." He began peeling off her chador. 2 For 'tis the sport to have the engineer Hoist with his own petar. -Christopher M. Bacon Having been raped before, Candila found no novelty in the experience. She was amazed only by the old man's insatiable joy in inflicting pain. In days to come she learned to feel and smell the difference between the musty imam and the equally gamy and equally lusty muahh'din who occasionally brought a cold dish of krill and mashed taboub, giving her time to eat only after a fresh round of rape. Flies infested her eye sockets. Candila consoled herself with the realization that,

even with Katushiro's worming and other preventives, she would not long endure this pestilent cell. They put some kind of cloth bag over her head and at first Candila thought the two old satyrs were repelled by the sight of her eyeless face. Then she sensed that others--an endless flow of men--were raping the sorceress. She slept fitfully. Once she thought she heard Umm's voice pleading. No; women were not allowed so close to the djeme. It had to be a dream. On another night came the dream in which God's thunder descended on Daresslam, killing the righteous and the wicked with His usual lack of favoritism. Candila had not been able to form a clear idea of the 20 21 interior layout of the djeme. She knew, though, that her improvised cell lay quite close to the imam's private quarters because she could hear him moving about. At times she caught a mumble of perfunctory prayer. Just after the dream of God's thunder she awoke to the sound of a strange voice. It was tinny and mechanical. Abruptly she knew it came from a translahelm. From a nearly worn-out translahelm. She struggled to listen but the voice was not loud enough. She caught meaningless mumbles, punctuated with an occasional "nova" and a strident "eleven days." Abruptly Candila recalled a story Onesima had told her about one long-disappeared pirate's ploy. Just as abruptly, Candila knew this was her only chance. Gathering breath, she hyperventilated--the best she could do since her in-mouth bullhorn had stopped functioning. "Walking cargoman!" Candila screamed in Galactic, from which Daresslamite had drifted so far that she knew the imam would not understand the term. "Slaver! Kill me quickly ere I expose your profession!" The coincidence was considerable that the man talking with the imam was indeed a slaver--and further that he was an Alachin whose career had begun the same way hers had. But for right now . . . For Zo, the worst part of it was not knowing. He was almost certain that Artisune Muzuni & Co. had been destroyed. If they had not. . . and then he knew something else was still onboard the damaged Murtadd. Something that lay quiescent but far from dead. Zo, along with Red and the other Jarp, had defected--with such a thoroughness that he had not a nebula of an idea where they were until Red's SIPACUM location--runs had ID'd Alachi. Zo's home planet! With a leaky ship, with TGO on his tail--and very possibly a testicle-hungry Muzuni too . . . Zo had no time for niceties. 22 "Either we repair this ship or we get another one," Red had said. Either took money. Neither the human nor the Jarps had ever learned any other way of making money. "Downriver," Zo decided. "Where life's so grubby we'll be doing the brutes a kindness." Down as far as possible from home. "Can you handle it alone?" Red asked. "One look at you and it'd be weeks before they came straggling back out of the swamp. Besides, you've both got to stop that crack in the hull from growing." Riding the shuttle down, he traced the outlines of delta and gulf in the infrared of night-side. Zo had never heard of the village but it was in a protected spot and it lay nearly on the equator . . . Mine managers on Bleak were always complaining. Worming about in the constant 52°* and kneehigh headroom of a twisty piggotsite vein, underground help just didn't last. If he could just round up a few warm bodies used to heat! Conditions were rough but if Muzuni or TGO caught up with him, Zo might face worse. He put down in a swamp just above town. The shuttle's weight stabilized until it floated with the cargo bay door just about right for loading from whatever the locals might have in the way of a skiff. The only problem was that Daresslam, or whatever this festering mound of krill shell was called, had descended even deeper into isolation and savagery than Zo was capable of guessing. "Nova?" the imam asked. "The word is strange. What does it mean?" Zo struggled for just the right amount of patience and urgency. "Stars are not constant. Stars are born, they live, and they die just as everything else. The final dying gasp of your sun will burn Alachi clean of all life--boil its ocean away and dry the river." * About 120° Fahrenheit, Old Style. 23 The imam shrugged. "So the Prophet has always told us. If that be God's will then we must accept it." "It is not God's will that all die," Zo said. "The wise and the just will live. They must first help prepare for the final day by helping me rescue the young." "Why?" "God does not punish those

who have not sinned. God is just." "Fine lot you know about God," the imam snorted. "Probably you come from the same place as that-" He stopped himself in time. "Your sun will go nova," Zo snapped, "in exactly eleven days. Everyone on this planet will die. I can only save a few." The conversation was interrupted by a scream. When a voice in Galactic threatened to expose him, Zo drew his stopper. (The imam did not see-or chose not to notice-the weapon.) "Who's that?" "Nothing that concerns you." Zo fixed him with a stare. "When anyone in a place like this speaks that language it concerns me." The imam frowned. He was reaching to whang on a gong when Zo gave up on persuasion and used his stopper. The imam began a little shuffling dance and the gong-stick fell from his numbed hands. "Lead the way," Zo snapped. "Or I'll give you a preview of God's lightning." The stench was beyond belief. "Gas gangrene," Zo muttered. "Get that flaying bag off her head." "Kill me!" Candila shrieked. "Now why should I do a thing like that?" Turning to the imam Zo added, "Just stand quietly out of the way for a while." Lest the old man dream up some mischief, Zo Number Twoed him. There was a satisfying thump as the old man's head hit the floor. 24 "Hold still a moment, girl." Zo wrestled to tear the first aid kit from his belt. "Shiva's Scrotum, who did this to you? How'd you end up marooned here?" Holding his breath against the stench, he dusted maggoty eye sockets with sarcophage. Candila writhed and he was abruptly aware of how long since he had seen a woman. Even in this condition her smoothskinned nude body was still . . . "Feel better?" he asked. "My light is out forever." "Oh, don't take it so hard. Somebody's always going blind working around that effing double-P Drive. Once we get to a decent planet you can pick up a new set of optics." Candila had not been onboard Suravomaru long enough to realize that only death was permanent. "Look on the bright side," Zo added. "As long as you're getting new ones you can have any color eyes you want-oh, Booda's bollocks, what a stink!" "You are a slaver, aren't you?" "Well I-" the question caught him by surprise. "For a pair of eyes I'll deliver the whole town." Candila hesitated. "I'd help you anyway." "How can you manage it? I'm-" Zo glanced at the paralyzed imam. The old man would not understand Galactic anyway. "You hate these people?" "I pray you have some special hell in mind for every man who raped me-starting with that old-" Zo fumbled through his first aid pack and found what, at first glance, seemed a pair of welder's goggles. They contained considerably more circuitry than appeared. "Try these for now," he suggested as he fitted them over her empty eye sockets. "I can see!" "Of course you can. How'd you ever end up down here without a spare pair of eyes?" Candila told him. "So how are we going to get our . . . cargo?" he at last asked. 25 "Revive that priapic hypocrite," She pointed at the motionless imam. "Can you keep him alive but give him a hurt he'll remember?" Zo considered. "Looks old. I wonder if he'd enjoy a few coronary symptoms." The old man did not. "Now," Candila told the old bastard briskly, "you will live forever. You will suffer that same excruciating pain once a minute." "Please, gracious lady. Kill me." His voice quavered just . . . beautifully. "You shall receive the same kindness you showed me. And you'll do exactly as you're told." "Yes, my lady!" The imam was slobbering with eagerness. "Business as usual," Candila said. "First you get the muahh'din in here for his nightly funfest. Afterward you can let the usual string of clients in-one at a time." Turning to Zo she added, "'Give him another twinge just to keep him honest." She thought a moment. "When there's time," she decided, "I think I'd like to bugger his holiness with a bottle brush." Zo grinned. Considering what she'd been through, this long-limbed girl was making a remarkable recovery. "Know anything about ship handling?" he asked. "Put me in a learning pod. I'll work at it." It became an assembly line process after he gave her one of his stoppers. As one stiff-sliced Daresslamite was blueshifting in the front door, Zo was redshifting the last via another entrance. He stacked Number-Twoed bodies on the roof of the djeme until he could bring the shuttle closer. "One hundred and three," he finally said. "No more?" "Those," Candila guessed, "are only the ones who got into the habit of using me regularly." "You sure?" She was not. He fiddled with his

translahelm. A moment later his 26 in-mouth bullhorn created a credible imitation of the muahh'din's screechy voice. "Hear me all the virile! Daresslamites, prove yourselves. Come work your will with the discredited sorceress." It was not yet the middle of the night when they finished bagging another twenty. "Looks like about the last of the sinners," Zo said. "Can you hold the fort while I go get the shuttle?" "With a stopper I'll do more than hold it," Candila promised. Zo was checking his bearings back to the half-sunken shuttle when they heard still another noisy arrival. This time some virile Daresslamite was having trouble with a wife who refused to stay home where she belonged. "If you go in there," she shrieked, "I'll tell everything. You'll have to kill me if you want to silence me!" "Speak not of killing, woman," the man's voice growled. Zo waited behind the door. Still naked, Candila lay on the pallet where she had spent her lonely blind durance. The man came in and she gasped. "Father! You too?" "Daughter." His voice was hoarse and Candila's borrowed eyes saw his tears. "This has gone too far. I have come to free you." As her father thrust the knife, Zo stopper-zapped him. He stared down at the seamed old man. "Is he really your father?" Umm burst into the room. "Candila! I kept trying but they would not let me see you. I have some poison." Abruptly she saw her husband prone on the floor. Umm spat. Zo gave Candila a questioning look. She shook her head. "I suppose he meant well. Don't take him." "Is this your mother?" Candila studied Umm's bleary, half blind eyes. "Mother . . . how old are you?" "Almost eight," the old woman said brokenly. 27 "Thirty . . . standard . . . years . . ." Zo muttered, stricken almost inaudible. Candila studied her rescuer. "It's been a good night, hasn't it?" He had gained some small experience in female logic. "If I can, I'll give what you're about to ask for." She nodded to the other woman. "Umm." "Your mother? Shiva's Scrotum, girl, I wouldn't take the poor old lady!" "Take her." "As . . . cargo?" "Clean her up. Worm her. Give her a 'normal' lifespan. Umm, would you like to be young and healthy-have an owner who'd treat you with kindness?" "I'd like to see krill fly too," Umm snapped. Zo grinned and Number Twoed her. "You drive a hard bargain, girl. Your mother's going to need a complete overhaul." He chuckled. "Which leaves only the imam. We can offload him on Bleak but even with every effort mine-slaves live only a couple of years. Don't you wish something better for your benefactor?" Candila did. She sat, stopper in hand, while Zo scooted back to the swamp and brought the shuttle into the courtyard of the djeme. The noise aroused every Daresslamite who had not been awakened by all the previous commotion. The more bold among them converged on the djeme but heeded Zo's bullhorned suggestion that they remain outside. It was dawn before he finished loading. Even with mechanical aids the job was exhausting. Finally, clad in skintight spacer-black, the wiry, raven-ringleted man faced the remainder of Daresslam. "It will profit you to remember this night," he said. "Over a hundred of you will not come home. Although I'm tempted also to take the traitor who sold them, I leave him for you. Try to keep him alive at least as long as you remember your loved ones." "Reverend sir," a timid voice inquired, "who sold our men to you?" 28 Zo pushed the just-reviving imam down the steps. Amid shocked silence, Zo retreated and barred the djeme door behind him. "Ready to redshift this cesspool?" Candila smiled. "Whenever you are." 3 Who loves not wisely but too well Will look on Helen's face in hell, But he whose love is thin and wise Will view John Knox in Paradise. -Dorothy Parker When he was young, Girdek Jaris cursed his luck at being born on such an out-of-the-way planet. Later he learned that even on Nevermind there were worse fates than being big frog in a small puddle. In midlife he discovered that the puddle could be expanded with as little effort as his girth. Both ends were achieved in the same fashion: by gobbling up everything in sight. Weight control was easy and cheap and was practiced by nearly everyone through the galaxy. Girdek Jaris did not bother. A little extra bulk, Jaris thought, gave a man substance. People got out of his way. Since his wife had always been healthy, many were surprised when the One True God saw fit to leave Factor Jaris her ample portion without the shrill inconvenience of her angular

person. Surprise ... but no conjecture when the Factor's lean, chill lady died suddenly and without issue. In Jaris's township there were some things a smallholder did not discuss or even think about-if he hoped to get a loan next spring. After a fortnight of dutiful mourning, Factor Jaris left young Ulf in charge of the Co-op. 29 30 (In the dear dead days of Jaris's daddy it had started out to be a real co-operative. But the organizer had suffered an accident. The co-operative effort had been plagued with unseasonable delays of shipments. Problems had arisen over credit and Daddy had come through with a loan and there had been another loan and now the Co-op's only function was to drive every competitor out, leaving Jaris the only grocery + feed store + seed + farm machinery + building materials + savings & loan within a radius of 700 kloms.) Jaris's ground-effect car scooted across endless hectares of azaafrunn, stirring the plants but not shaking loose a single gold-yellow pistil of the spice that was Nevermind's principal source of foreign exchange. In the privacy of their club rooms and annual board meetings, some Nevermind factors were cynical enough to admit that azaafrunn was not all that desirable. One scholar among them had remarked that were the prices reversed, the true classic delicacy of the forgotten Homeworld/Urth culture would have been peanut butter instead of caviar. Since Factor Jaris had tasted neither, he didn't care. Azaafrunn sold for only slightly less a gram than tetrazombase and, unlike the latter, azaafrunn was totally legal. Nevermind had a pretty good thing going. Factor Girdek Jaris had a very good thing going. Riding the car strictly as a lone passenger on a programmed vector toward the Sammak holding, he pondered the flaring yellow sun, the golden yellow fields under the cream-yellow sky, and the probability of something even more pleasant. And he smiled. Not yellow, this pleasantry upon which he mused with so much anticipation. Alianora Sammak was seventeen. Last fall her long, sheeny brown locks and smooth, olive skin and those marvelously indeed bemazingly long legs had created several cases of strabismus among elders who straggled to look at her without appearing to, without turning their heads. She was almost hazel-haired, which was striking and akin to blondness among the darker-skinned Neverminders- and nearly everyone else among the "Galactic race" that 31 populated most of the galaxy. The slim perfection of her 158 sems, which at first glance seemed mostly legs, had been sufficient to make Alianora queen of the azaafrunn festival-a yearly debauch that unfailingly left smallholders slightly deeper in hock to the Co-op's liquor store. Now the Factor was going to make her queen of something else. He had considered ingesting the necessary weight-control enzymes, but in the end decided against it. To halve his weight in a week might not be healthy. In any event, why bother when it would mean another visit to the tailor and more damned expense and delays? The civil and religious wedding ceremonies took place on different days and it was not deemed proper to consummate a marriage before dotting all the i's of every clause of the laws of The One True God and Humankind. To these two ceremonies Girdek Jaris added a third. Before climbing shortwindedly into the marriage bed he tore a mortgage in two and tossed the pieces into the godzoon-root fire that blazed at one end of the room. (In all fairness to the Factor, after experiencing a tongue that rose above, beyond, and around the call of daughter's duty, next morning Factor Jaris quietly shredded the real deed to her father's smallholding.) Girdek Jaris struck hard bargains but he wasn't out to screw anybody--except some damfi fool just asking for it. And Alianora, of course. She kept her bargain and kept her mouth shut except in bed and was marvelously decorative besides. Her husband, meanwhile, was permitted to get on with his grand designs He preferred to call it The Movement. Four years ago Jaris had proposed the concept to the Planetary Council of Azaafrunn Factors. He had not been surprised at their response but he had hardly expected such mouthfearning fury. "Mechanical pickers, for the True God's sake! Even if they worked, what could we do with our tenants?" "Azaafrunn is the most delicate crop in the Universe," another elder growled. "A good worker can pick fifteen 32 grams a day and then some of it's damaged. Where would you ever find a machine that knew which parts were ripe

and which had to wait another day or two?" Being younger and owning less land than the other factors, Girdek Jaris had quietly let it drop. Where would he ever find the machine? True God's teats and testicles! He had three mechanical pickers gathering dust under a plasstarp behind the drying floor. They had been there, secretly, ever since that offplanet trader had quietly delivered them. And now if only he dared unveil and use one of the machines . . . Jaris had known the real reason. The factors were a conservative lot and they had to consider the planetary economy as a whole. It was cheaper to finance farmers into debt bondage and keep them working than to put them all out of work and onto welfare-which was a dirty word never spoken on Nevermind. He could deduce another reason, too. In spite of the official ban on newsgatherers who tended to report on deplorable conditions for field laborers, Nevermind could not keep spacer captains locked in their ships. News got around. If it ever became known that azaafrunn could be picked economically and mechanically, the snob value would be gone. The price ratio might drop from caviar to peanut butter-whatever they were. Meanwhile Factor Jaris made sure his tentacles were deep in his 1400-klom spread. His daddy had started small. Girdek had started a little larger. Now he was going to expand. To meltdown with the tradition-bound factors! Nevermind might not be rich but it wasn't that hard to gelt off a 1.1-G planet. One season of mechanical picking would give Jaris enough surplus credit to buy a ship. Once Nevermind had that capability no offworlder would ever set foot planetside again. That reminded Jaris-he would have to shoot some stock footage of azaafrunn pickers stooping over the shin-high plants before they were all replaced by machines. (Why did they call it footage? He wasn't a philologist; Girdek Jaris was just a man on the move.) 33 Ulf Jort had been left to mind the Co-op the day Girdek Jaris scooted off across the azaafrunn fields to present his proposal-proposition to Harl Sammak. It was neither the first nor last time he had minded the Factor's business. Ulf knew how to read and how to punch accounts into a computer. He had decided early on that even if Life condemned him to Nevermind, there had to be something better than azaafrunn-picking. Ulf had a clean, open face and found time enough to take care of his appearance. He had known of Jaris's plans for the former queen of the azaafrunn festival. He didn't necessarily approve, but Ulf was in no position to protest. ^ Even if he had not been unpopular because of his job- his employer--what could he have offered Alianora . . . in the odd event that she'd have him? He tried to see the bright side of it. She would be nearby now. Not 200 kloms away on her ne'er-do-well father's holding. If he got a look at her once in a while-watched her wrinkle and sour, perhaps he could put things back into perspective again. "All set for that meeting?" Jaris asked from across the office. "Sure am, Factor," Ulf said. "Ought to be a good one." "How many do you expect?" Ulf hadn't the slightest idea. It was hard enough getting anybody to attend something everyone knew the Factor was behind. Ulf, however, spent his days handing out groceries, credit, and advice. "More'n last time," he promised. "How much'll you need?" "'Half.'" Ulf could have asked for a full barrel of godzoon beer but he had resolved never to steal from the Factor unless some really worthwhile opportunity presented itself. "I'll set out a few trenchers of pistrel." "Good thinking," the Factor said. "That way they won't get too honked-up." "You'll be there for the windup as usual?" 34 "Nope, son. Got other business tonight. Think you can handle it by yourself?" "Not as good as you, Factor, but I'll do my best." Ulf had assumed the Factor's "other business" would be between the endless legs of his new lady. The handsome youth was mildly surprised when he saw Jaris's ground-effect car go scooting off over the azaafrunn fields toward Twometer Mountain some forty kloms poleward. On flat-as-a-billiard-table Nevermind, the two-meter rise was enough to interfere with rain absorption. Therefore the "mountain" top, which would not grow azaafrunn or even godzoon vines, had become the Factor's private spaceport-or would be when he got a ship. Meanwhile it was just the site where an occasional dutyfree delivery glided in quietly on a cloudy night. Ulf considered the evening with distaste. He wasn't sure what the Factor was up to

but Ulf had been instructed that he, personally, was to have no thoughts of enlisting in this private army the Factor was raising. At times Ulf suspected that not even the Factor really knew what he was up to. Sometimes he spoke vaguely of "soldiers-of-fortune for the glorious cause of Freedom on Samanna." As if the Samannites were in any worse shape than the Neverminders! Other times-and invariably in public-the Factor tended to rant on about "the Movement, the Regeneration of Nevermind and the Recapture of our Planetary Place In The Sun." Though Ulf had never been offplanet he thought that Nevermind had quite enough sun already. What was he going to say to the rednecks tonight? Thinking how easily he could have been one of them himself, Ulf shuddered. "He's gone." Ulf whirled in the empty office to behold the former queen of the azaafrunn festival. She wore a peignoir of the lavender color that on Nevermind was called al hoceima. The garment didn't quite make it closed down the front. He fought his eyes, which wanted to stare at skin the sun had never seen. "Who's gone?" (Ulf knew damned well who was gone but he had 35 fantasized this scene so many times that now he knew it wasn't really happening.) I must be dreaming or something. Or there was some emergency in the big house. She wouldn't just invite him in. In the five weeks of her residence as the Factor's lady they had not exchanged a dozen words. Something wrong. A stuck window, maybe. I'll go fix it for her and then I'll get my cowardly ass back out here and never let her know that every time I look at her the sun changes color and the planet moves a little on its axis. . . . "What can I do for my lady Factor?" "Come on upstairs and we'll work something out." Her voice came straight from the throat and went straight to Ulf's crotch. He gripped the desk with both hands and managed not to fall off his stool. It couldn't be true! Nothing this good had ever happened to him in all the miserable nineteen years he had dwelt on this yellow-skyed planet. It was just wishful thinking. She'It just get me up there all swollen with expectation and then she'll just want somebody to play cards or reach something on the back shelf or ... "I uh-I-ai! I've got to handle the meeting," he explained, and O True God but it hurt! "They'll be over on the drying floor in another five minutes." "How long will it take?" Ulf calculated desperately. "At least an hour. Maybe two." Alianora shrugged. As she turned to leave the office the lavender peignoir obeyed the laws of motion, revealing another half klom of leg. It was the first time Ulf had ever seen a girl's leg above the knee. Was she wearing some funny patterned underwear or had he actually seen what he thought he saw? Gripping the desk with both fists, Ulf struggled to thrust out of his mind a vision of paradise and compose himself for the Movement meeting. Factor Girdek Jaris knew exactly what he planned with the Movement. And no matter which way it came out, the Factor was going to win. He had heard of TGO. Every- 36 body had heard about The Gray Organization. On the other hand, Girdek had outgrown childish beliefs about the soulstealers that lurked amid thickets of godzoon vine. I've created enough propaganda not to be sucked in by somebody else's, Jaris kept up with the news. Just because things were well in hand on Nevermind didn't mean that other parts of the universe were equally peaceful. A whole universe without war was impossible. Insurrections at least. He knew it. He suspected that TGO suppressed the news whenever a planetary shindy turned into a real war-and long before it became interplanetary. That was not the point of the Movement. Even though he was recruiting an army, Factor Jaris had no intention of starting a war, much less fighting in one started up by some other idiot. The Movement was simple once one understood the economics. The Factor was going to create a local shortage of labor. What slicker way than to enlist every young man and ship him off to-who the hell cared where they ended up? Just because Neverminders were fertile didn't mean every planet could replenish its own labor force. Slavers existed. He hadn't met any, but Jaris had put out the quiet word that he would enjoy talking business with anyone in the legendary Captain Jonuta's line. Once the Planetary Council of Azaafrunn Factors see their crops rotting they'll come around to mechanical pickers soon enough. That was Jaris's thinking. And that's when they would learn who was

the only man on Nevermind who had machines that could pick azaafrunn-and who was the only man who could furnish them all with machinery. So long as they were willing to pay the price. Jaris smiled. They would gnash their teeth for a while but once he had his ship they'd bless him for keeping outworlders offplanet so nobody could ever learn how cheap it was to harvest azaafrunn. Once all the inconvenient smallholders had been dispensed with. The Council 37 would bless him right up to the day when offworlder ships no longer called and anyone who wanted goods shipped in or out of Nevermind would deal with Factor Girdek Jaris. Let's see if they still call me a smallholder then! The meeting was a nightmare for Ulf. With his mind on automatic, he delivered a canned exhortation to the Resurrection of Nevermind, only half seeing his redneck listeners, his rather large chocolate eyes still full of what he thought he had seen at that oft-imagined place where two legs become one. ... He pulled himself back to reality and saw to it that the godzoon beer flowed in appropriate amounts. He handed out kapults and led his fellow Neverminders in a ragged manual-of-arms, then oversaw field stripping of the weapons. They were accurate to thirty meters and served to keep down the godzoon rats and other local pests. They were also scarce, expensive, and the only weapon ever rented- never sold-to a smallholder. In his innocence Ulf had once tried to fashion one. That was before he learned that the special synthe that gave that resilient boingg to the springs was a Controlled Substance and only licensed importers were allowed to handle it. Ulf knew that the opportunity to fondle a kapult was what drew the young men to these meetings. That and free godzoon beer, he mused, and saw that the overly thirsty got a handful of pistrel. He spoke of the need to aid the poor downtrodden Samannites in throwing off the Yoke Of The Oppressor (which reminded him of how two legs joined together to form a yoke and, True God, the pressure)! Gritting his teeth, Ulf handed out cards. Each had already been imprinted with a name and photograph. It made the members feel important. Most could recognize their names in print, at least. In the end the meeting was not a total disaster. Out of forty showups he got back six Xed and thumbprinted cards. Ulf saw that everyone had a final round of beer while he went around turning off lights and closing the dozen entries to the drying floor. 38 At last they were gone. He looked at his watch. What for? It did him no good to know what time it was. He didn't know when the Factor would be back. Ulf also knew instinctively that no matter how innocent the errand, if the Factor were to return unexpectedly and find him inside the great house (or inside the bedroom, he tried not to think) all his reading and computing would be for naught. I'd end my days picking azaafrunn or soldiering in the Factor's "army." If he didn't just kill me. Sighing, he secured the last door to the drying floor and went back to put the roster and the six Xed cards on the Factor's desk in the office that adjoined the great house. "So you finally got rid of them?" Ulf thought he was going to faint. All night he had been wishing, hoping, praying to the One True God even though the True God frowned on the sort of thing for which he prayed. The office was lit only by the tiny desk lamp. He turned and saw the shadow that had to be Alianora. It was too dark to know if she still wore that peignoir that gaped in all the most eye-enticing spots. "He's still gone," she said, from the throat. For how long? Ulf abruptly sensed a Manichaeian duality that had never before occurred to him. He was facing forbidden fruit. He was facing ruin. If the Factor even suspected . . .! Even stronger was the knowledge that he was going to do it. He was going to do whatever Alianora wanted him to do-whatever she let him do. True God, if he could just control himself long enough to ... He tried not to think lest the thought be father to a premature deed. "Shiva's Scrotum, didn't you bring any help-not even a loading robot?" The voice came metallic from spacesuit speakers mounted fore and aft for intelligibility and not for high fidelity. "I-uh-thought you'd have equipment," Jaris said. 39 A tootle-tweet from the second offworlder ... a thing, mostly bare and displaying unmistakable signs of bisexual-ity along with large, very round eyes and a luridly orange skin. "I have a loader," the human spacefarer snapped, his

voice made hollow by the suit-comm. "But only to get them off my lighter. How in Sheol do you expect to get them home?" "No problem," the Factor said. "Tomorrow I'll get some of my own people over here." "Don't count on it." "Why shouldn't I count on my own people?" "Don't count on these damned pickers being here when you get back." A bit of a scare shot through Jaris. "What's wrong?" "I felt a trace on me all the way down. You sure you greased the right people in Planetary Customs?" "I ... see," Jaris said, without enthusiasm. "Glad you do. Terms were C.O.D." "But!-" "Now." Jaris squinted into the darkness, trying to see past the spacesuit headlight. "I can't come up with the money until they're safe on my back lot." The spacefarer did not reply. Jaris abruptly felt an electric tingle and as his nerves rebelled he lurched into a crazy little shuffling dance. He wondered if the excitement could be giving him an attack like Daddy used to have in his last years. But it went on and on and it was starting to hurt and his muscles were straining and he struggled to complain. Then just as suddenly it stopped. "That's setting Number One," the spacefarer said. "'Number Two and you'll do ditto right in your pantaloons.'" "You-you-" "Used a stopper. Number Three and there'll be a puff of slightly greasy soot to remind your neighbors what happens to a welsher." "I can give you a check." "I can give you Number Two." The man's tone never 40 changed. Sounded as if he hadn't a milliliter of blood in him. Just ice. "Wait! I just remembered. I've got some money somewhere." Frantically, Girdek Jaris clawed at his purse. The string was there but his purse was gone. "True God!" he moaned. Greasy globules of fear oozed from every pore. He was feeling to learn whether his purse strings had broken or been cut-and then he was executing that crazy little shuffle again. The headlight on the spacesuit centered on him. "Shiva's Scrotum stuffed with dhal and curried!" the spacefarer intoned. "In the dark with a stopper aimed at you, don't ever grab at your belt. Now what happened to your money?" In the back of Jaris's mind was an image of himself as commander-in-chief of his "army." Thank the One True God they couldn't see him now! "Maybe in my car-" he began. The purse was not in his car. "We'll go to your place." The spacefarer was still suited up. He had explained to the Factor the last time down that Nevermind was too hot for his tastes; spacesuits were temp-controlled. Jaris suspected other reasons. He knew the man was a head taller. Probably thinner. Light or dark? The headlight atop his helmet made it impossible to guess what inhabited the indigo suit. Jaris began moving toward his car. "This way!" the spacefarer snapped. "Your shuttle! True God, sir, there's not room. You'll destroy my outbuildings and two hectares of azaafrunn." "Tough. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. Call it an honest mistake and I'm throwing in free delivery. Also, I'm not leaving my lighter here for the nippers to grab." Planetary Customs would confiscate his ground-effect car. Jaris wanted to protest but he didn't want to feel a stopper again. Planetary Council of Factors and their weapons policy be damned! He was going to have to get one of those things for himself. 41 The human spacefarer swung himself up the ladder and into the shuttle. Puffing and sweating, Jaris followed. Halfway up the ladder he felt the other thing, the unhuman, pushing. Not pushing! It was grabbing where the Factor didn't like to be grabbed. "Ever been raped by a Jarp?" the big-eyed thing asked. Ulf had never seen the master bedroom. He had heard about the fantastic extravagance of an open fireplace on a planet where fuel was scarce and only the roots of the godzoon vine lasted longer than the bare minimum to warm a wok. Now he saw it-and paid slight attention to fireplace or rugs or even the bed. Ulf had been waiting nineteen years for this. In the natural scheme of things it would not have happened until he had accumulated enough capital to marry, for Never-minders were conservative in these matters. Pantaloons were loose. Skirts were long. Engagements were longer. Longest of all was the wrath of fathers and brothers of any maiden cheated of her single negotiable item of capital. The One True God would never forgive him. . . . I'll never forgive himself if I throw away this single chance of a lifetime! Queen of the azaafrunn festival! That she was also the Factor's wife was

incidental. Alianora was smiling. "I suppose you've never done this before?" she asked. Ulf wanted to lie-brag about his vast experience. The trouble was, he couldn't speak. Nevermind had two seasons- hot and hotter, according to offworlders. Since this was the hotter period, there was no fire. A faint hidden light glowed golden somewhere over the huge bed and Ulf couldn't help wondering why anyone would want a mirror on the ceiling. She opened her arms. The loose belt surrendered and fell. Alianora's peignoir spread like a vampire's wings. Ulf stared transfixed, viewing marvels oft imagined but never seen. Holding his breath, he prayed for the dream to go on. Even when she drifted toward him and gently pulled his face into the valley between those full, firm 42 bulges he still didn't quite believe it. When she pressed gently downward and he felt himself kneeling, nuzzling down the warmth of a firm and so-female belly until his smoothshaven chin ground against crisp chestnut ringlets, Ulf became a believer. 4 You can't cheat an honest man. -Wm. Claude Dunkenfield Like everything else on a 1.1-G planet, the shuttle made much less noise coming down than it had going up. The damage, Jaris realized, would not happen now. That would come when the stubby monster lifted off. "I'll go round up a crew and offload," he promised. "Of course you will. But first there's a matter of payment. Remember?" Jaris saw no point in arguing. "Office," he said. "Probably broke my purse strings there." Quietly, the two humans and the Jarp walked around the drying floor toward the office adjunct to the great house. Jaris thought again about the stopper. He kept a kapult leaning against his desk but it took seconds to reload and both these obviously ruthless spacefarers wore stoppers. What am I thinking about? He'd be doing business with these men again. Either way the Movement went, there would be machine-pickers to offload and humans to be transported. "Trweet?" The Jarp was holding up the kapult. "Turn on your damned translator! I suppose it's a weapon of some kind. Factor, don't you have any cash on hand?" "Not here," Jaris had no intention of revealing a hidden 43 44 safe unless he had to. "Purse must be somewhere in the house. Where's that damned Ulf gotten off to? "Ulf?" A few moments later, as Factor Jaris entered the master bedroom followed by two spacefarers, he discovered where that damned Ulf had gotten off to. "Thrweet?" "Turn that damned-" Abruptly the human spacefarer stopped. They all heard the faint drumming sound. "Didn't think they'd get here quite that fast," the human growled. Staring at the mass of writhing lusting flesh atop his bed, Factor Jaris did not even hear the distant approach of the policer ship. Spinning with surprising swiftness for so fat a man, he snatched at the kapult that the Jarp still carried. "Thtw'lee!" The damned creature hung on. The brief tug-of-war ended with the boinnng of kapult springs releasing. This was immediately followed by a porcine squeal as Factor Jaris clutched at one full, firm buttock. Meanwhile, Ulf had leaped from the saddle in mid-gallop. Slicer wilting, he was making instantaneous evaluations of door versus window. Alianora stared between the upturned knees of her endless legs into great big round eyes and an amiably sweet but shockingly orange face. "Ever make it with a Jarp?" the creature asked. Alianora's scream temporarily drowned out the Factor's shrilling. Ulf bolted, opting for the door in his attempt to get past the Jarp and whatever was inside the human-sized spacesuit. "Hold this a minute," the Jarp said as he passed. Without thinking Ulf found himself halfway downstairs with a discharged kapult in his hands. Factor Jaris caught his breath and began that stuck-pig shrieking again. "Under the circumstances," the human said, "I suppose we'd best suspend payment till next trip." They found Ulf at the bottom of the stairs staring at the empty kapult he still held. 45 "Things are liable to get a little hot for you here, young man. Have you ever considered a career in space?" Until this instant Ulf had not. The vision was instantly glorious. "I learn quick," he said. "Let's go." "Tleetee'l!" Ulf dropped the useless kapult and led the way out the door. "'Just a minute!'" The trio turned. Alianora's long chestnut hair was not perfectly combed but she was in a longskirted traveling suit and boots, which transition from nakedness had taken some twenty seconds. "You're not all going off and leaving me holding the bag," she

snapped. The drone of the nipper patrol craft was turning into a roar. "Come on then," the spacesuit's speakers said. "We've just gotten in a real hurry!" Ulf's eyes widened at sight of the shuttle's outlines just beyond the drying floor. Under the circumstances he had not really thought how everyone had arrived. Departure, he suspected, was going to be flaming and noisy. This was a shuttle; could such a cargo lighter outrun a policer ship? "One moment if you please!" The slight figure in skintight black stepped from around a corner of the drying floor. "I'm afraid we're all in a bit of a rush," the human spacefarer began, and abruptly he began shuffling. "'Since you put it that way,'" he said when the seconds-long dance ended. The newcomer waved his stopper. "Back inside. I'd like to wind things up before whoever's making all that racket shows up." The four of them trooped dejectedly back upstairs into the master bedroom, the lean man with twin stoppers walking behind. Numbly, Ulf realized that Factor Jaris was still making that shrill racket. Bet it gets louder when he sees us again. Oh, what a night to have gone hunting-or anything! 46 "How do you load this?" The man with twin stoppers prodded the kapult with his foot. "Beats me," the spacefarer said. "Ter-l'eetl'l!" the Jarp added. "Do you want me to show you?" Ulf weighed the chances of a kapult against two stoppers. He had never seen a stopper but he had read about them. Moving very carefully, he began winding down springs until he could snap in a dart. "Butt first," the man in black said, holstering his right stopper and extending a hand. Ulf covered his sigh. He handed the fellow the loaded kapult and they went upstairs, Fat backside striped with blood trickles, Factor Jaris lay face down on the bed, sweating and moaning, twisting his neck to stare into the ceiling mirror, fumbling in reversed-motion with the barbed dart that adorned him like a banderilla. "You'll pay for this!" he moaned. "Please take a good look at me, Factor Jaris," the man in black said and, when the Factor straightened, the man in black twanged the second dart into his chest. Turning to Ulf, he said, "I presume you have some kind of communication that can reach that approaching patrol ship?" His voice was cool as if he had not just. . .just. . . Alianora gave her dying husband a brief glance. "There's a radio in the office," Ulf quavered, staring at his employer . . . his former employer. "And a tie-in here," Alianora added. She reached over the bed to hand the man in black a venerable communicator that was still connected to some thing with wires. * The man in black muttered something containing the word "neolithic" and spoke a series of numbers into the comm. "Yes?" a surprisingly loud voice rasped. "TGO. Here on an extraplanetary matter." After another brief bit of numerical gibberish, he added, "Matter of professional courtesy. We'd appreciate it if you'd back off." "Nevermind can't back off from smuggling." 47 From the change in voice Ulf abruptly knew that Nevermind Customs had already backed off. He swallowed hard. True God, what am I in the middle of? Nothing happened this fast on Nevermind! Until now, Ulf mentally corrected. "We'll take care of it," the man in black said. "TGO cooperates to preserve status quo and established government. If you've any lingering doubts punch in ar shut sun-" From his tone Ulf supposed they were numbers but he wasn't sure of the language. "Sinchung Sin," the man in black concluded. "Is that a name?" the human spacefarer asked in the sudden silence. "Mine," the slightly built man said. "Now . . ." He rubbed his hands, which shone strangely. (Glistened, Ulf thought.) "One must assume the Factor's death will not go long unnoticed. One notes from the thumbprints on enlistment cards down in that office that local policers probably rely heavily on fingerprints. They will find an abundance on the weapon with which the unfortunate Factor was slain. None of mine, of course." He held up a plassgloved hand. Ulf had not become the store manager by slow thinking. "What do you want?" he asked. Sinchung Sin regarded the young man steadily. Ulf abruptly realized that he had his baggy pantaloons on backward. "I'm sure a time will come when I'll have something for you to do," the slight, narrow-eyed man mused. "But not just at this moment." He turned to the human in the space-suit. "Why don't you take that flaining helmet off, Zo?" Ulf did not know whether it was the spacesuit or the man inside but suddenly something shrank. A moment later the

spacefarer's helmet was off. He was a dark man-almost handsome, with ringleted shoulder-length jet hair nipped into a ponytail so it wouldn't drift around into his eyes inside the helmet. And now Ulf saw that the human spacefarer was no taller than his own 180 sems* He was nearly a head shorter than the Jarp. * 180 centimeters. About five feet, eleven inches, Old Style. 48 "So?" Zo did not seem particularly happy. Without the spacesuit's fore and aft speakers his voice was more capable of expressing the normal human condition. "There are three mechanical azaafrunn pickers under a plasstarp about ten meters from your shuttle. Please make sure that your exhaust destroys them as you remove your still unloaded cargo from this planet." "That all?" Sinchung shrugged. "You've still a bit of a debt to work off with TGO." Zo frowned. "Look on the bright side of it," Sinchung Sin suggested. ' The Planetary Council of Azaafrunn Factors may erect a statue to the man who preserved the status quo on Nevermind. Today you're a hero." "But why Jaris?" Zo asked. "That fat fart wouldn't ever start a war." "Of course not. But what do you think the Junkers on this planet would have to do once he gave them a proletariat? They may be conservative but they're not stupid." Zo sighed. "So I'm a hero," he said. "I loaded enough fuel to get an empty shuttle back into orbit. If I can't find any more fuel here I'll have to offload everything and go back up for more. Could take hours. Meanwhile, how do I explain that to the local nippers?" He pointed at the dead Factor. Sinchung Sin drew a stopper and changed the setting before he aimed. Factor Girdek Jaris became a smudge of dust on the sheet and the bottom dropped out of Ulf's stomach. "You'll think of something," the man named Sin said. Alianora gasped. Dust hovered for an instant as a ghostly remnant of her fat husband, then settled. Ulf stared at the motes and was amazed at how little he felt. His only concern, he realized, was for himself. He had been the factor's dogsbody, doing Jaris's dirty work since he was fifteen. Never really wanted to be an accountant-storekeeper. It was just better than picking azaafrunn. Ulf had never really hated the Factor. Never loved him either. 49 Would it be as easy to witness somebody else's death-or cause it? "Well," Alianora said firmly, "True God knows what the laundress will think up once she decides Big Poppa isn't coming back. I suppose I'll be the one to wash that bloody sheet." Slowly, Zo seemed to be recovering from his sudden deflation when Sinchung Sin had asked him to remove the helmet: He gave last fall's azaafrunn festival queen a look composed of admiration and horror. "Where'd he stow his creds?" Ulf shook his head. "Wrong time of year. Even if I could find his hidey-hole there'd be nothing until after the harvest's sold." "How'd you pay your workers?" "Company store chits." Zo smiled. "Thrwee't?" The tall, orange-skinned Jarp held up a kapult. "Turn your damned translator on!" Zo snarled. "Hurts my seventh molar," the Jarp protested, while it fiddled with an adjustment. "Captain?" It held the six photo IDs that Ulf had gotten thumbprinted only hours ago with the twin aids of kapult drill and godzoon beer. Zo studied one. He turned to Ulf with the same wry grin of amused admiration he had given Alianora. "What in Shiva's Scrotum were you 'minders up to?" he demanded. "Recruiting an army to fight a war with theseT' He brandished a kapult. Ulf shrugged. "Surely you have some news on this benighted planet- galactic holo or some damned thing! You've seen what a hand-held stopper can do. What do you suppose a real military force with heavy weapons could do to the owner of this thumbprint?" "I only work here," Ulf explained. Used to work here. Zo turned to the TGO man. "Now where'd he-?" The slight, narrow-eyed man in black was gone. Ulf heard the diminishing whisper of something much quieter than the Factor's ground-effect car. He wondered what the 50 Factor had really been up to. Planetary regeneration . . . surely the Factors' Council and the nippers had something better than kapults. "Got any propaganda handouts?" Captain Zo asked. "Who could read them?" In the end, feeling rather silly, Ulf delivered one of the Factor's boilerplate recruiting speeches, complete with hoarseness, fake sighs for Nevermind's lost glory, and armwaving oaths of endless devotion to Our Planetary Place In The Sun. Alianora seemed bitterly amused as she glanced repeatedly at dust motes on a bloody sheet. The Jarp gripped its

single-testicled-scrotum-vulva-and-penis while its firm orange breasts jiggled. Captain Zo wiped tears from his eyes. Listening to himself and watching his audience, Ulf began to see how absurd the Factor's grand plans had been. But Girdek Jaris was not stupid. What had he been up to? The knock at the door startled all of them. The Jarp and Captain Zo gripped their stoppers. Alianora gave them a shushing gesture. "Laundress," she hissed. "She checks the sheets every day to see if the Factor 'joys me as much or as often as he used to 'joy her.'" "Offhand I'd say yours was not a marriage made in heaven?" Captain Zo observed. "I kept my bargain with my father and with my husband. From this day forever I'll be owned by no man." Alianora went to the door and quietly got rid of whoever was knocking. Ulf had been entertaining vague thoughts of his future on Nevermind. Other factors already had other dogsbodies. He had admired Alianora from afar since the first time he had seen her ankles during the daringly costumed preliminaries for the azaafrunn festival. It had never occurred to him that she might someday be a wealthy widow. He sighed. She was not. Perhaps because it might encourage early and informal dissolutions, widows did not inherit on Nevermind. Ulf 51 had once met the distant (by the Factor's strict orders) cousin who would inherit Jaris's holdings-and who would have Ulf's hide if he even considered computerizing a fake will or any such randygazoo. Alianora was now free to marry again. But Ulf . . . : Without capital a Neverminder didn't. Until now he'd at least had a steady job. "How many men you got enlisted in this army?" Zo asked. "About six hundred." "Really?" The spacefarer rubbed his chin. "All young, strong and healthy, I suppose?" "It takes a strong back to pick azaafrunn." "How long did it take you to sign up that many?" "I've been collecting thumbprints for about a year. Ess," Ulf added to show that he knew about such things. "Could you enlist more if you offered some kind of a bounty?" "Like what?" Captain Zo pondered a moment. "A new stopper for every man?" And Factor Jaris had been playing around with the springloaded kapults he rented to his tenants! ' 'I might get a few more," Ulf said cautiously. Including one or two on the Planetary Council. The spacer captain saw Ulf's surprise. "That Samannite cause Jaris spouted on about is small beer," he explained. "The whole idea behind soldier-of-fortuning is to make money and stay alive. Professional soldiers leave all that death and glory crap for the patriots." Ulf had never dwelt on the subject before but that seemed pretty well to summarize his view of it. "Your factor had the right idea but the wrong target," Zo continued. Ulf had only the vaguest idea in which direction Samanna lay, and even less of its politics. He could not have picked out the planet's primary if-even Nevermind's yellow-hued, never-quite-dark skies had ever encouraged stargazing. After a millennium of isolation those 'minders who thought at all were convinced that space and other planets 52 and all that new talk was just some exotic sales pitch to excuse the high cost of the occasional new product in the company store. Smallholders knew the spacefarer traders were really just a bunch of strangers who lived underground somewhere on the hotter side of Twometer Mountain. Although he had read books and knew better, Ulf had never really been able to disabuse his subconscious of every Nevernu'nder's gut feeling that there was nothing beyond their yellow sky apart from a huge yellow sun and the moons that constantly chased and overtook one another. If there were, why hadn't the One True God instructed them in the proper attitude toward such things? "Ever been to Jahpur?" the spacefarer asked. Ulf had not. "It's not that much farther than Samanna." "So?" Ulf struggled for the boredom of a man who dealt daily with offplanet affairs. "I have a friend over there. Manufactures agricultural machinery in a small way. Now, the Maharajah of Jahpur's a very decent old fellow but he owns some real estate that a couple of local bandits are trying to do him out of. I can assure you he'll pay handsomely." "For what?" "Soldiers, my lad. What were we talking about?" Visions of stoppers were still dancing through Ulf's head. He remembered his lonely, bookish boyhood among the rednecked pickers of azaafrunn. Doubly lonely because his mother had been called to some mysterious service in the Great House. Only rarely had she managed to return to a boy who

scarcely remembered her and a husband who seemed to think it was all her fault that she was not home and picking azaafrunn like other less attractive young women. Eventually she stopped coming home. Ulf had been thumped repeatedly for his mother's reputation and his bookishness until, at twelve, he discovered the fallacy in Nevermind's vision of a fair fight. One by one, after dark and inexplicably, Ulf Jort's tormentors suffered accidents. Some broken arms, a fractured parietal bone, and permanently relocated noses. No one was quite sure whether the quiet, bookish boy had pacted with a familiar among the soulstealers in the godzoon thickets. But after one fourteen-year-old bully was found with severe contusions and a permanent neurosis, his peers stopped tormenting Ulf. Nothing was ever proven. Ulf had never expected to be liked and he was not. But after that he was respected. "Think your boys would be interested?" "For a stopper-" True God, how I could have used a stopper in those days! "How soon can you muster your army and enlist every other possible?" The Factor's obsolete commnet was used mostly to muster pickers to the proper field at an exact hour. Still, part of the private army's secret-handgrip gimmickery was the code words that would bring every plowboy scrambling to pick up his kapult and knapsack and move to recover Nevermind's Place In The Sun. Might even bring a few new ones! Ulf guessed this because, due to an endemic inability to keep a secret, everybody knew the code words. "I've got to issue the morning picking orders in a couple of hours," he explained. "An hour after that." Captain Zo smiled. "That gives me just about time to get that cargo back up into-to hell with it. I'll blow it up here on the ground." Ulf recalled what the Factor had paid for the first three machines. If a spacefarer would blow up a load of them instead of bothering to haul them back home, then Ulf wanted to be a spacefarer. He sneaked a glance at Alianora. She was studying Captain Zo with an expression that caused Ulf some unease. "Why not blow them up here in the bedroom?" Alianora asked. 5 Never give a sucker an even break. -Artisune Muzuni Definitely not a love match, Zo mused as he and the Jarp began rummaging the Factor's warehouses for explosives and combustibles. He felt a brief pang of pity for the poor, planetbound girl. But pity could not change things. Alianora would have to discover Life and how to live in space. He had. Shiva's Scrotum, had he ever! Zo had been four years old when he left his home planet of Alachi. Later he had learned to modify this and say that he had first gone offplanet when he was a few days over sixteen-ess, since a standard year was only about one quarter of slowmoving, 1.454-G Alachi. Like Nevermind, Alachi had also been a lost planet- isolated from the spaceways since some long unpaid civil servant had mislabeled the surveys of the Farther Reaches during the decline and fall of the old TAI empire. Not decline: no Urth-based empire had ever really existed but for some centuries a strong PR campaign had maintained the illusion of empire and unity. The difference between Nevermind and Alachi was that Alachi was still officially undiscovered. Folks where Zo grew up had been excited when someone spotted the faint evening-and-dawning streaks of orbiting ships. After all these years, just when everyone was 54 55 beginning to wonder if the old empire had ever really existed, Terra Alta Imperata ships were back! Trade and travel would return. Things would get better. The municipal hajjyatt'ullah issued instructions. Folks rounded up their grazing uzelli from the spaceport. A work party began hacking at the brush that erupted through cracks in ancient paving. Nothing happened. They waited a week and no lander came down. For almost a year ten closely grouped ships orbited, visible at dawn and dusk. Binoculars and telescopes were dusted off. The village math teacher laid out a distance and observers squibbed off fowling pieces from each end as the ships occulted a star. The teacher spent a week slinging beads on his abacus and fiddling with his slide rule. "The ships are orbiting at the prescribed historical distance," he concluded. "And thus, they are TAI ships." Why would they not communicate? "Either something's wrong with our communicator or we're not using it right," the math teacher insisted. The municipal hajjyatt'ullah did not argue. He wanted those ships to land. It was actually Zo, age sixteen (ess), who finally thought of a way. "We have dishes

and reflectors laying around from the old days," he said. "Let's polish one and make a heliograph.'" Three weeks after the citizens of Mdina Shamun began reflecting sunblinks toward the tiny school of orbiting ships, a battered landing shuttle came squatting down in a flaring skirt of flame. "I can't spare much time," the pilot greeted the assembled citizens. "What can we do for the honored representative of TAI?" the municipal hajjyatt'ullah asked. "Ah so?" the spacefarer mused. After a moment he said, "I suppose there's not time to build a proper space station." The municipal hajjyatt'ullah agreed that this might strain the local economy. "But it will be years before our econ- 56 omy has revived enough to need an orbiting station," he protested. "We don't have years," the man from space said. "Haven't you been receiving my messages?" "Our communicator's getting a little old," the hajjyatt'-ullah explained "If I'd had your coordinates we could have beamed a stronger signal." The spacefarer sighed. "I'm afraid we won't be rebuilding your economy just yet either." "But we have all kinds of resources here! Alachi is a rich planet. In the old days we-" "In the old days," the stranger said regretfully, "the greatest asset you had was time." He was a smallish man with an epicanthic fold that revealed little white in his eyes. His gold-hued skin was lighter than the norm for Alachi and, though the stranger was a native of Terasaki, he honored Nippon's ancient glory with a severely tailored black silk business suit. His waist was girded with an obi from which pended twin stoppers in holsters ornate with curlicued prasswork. "But we still have plenty of-" "Ten days-ess. About eight of yours." "Ten days to what?" The hajjyatt'ullah had been a year planning his well reasoned replies to every imagined situation and now things were not coming out at all the way he had expected. "To nova. Didn't you know your sun is about to blow up?" The Alachins didn't. "I'm here to help evacuate. Now let's see how many of you we can lift offplanet and up into those ships." The hajjyatt'ullah stared in mute horror. "You can't possibly carry all of us," he protested. "No," the spacefarer commiserated. "We didn't plan on evacuating anybody. Ours is a scientific expedition to observe the event." "What can we do in eight days?" the hajjyatt'ullah asked. "I'm afraid there's only room for the youngest and best." The offworlder paused. "After you've talked it 57 over I'm sure those of you who elect to stay behind would want it that way." He paused again; longer this time. "Are there any other settlements on this planet?" The hajjyatt'ullah was almost beyond speech. "Forty that we know of on this continent," he managed. The offworlder seemed to choose his words carefully. "When there is no remedy, it is needless cruelty to spread bad news." The hajjyatt'ullah digested this. If only one village could be saved, why should it not be his? "Villages are so far apart that often weeks pass between a visit," he said. "I confess though, that I am torn between my duty to my neighbors and my own. All should have time to prepare their souls. I search my own soul for some scant gloating joy at our good fortune. ..." The hajjyatt'ullah sighed. "Perhaps your thoughts are best. We'll not spread the news. But where will our young people be going?" "In my master's house are many mansions. All will find homes. Truly, from now on their lives will be different." Although young Zoroaster Imamou volunteered to stay behind, the elders knew he was one of those youngest and best who were their only hope. In the end, they consented to his remaining onplanet and helping with the evacuation- until a mournful Chief Scientist Muzuni assured them that all ten ships had reached their capacity. This would definitely be the last load. Young Zoroaster did not struggle too violently as his weeping parents thrust him aboard. To this day Alachi remained undiscovered. People from other villages often wondered about the strange disappearance of all the young folk from Mdina Shamun but they had learned: whenever a strange star began orbiting too swiftly, occulting through the midportion of the night and visible only in reflected sunlight, there tended to be mysterious disappearances. When these ships appeared Alachins stuck together and indoors after dark. When Artisune Muzuni first orbited slowmoving Alachi seven of his ten ships were holed. Half of his company had 58 been holed in the same operation when he had attempted

to take over another pirate's fleet and hunting preserve. He spent a year and a half orbiting Alachi, patching first; then rebuilding and refitting. And then somebody noticed those reflected signals from planetside. Conditions in the hold were deplorable because of overcrowding and because repairs had not gotten to the stage of restoring G. The crowded evacuees rebreathed bad air and, used to 1,454 gravity, would have been queasy even if G-force had been restored to normal. In the minimal spin of a hastily repaired ship the evacuees evacuated spasmodically from both ends and Zo Imamou learned the meaning of vomit in freefall. He was strong-stomached though, and had a crash course . in what to expect during the days he had assisted planetside with the evacuation. Soon he was helping the other retching wretches pull themselves together and make a start at cleaning up. Then the commander's voice came tinny over the ship's PA translator: "We'll be heading down the Tachyon Trail in ten minutes," Muzuni explained. "The transition to subspace is disorienting for those who are not experienced. To avoid injury we must ask that all evacuees go into sleeping pods and button down. Make yourselves comfortable for an extended stay." Zo was tempted to stay awake but he knew his own resistance to nausea was only marginally better than the youths' around him. He kicked his way across the emptying hold into an empty pod. When he awoke, Zo was troubled by a vague sense of something different. Looking about the crowded cargo hold, he abruptly knew that some things that had been mysteries were now clear. He understood how the pods worked-and that he had not slept for just a few hours. It was not that he understood the physics or the real principles of space travel but now at least simple ship gadgetry was no mystery. He could turn a light on or off. 59 He knew how to open and close a faucet. He knew words for things he had never seen on Alachi. Then Zo saw the whole of it: I'm not even thinking in Alachin anymore! During his stay in the pod he had learned a new language. Erts. He digested this. It was, he supposed, not reasonable to expect people on some other planet to learn Alachin when he had trouble communicating with countrymen three villages away. He would adapt. He would survive. Then his hair was on end. Zo was filled with a fear he had not sensed since he stopped believing in the boy-stealing effreet. The other cargo hold hatch (the one that had never opened before) was open now. In it he could see ... things. They were moving. They were not human. They were not animals either, he abruptly realized-not unless the beasts of other planets wore kneehigh red boots! This tall slender creature's skin was far from the bronze of Zo's, or the brown of most of the spacefarers he had seen. Its skin was orange. The creature was a head taller than Zo's 180 sems. Large brown eyes were not just, "round" as Homeworld Asians had once described the bearded, pinkskinned barbarians who had erupted among them. Ringed in deep, dark glowing winelike red hair, the creature's eyes were totally round. Its face was heartshaped, broad of forehead and pointed of chin, with a small, daintily pale-orange lipped mouth. Its nose flared slightly more than human but did not tip downward as did Zo's and most of the spacefarers'. One of the creatures came through the doorway into Zo's section of cargo hold and Zo's frisson began to disappear. It was like nothing he had ever seen before- and taller than he. But the total effect of all this strangeness, plus those large lustrous eyes, was of a gentle sweetness. Staring, he noted the creature's scant clothing. It had female breasts. It also had an unmistakable bulge in the crotch. (Later, Zo would learn of the bisexual nature of Jarps with their single testicle and enough female anatomy to play either role in their reproductive cycle. At the moment he was fascinated by its four-fingered, two-thumbed hands.) 60 Marvelously useful for delicate work, he suspected. The hands were fiddling with the three-strap openwork helmet as it approached Zo. Abruptly, he noted that the pods around him were just opening, their occupants beginning to yawn and stretch. "Want to make it with a Jarp?" the creature asked. Zo was so shocked he could not reply. "You will sooner or later," it said. "All of you will." "How come?" Zo managed. The Jarp sighed. "Partly because you're young and handsome. But mostly, because that's what slaves are for." "Slaves!?" As

he said it Zo suddenly knew it was true. Shiva! He had been suckered. The hajjyatt'ullah-the whole village had been taken in. And how neatly it had been done: Chief Scientist Muzuni had introduced just the right degree of selfishness into the rescue so that they would not proclaim their good fortune to their neighbors. When its turn came each neighboring village would be just as eager to remain silent about its good fortune. Nobody would ever spread a warning. Not even when the sun did not go nova and they realized their children had been stolen. Who would confess to such colossal stupidity? Zo knew now that Mdina Shamun was not the first village that had been "rescued." Gritting his teeth, he remembered how desperately they had striven to attract attention-while Artisune Muzuni & Co. had been busy filling their holds with the best and brightest from other villages all over the planet. And Zo had devised the attention-getting mirror. He had helped sell his own people into bondage! It can't be true. I'm imagining it! But looking into the sweefaced alien's sorrowful eyes Zo knew it was true. "Are you a slave too?" "All offplanet Jarps start out as slaves. Now I'm a junior partner in Artisune Muzuni & Co." "How did that happen?" "The same way it can happen to you. Call me Red." "Is that your name?" 61 "No, but it's the best a human will ever do." The Jarp fiddled with its helmet straps momentarily and for an instant Zo thought he was listening to one of Alachi's xentzontle birds that he would never hear again. "That's why we wear translators," the alien explained. "Do you want to go on being a slave?" "I hadn't planned on it," Zo admitted. "But I'm new at this." "Walking cargo will be dispersed and sold," the Jarp explained. "But our captain miscalculated the odds in his last battle and we're short of crew." Zo nodded wisely. His voice was a murmur: "I ... see." "Maybe you do. Those teaching machines give you language and some basic knowledge so you can flush a toilet and close a door behind you but slaves aren't supposed to know too much." "What is it that I ought to know and don't?" "Sure you've never made it with a Jarp?" "What's a Jarp?" "I am." "Oh." "Remember what 'Commander' Muzuni told your elders about selecting only the best and brightest from the village?" Zo did. He had helped load them! "There will be another selection of the best and brightest before this lot is sold off." It took Zo an instant to realize what the Jarp was proposing. "But they're my people!" he protested. "I grew up with them. They trusted me." "Even a slave has some freedom of choice," the Jarp said. "By the way, since you woke up first, perhaps you'd like to go about and distribute some stimulant to the others?" It offered him a tray of pills. Zo shook his head and tried to think. With the Jarp's limpid, lemurlike brown eyes looking steadily at him, he licked one pill cautiously. It was sweet. He almost swallowed it, then realized those round brown eyes were watching entirely too steadily. 62 Zo put the pill back on the tray. Scooting from his sleeping pod, he began working his way around the cargo hold, making sure that every bleary-eyed slave swallowed one. Making his rounds, Zo discovered twice as many sleeping pods in the hold as had been when they had embarked from Alachi with a "full load." Artisune Muzuni had been busy while he slept. Some of these new people were ... not aliens. At least they weren't as strange looking as the Jarp. But Zo knew the newer, olive-skinned ones with a tendency to freckle could not have originated anywhere under Alachi's blue-white primary. Shiva only knew what might be awakening in some of the other cargo holds! One strapping young stranger spat out the pill Zo put in his mouth. A third had a coughing fit. By the time he recovered he was fully awake and could not be induced to swallow anything. "Looks like three of you passed the elimination trials," the Jarp said. "I'm afraid there're only two openings." Zo looked at the strapping youth who had spat. "What's your name?" he asked. "Vett. Vettering really. What planet you from?" "Alachi," Zo said absently. "Ever see anything like that before?" While Vettering stared at the Jarp, Zo broke the cougher's neck with a swift karate chop. "Nice," Vettering said. "That-thing?" "The way you just fixed it so you'n' me don't got to fight." Zo had not been quite so fast as he'd thought. He studied the other boy. Vettering, at first glance, was not that different from Zo in appearance.

A trifle lighter in skin tone, but with the same competently compact build. Only later would Zo discover that, had it come to a crunch, Vettering's home planet boasted nearly a quarter G less than Alachi. Part of what he had assumed was muscle was even at this age approaching flab. Later he would discover other differences between him and the taller, heavier boy. "What's your name?" the Jarp asked. "Zoro-" Zo caught himself. His father had seen fit to name him Zoroaster back on Alachi where the prophets of outgrown pagan gods were not all that popular. Zo's life was changing. It was time to shuck an outgrown name. "Zohajar Imamou," he said. "Folks always call me Zo." Zo spent hours wrestling in free fall, training himself for hand-to-hand combat. The rules were simple: he trained with Jarps and every time he was pinned Zo got raped. After his first victory he raped a Jarp, stuffing what he had learned to call his slicer into its stash instead of being buggered by an alien. The Jarp did not seem to mind. Red, the first Jarp he had ever seen, was protective and helpful. They all seemed-if not kindly-at least less cruel than any offplanet humans Zo had encountered so far. "Threew'l," Red said. "I can barely understand you with your translator on." "I know," the Jarp complained. "I just keep wishing some human would learn Jarp. That translator makes my seventh molar ache." "What were you going to say?" "Next exercise period you start with weapons." "When do I meet my commander again?" The Jarp studied Zo from limpid brown eyes. "Artisune Muzuni likes smart young recruits," it said, "but not too smart." "But I-" "Are as obvious as you suspect you are," Red said with a whistle that Zo had learned was Jarp laughter. "Loyalty to Artisune Muzuni pays great rewards. Any theorem must have its converse." Zo wondered if an unsuccessful attempt on the man who had stolen a whole generation from his village would get him back into the walking cargo hold or if the pirate would take some more imaginative vengeance. He learned the effects of a stopper's first two settings by 64 drawing too slow. He learned what happened with the Number Three or "Fry" setting when one of the walking cargo found the initiative and a piece of cargo net and fashioned a noose, thus avoiding a life of slavery. A lovely disposall, setting Three! Watching the still-warm body poof into dust, Zo pondered. Was it more brave to die, or to go on living somehow? To live well, one paid. To live poorly, one paid more. Death was quick and cheap. "You've been making it with Jarps for a long time," Red said. "Don't you get lonesome for your own kind?" Until his instructor mentioned it, Zo had not realized how he missed human females. He was surrounded by men and Jarps. Occasionally he saw women-from a distance in parts of the ship where he was not yet allowed. Back on Alachi there had been Sarissa with whom he supposed he would someday mate. She had become part of the cargo and now he could not remember which planet's slave mart had swallowed her. Was it Resh, where slavery was both legal and a mainstay of the economy-or had firm-bodied, ravenlocked Sarissa been sold on Jasbir? "Sure I'm lonesome," Zo said. "I'm offplanet and I don't know anybody." "Playtime," the Jarp said. "Big deal." "While you were sleeping off that last training bout we unloaded some choice cargo," Red explained. "You've earned a free sample." Zo was unaccountably excited. Strange women and his for the taking! Suddenly all the muscle-straining hours of freefall hand-to-hand were worth it. This was the way a man lived! "Where?" he demanded. The Jarp handed him a stopper with belt and holster and a numbered key. Zo saw ironically that it was to the same hold where he had awakened and learned the truth of Artisune Muzuni's promise to the Mdina Shamunites that, "In my master's house are many mansions. They will all find homes. Truly, from now on their lives will be different." When he opened the hatch, Zo gasped. Twenty females 65 huddled in a corner of the huge, nearly empty hold. They were all young. All were incredibly more beautiful than any girl he had ever seen on Alachi. And, unlike the fullskirted and longsleeved maidens of Mdina Shamun, these raving beauties who sat combing each other's dark brown waistlength hair were-not just nude. They were practically naked! Zo drew a shuddery breath and licked his lips. "Aaaahhh!" He hadn't meant to say it but it just slipped out. The reaction was not what he had expected. Shiva, have I

turned ugly? Is my skin peeling from that unmentionable disease that strangers sometimes bring home? Girls were gasping and shrieking, looking at him as if he were a child-stealing efreet. Zo locked the door behind him and stepped into the hold. Suddenly it came home. He was a pirate now-dressed in the same skintight black that other spacefarers in this fleet wore. His belt held a stopper. This too, he saw, was part of how a man lived. "Look," he pleaded, "I'm not an evil man. I'm just like you. I was locked in this same hold only a couple of months ago." Girls wailed and cringed as he came near. The closer he came the younger and more pathetic they seemed. The bulge that had threatened to burst the crotch of his black tights a moment ago was subsiding. Shiva! They're children. Just like the little girls in my village. He patted a lovely naked girl on the head. She cringed. Zo backed out of the cargo hold and locked the door behind him. He was alone and unsupervised on board Artisune Muzuni's flagship. He had a stopper. Zoroaster Imamou . . . smartest boy in the village and everybody knew he would someday grow up to be municipal hajjyatt'ullah just as so many others in his family had served. Only a couple of months offplanet and what was he turning into? He considered what one man running loose with a stopper might accomplish. Plenty, he suspected. 66 Entirely too much. Zo half-drew the stopper. He didn't have to examine it. The weight and balance told him the power pack had been removed. (Elsewhere aboard the flagship a man glanced up from a screen and smiled approvingly as Zo dropped stopper and belt into a weapons storage chute and returned to quarters.) "You can enlist that one," the man at the screen told the Jarp. He frowned. "Looks like the lad could use a little instruction though." He punched another terminal up on the screen. "Lady Soraya?" The woman whose face filled the screen was sleepy. There was a look of permanent sleepiness about her sleek, ageless face. "You were expecting someone else in my cabin?" she asked. The man who called her knew there was no acceptable answer to this question. "A young recruit," he said. "Well-built lad. I thought I'd bring him to your attention." "Name?" The man turned to the Jarp. "Zohajar Imamou," Red said. "I'll look into the matter," Lady Soraya said, and the screen went blank. Alert now, she punched the name into a console and sat, unlined ebon face blank as she considered. Then she made her decision. It was practically textbook. What child didn't like to play doctor? 6 They also serve who don't just sit and wait. -Kelly P. Gast Unlike Zo, Vettering suffered no qualms. Heaving a roaring sigh of satiation, he entered apprentice crew's quarters next morning and observed, "Booda's Balls, what a slice of cake! Hey Zo, you ever bust one virgin with your slicer and another with your thumb while the third one's lickin' your-" Zo went into the sitter and had a prolonged cold shower. He didn't dislike Vettering. The bigger boy was gross but Zo had constantly to remind himself that different planets had different ways. If he could get used to Jarps he ought to be able to put up with Vettering's unrestrained farting and belching. Zo felt growing guilt over the way he had headed off a threeway competition-a fight that he now knew he could have won easily. Vettering was untroubled. He admired Zo's microsecond decision to kill off a potential competitor. Vett likes me. Red likes me. Why don't I like me? "Zohajar Imamou report to level B, one-four." Shiva's Scrotum, what have I done now? Level B was very much part of Officers' Country. Entry was totally forbidden to Zo's level of recruit. The first gate refused to open until he had deposited everything that could 67 68 conceivably serve as a weapon into its hopper. Moments later Zo knocked as he opened the door to one-four. Shiva save me from the searing! Some lady with very little in the way of clothing glanced up from a holo. "I'm sorry," he blurted. "I-this must be the wrong door!" "Come in." She was very dark-almost black. To Zo's inexperienced eye she was thirty. Later he would say closer to fifty. She wore a severe white shift that Zo somehow associated with medical personnel. But how, he wondered, could she get around in anything that clung with such unwrinkled and unrelenting skintightness? "Is this where I'm supposed to report?" Zo knew he had read the cabin numbers right. "If you're the Zohajar whose name and picture seem to look like you." "I guess I

am. Don't know any other." "Bed's in through the next door." "Bed?" "This is sickbay." "I'm not sick." "You are. You just don't know it." He tried not to stare. He marveled at his mind's perversity. Less than one day ago he had walked out on a roomful of young, tenderly nubile and near-naked girls. Why was he so aroused by the sight of this trim ageless woman in the tight, no-frills white shift? It did not occur to him that this capable lady was putting her all into the silent communication that passeth all understanding. "Go take a shower and get into bed and I'll be in after a while to check up on you." "But I'm not sick!" "Are you well? Are you at peace with yourself?" Zo hesitated. "Now just go in there and do what the daktari ordered." The shower was no different from crew's quarters but there was only one, enclosed in gleaming white plass. Zo stood passive, enduring the scrubbers. When the machine had dried him off he passed into the 69 next cubicle. The bed was at least three times as wide as his sleeping pod. He climbed in and lay asprawl, luxuriating on its satiny softness. Vettering would just wallow here and enjoy. Zo could not. He didn't know what was going to happen but he suspected another of those damned psychological evaluations that Artisune Muzuni & Co. were always pulling. Probably somebody had been watching-maybe noticed that split-second of hesitation before he dropped the stopper down the chute. Chocolate brown limbs of unbelievable length propelled a white, skintight, no-frills nurse's shift into the room. She began tucking him in. It had not happened since Zo was a child. As she bent over the bed, Lady Soraya murmured, "Just call me Hakeema." Zo's eyes were on the matched set that threatened to escape from that lowcut and skintight white shift when she bent over him. "Sleep tight." Zo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. As she was leaving the room his breath escaped in an involuntary "Uhh!" "Yes?" "I think I may have trouble getting to sleep." "Yes?" "Could you, uh, put another blanket on me?" Lady Soraya smiled a secret little smile. "Certainly. But it's hot in here. Do you want to suffocate?" If I could do it between those chocolate-looking warheads . . . Zo wondered if the nipples outlined in white fabric would be black or purple. Bending low over his face, she spread a second blanket. "All right now?" Zo discovered that she was right. He was much too hot. "I-uh . . ." "Yes?" ' 'Maybe you better take the blanket off again.' ' She smiled that secret little smile and bent over the bed. "He don't really need it," she murmured. "This little pirate's going to sleep in a tent tonight." 70 Zo felt his straining slicer pushing at the sheet. Gently, she peeled back the blanket. "Now what is that!" she marveled. Zo wondered if it would be possible to die on the spot. He willed his rebellious member down but it refused to obey. "I can't help it," he apologized. "You can't?" "No." "What do you think makes it do that?" "I don't know. But it happens every time you bend over me." "You mean this Way?" As she bent lower over the bed Zo thought sure he could see down to her navel. Except for two . . . obstructions. His breath caught and he felt a little preliminary thrill. It was the same feeling that usually ended a dream in sudden wakefulness with the solution to some burning problem in hand. This time it was her hand. He lay transfixed, nor daring to believe what was happening. It's all some damned trick. She'll wait till the proper moment and then she'll worm some secret out of me. What secret do I have? He had given up any serious thought of escape. He was going to be a pirate-if this woman didn't kill him. Then he knew what was happening. He was dreaming. . Maybe if I lie perfectly still and hold my breath and don't move a muscle I can stay asleep. Why did he always wake up just when these dreams were getting good? This was the best one yet. Why can't my slicer stand still and rigid like the rest of me instead of throbbing, jumping, jerking upright with each heartbeat? It's threatening at any instant to end this delicious dream in another sprint to the head. "Hakeema, please!" he whispered. How could she just remain there smiling, bending over him, her soft warm hand wrapped round his zupp, watching and waiting for his shame to explode? 71 Shiva's shriveled scrotum, I can't even remember to call it slicer. This was the farthest any dream had ever progressed. Usually in Zo's dreams some lissome maiden danced about in

improbable costume-or was so absorbed in her holo or embroidery' that she never sensed his daring hands exploring the shape, the feel, the firmness of her matched set of man-magnets-full, round, and firm. Like the ones so close, making Hakeema's simple white uniform so seductively erectile. Now the hand was moving. Rigid with disbelief, willing, praying not to wake up, not to explode, Zo felt a gentle black hand closing around the head of his throbbing slicer. Oooooohh Shiva, did it ever feel good! She was squeezing. Does she have to squeeze so flaining hard? That gentle hand was squeezing, clenching, pressing, strangling his struggling zupp. Shiva's Scrotum! This was no dream. It was hurting! She was really there. She was squeezing the life out of his best parts. "Ow! Hakeema, stop it!" She gave her toy a final squeeze, dug a green fingernail into its throbbing purple head, and let go. His wrecked erection dangled ignominiously, shriveled to little-boy size. Abruptly he sensed that at last one of his dreams had come true. He had not counted on pain like this but a lovely black-bazoomed lady had caressed his hair-trigger weapon and it had not gone off. In theory Zo knew all about Doing It. The only thing he didn't know was how any man could possibly control himself long enough to thread his erection into a warm, living, passion-pulsating stash. He knew he'd never be able to control himself long enough to get into a young woman. Or even an old one. Just the thought of such a deliciously impossible experience was enough to get his eager erection teetering over a chasm of orgasm. He gritted his teeth and strained not to flash. But Hakeema put her hand on my cannon and I've still got my charge. Could he actually get it into her? 72 Would there be time for one delicious, soul-wrenching lunge before . . .? Would she let me? He still could not believe what had happened. She was a woman: confident and mature-secure in her allure and amusing herself with some hairtrigger boy. Will she let me prove that I'm a man? Whatever Hakeema planned with him seemed to involve peeling off her severe white uniform. This was no slow, sensuous operation. Instead, she stepped back from the bed and bent over, crossing her hands. Straightening suddenly, she whipped the skimpy white uniform over her head like a triumphant battle flag. Beneath the dress . . . Shiva's shriveling scrotum! Absolute hectares of smooth ebon skin. Lovely taut-musclcd body with no scar or blemish. What will happen if I grab a handful? If I touch one of those tender warheads will she stop undressing? Perhaps more seriously, would he detonate or go into meltdown? His zupp was throbbing again, within micro-grams of critical mass. Twin volcanoes stood rampantly upright without the restraint of that white uniform. Zo reached for one. Its owner smiled the same little secret smile and danced out of reach. The volcanoes bounced. For one horrible moment Zo was afraid she would be angry and put her clothes back on. While he stared she began a slow sensuous slide out of a black nether garment so sheer he had not known it was there. He gave up. It was never going to happen. Might as well relax and see what came next. Not him, he hoped. Sheol! He would never get his zupp into that effable black body. The first time she came within half a meter he would explode like some unlikely fountain, erupting liters of maleness from his eyes, from his ears- Things like this don't happen anyhow. It's just a dream. Half believing that, he felt the throbbing ache lessen a bit. This, he was later to learn, was the essence of Life, religious conversion, or anything else. Just give up and 73 take what comes. Surprisingly nice things came to those who didn't try too hard. The nicest thing at the moment was the smooth chocolate blackness of Hakeema's firm body. She climbed onto the bed beside him. After a moment he was able to live with the fact that a lovely naked female was actually here, in his bed. It was a vision for which he had burned in solitary ardor night after youthful, frustrated night. She kicked the blankets to the floor and reached above his head to do something that lowered the lights. The movement brought one purple nipple within nibbling distance. He was pumping up his courage when her arm came back down. They lay facing one another only sems apart. His zupp was throbbing, twitching, jerking. She moved imperceptibly closer and its tip began tracing slipperly little tracks up and down her fine firm belly. It was too much. I'm going to flash. I know it! Does

she know about flashing? Can I explain that it doesn't matter, that I'll be ready again in five mins? Maybe the second time around my slicer won't be quite so hairtriggered. Maybe I'll even get it in! He was starting to explain all this when he felt a soft fist squeezing that apprentice organ again. She was squeezing his erection to extinction, mashing and squashing like some mad milkmaid with one fist while the other drove thumb-and-fingernail pincers into his perineum. It's agony. I'm dying but I don't want it to stop! If her educated hands wanted to torture him, he wanted to suffer. Forgetting the stabbing pain in his loins, he buried his face in the yielding firmness of her warheads. Licking, kissing, nibbling, he got his mouth over one purple-black nipple. He was amazed to feel it swell like a miniature zupp as his tongue savored it. Squirming, he got another nipple into his ear. Moaning with delight, he cuddled and caressed, running eager hands over enticing warheads, delighted in the originality of his invention. Surely nobody had ever done this before! He decided to call his invention "communicator." He knew nobody had ever done it before because it was impossible for anyone 74 even to come close to such bliss without flashing into a supernova. Her hands aren't tormenting my limber zupp anymore and I still haven't flashed! He satisfied his curiosity about his lover's firm, flash-provoking breasts. He became so inured that sometimes he could keep hands, mouth and face off them for ten seconds at a time! Gently, she caught his ears and drew his face to hers. Drifting gently together, they bumped noses. After a moment he got it through his head that a person must turn a little out of line for a successful kiss. Just as he was getting the hang of it, her agile tongue invaded him. He was so startled he almost bit it off. Then, feeling smooth muscle gliding gently in and out of him, he experienced a brand new joy. His tortured penis revived and began stabbing blindly at his tutor's firm, phallophilic belly. A hand captured it before the erection was complete. Though the poor squeezed thing struggled to grow, a merciless fist frustrated it. It hurt so good that he could not wilt. And yet it hurt enough so he couldn't flash either. He was starting to hurt all over from the strain of holding it in. "Please," he whispered, "let me." "Me first," she said, with a lazy sort of grin. Men on Alachi had never been told that women might also enjoy it. Women were created to give pleasure-not to take it. Zo was so astonished that for a moment his zupp started to subside. Hakeema's skilled hand let go. Her other hand pulled his from its spasmodic exploration of tender warheads and guided it down past a deep navel, across the smoothly swelling expanse of her belly, guiding his fascinated fingers over her prominent mons veneris and on to man's best friend. Like every male inhabitant of post-Islamic Alachi, Zo was almost totally ignorant of female anatomy. When a man was aroused his zupp stood straight out. Logic and Shiva's mercy indicated that all he had to do was walk straight into a waiting woman and they'd snap together like two ships docking. His frantic fumbling hands poked about Hakeema's down 75 there in quest of an aperture that was not there. He remembered a hoary joke about the man who went to Sheol and found that the hell of it was none of the women had any holes. Then, at last, his desperate digit found the upper end of soft womanly slice. Barely in time! He had been so frightened at the prospect of her not having one that his cringing slicer drooped lifeless. Running an exploring finger down the delicious damp, he felt it revive. Now what in Sheol was this little bump? Whatever it is, she's moaning and giggling and opening her legs so I can rub it again. When her clitoris was swollen firm and marble-hard as her well-kissed nipples, his fingers sought new planets for plunder. I found it! Warm, juicy, deep, inviting. His probing finger couldn't find bottom even when she spread her legs to make it easy. He became so absorbed in his exploration that he squirmed around until he was peeking straight up her rosy, open-mouthed stash. It looked good enough to eat. Shiva save me! What kind of unnatural freak am I? Recruits made jokes about sucking ass! And here for a moment I was actually thinking about doing it! What would she have done if he'd planted his lips over that firm little knob and run his tongue up and down it the way he was tempted to try? Probably she'd scream and

kick and somebody would come bursting through the door and then- It was too horrible even to think about. Instead, he kissed her crisp pubic patch, ran a burning line of kisses up her firm belly, paused to drive his tongue into her bottomless navel, then kissed his way up the underside of one jutting warhead. She laughed and squirmed. Endless chocolate legs clamped in a scissors hold around his waist and restrained him from climbing her lovely frame any farther. They wrestled playfully, and between lickings he swapped tongues again with the lovely, ageless woman. Squirming, rubbing skins together like amorous serpents, they learned the ins and outs of each other's bodies. Just as 76 the youth was beginning to accept the idea that he could wrestle with a lovely, firm-bodied lady without exploding, firehosing liters of masculinity all over the cabin, she augered a twisting tongue into his ear. It was so unexpected. How was he to know what a woman's wiggly tongue would do in his ear? "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me," she was murmuring. My rod just got out of her hand. Oooohh Sheol, here it comes! Nothing now could ever stop that delicious spurting, squirting hurting-and then this incredible woman's educated fingernail did just that. She drove it like a spike into the crack just behind his power pack. He would have yelled loud enough to bring Security running if her mouth hadn't fastened over his just in time. Eventually, the spasm passed. Guided unobtrusively by her knees and elbows, he let himself be chivvied into what was once called "missionary position." Kneeling between gleaming black jade thighs, he no longer worried about not flashing before getting it in. Now his problem was finding enough rigidity to keep his zupp from bending double. The sprawled woman wiggled her belly and worked her legs. Warm dewy lips closed over the head of his bedraggled slicer. Slowly, gently, her body drew him into her. For a moment he lay immobile but for his shudders. Resting on elbows, savoring the feel of breasty black mounds rubbing his chest, nipples tracing out little circles on him with each of her breaths. She moved and her elated lover felt her tight stash sliding up his shaft. Pulling, milking. By the time she had slid it halfway back out in that delicious, impossibly prolonged stroke, his drooling slicer was ready for action. Shiva, was it ever ready! Ramming for home, he felt his mind splitting in two- one half living the pure physical pleasure of this sensual slide down into the secret depths of her healing flesh. And all the time the other side of his mind exulted in the knowledge that here, now, at last he was slicing something better than his boyish fist-better than Jarps. Better than anything! 77 I'm slicing! He wanted to yell it, proclaim to the universe the simple animal pleasure of feeling his eager erection flog itself to death deep inside this incredible woman. Any second now- Her fingernail stabbed again into that tender terminus between power pack and exhaust. He lunged, plumbing new depths in his eagerness to escape that drilling digit. He was up to the hilt, straining, feeling his prurient prostate gather forces for a detonation both imminent and eminent. Once again his tutor's fingernail would not let him back out for the final friction that would trigger his thrumming cannon. Locked in silent struggle, he felt a moment of frozen ecstasy slowly pass. The fingernail backed off and he could breathe again. She grinned. "You only have so much," she pointed out. "No point in wasting it." Will she ever let me flash? Doesn't she know the first time is only the beginning for me? He was only a few months past sixteen. Back on Alachi when he was fourteen he had hidden in the underbrush just beyond where village girls bathed. That afternoon he had flashed five times in his fist . . . and pounded away for a solid hour trying for six! And now he had it inside her-a real woman! Sheol! He couldn't believe it. Yet it was difficult to remain a doubter when smooth black legs wrapped around him, drawing him in, guiding the length of his strokes, doing everything this wonderful woman's sophisticated body knew to prevent his rambunctious boyish ramslamming from ending too soon. He was on top. He had thought he was in control- ensaddled and riding-but now he realized that she was throwing him every way but off. Smooth strong arms drew him down. She kissed him into grinning, idiotic ecstasy, then pushed his head down where he

could once more play "communicator" while her fingernail toyed gently with the inside of his other ear. Like a metronome, his buttocks rocked gently, sliding him slowly in and out. She guided him in, guided him out, 78 regulating speed and length of stroke by subtle hints as her muscled chamber rose to meet him, held for an ecstatic second while his fluttering piston decided once more not to flash just yet, and then gently, oh so slowly they would slide apart until the head of his slicer was only just nipped within her. Hold again, strain and grunt in frozen frenzy waiting for her expertise to allow once more that slow slipping into the secret savors of her enslaving. // this is slicing, why did it take me all these long years to get started? Tomorrow I'll steal Hakeema. We'll go find another planet where there'll be just the two of us. I'll spend the rest of my life just doing this, doing this! Will I ever have to stop long enough to eat? Boyish plans for an ecstatic, sex-filled future were suddenly interrupted when womanly control began slipping. Long midnight legs were no longer guiding him, limiting him. "Aaaaaahhh!" she sighed, and shuddered long. Her bottom began a rolling gallop, meeting his pounding pelvis in wild abandon. Once more he felt that preliminary prickle, and this time he knew he had reached the point of no return. She was moaning, wailing, slamming her lovely tight self up to meet his every thrust. With both hands around her, he pushed. Ramming, slamming, cramming his slicer in and in. "Aaaaaahllaaaahhh!" she wailed. He buried his face in hectares of black warheads, pushed and grunted, ring for another millimeter as his rampant rod exploded. Shiva, did it ever feel good! This isn't my fist I'm slicing. This is the real thing! Hakeema's stash. I'm really slicing! And in a minute when I catch my breath I can do it all over again! "Oooohh, you ravishing little pirate!" she crooned despite her growing shortness of breath. He savored the feel of his first real flash, glorying in it, emptying his weapon, his heart, his soul into Hakeema's marvelous body. 79 Toes clenched, he thought he was going to faint from the sheer pleasure of orgiastic meltdown. He floated pinkly . . . When he opened his eyes with a little jerk of astonishment, Hakeema was back in her skimpy white uniform. She had wiped up the worst puddles of spent passion and had the blankets back on the bed. "Don't go," Zo pleaded. "Let's do it again." "We will," she promised. "But I want to do it now!" Hakeema leaned over the bed and kissed him. "I know you do. But you might hurt yourself. We'll do it tomorrow." "But how can I get to sleep?" "Try closing your eyes." She was right. Zo awakened hours later, refreshed in body and soul. There was no combat drill that day-for which he thanked all the gods. Two years later Vettering was pudgier but a competent fighter, making up in speed and misdirection what he lacked in strength. Zo had leaned into wiriness. A hint of line ran from the corners of his mouth to his nose. He still smiled as often as he had on Alachi but Defense Systemist Zo, who would have been Gunner Zo in an era less addicted to euphemisms, seldom smiled with his eyes. Artisune Muzuni had prospered after the last setback. The pirate now had nineteen ships. He also had the undivided attention of TransGalactic Order. 7 Deliver us, O Lord, from the fury of the barbarian and from the zeal of the catechumen. -Brother Kallipygast of Athos Unlike some TGW personnel who had converted to .the cause of law and order under the bright edge of a sword, Lhari Haddad's record was spotless. Too perfect. It was just not right for a woman with that unblemished skin of charcoal velvet and trapeze artist's body not to accept the homage properly due her. To ignore all those boys buzzing around her was an insult to the balance of nature. In school dire mutterings had issued from girls who would have dined bountifully on lissome Lhari's leavings. Plots were hatched. Plots were nurtured. Plots ran to their unsuccessful conclusion without their victim's ever becoming aware of them since Lhari was simply not interested in boys-or girls. Someday when she had time . . . But not now, not when books were the only possible entry she could find into TGO. Every book she had ever scanned or listened to was in agreement that TransGalactic Order probably existed. TGO did not conflict with local policer forces but it superseded the planetary nippers whenever anything beyond local jurisdiction came up. Thanks to TGO there had been no war along

the spaceways since the disintegration of the old empire. Nor would any local bandit ever expand beyond certain limits. 80 81 The books were not in agreement about TGO's methods. Official news releases might be convincing in other systems but observant locals could see the holes in them. Which was all right as long as everybody could say, "Well, they made a few mistakes in that one but all the other stories must be true." Problems might someday arise if Doubters of the Universe ever convened and discovered that everyone's firsthand information had a couple of little inconsistencies. Some insisted there was no TGO, that TransGalactic Order was just a colossal con job and no more to be feared than any phantasm created to keep rebellious children in line. Phantasm was a word used often in describing TGO. Most anyone could see the uniformed and highly visible TransGalactic Watch. TGW fought real battles with real weapons that killed real pirates. TGW personnel died irreversible deaths while they struggled against the forces of entropy and disorder along the spaceways. Lhari understood the difference. TGW had recruiting offices and snappy uniforms and a liberal pension plan for those who lived that long. TGO though ... the references were vague. She scanned every available directory. No recruiters. Nor did there exist, apparently, any watchdog agency or overseer of any kind. TransGalactic Order was a law unto itself: occasionally employing scungy means to justify some marginally less foulsmelling end. TGO Headquarters: unknown. Strength and personnel qualifications: unknown: No one reported ever having been approached directly by TGO. How had the organization survived over 300 years? Lhari thought she knew the answer to that. Organizations grew flabby as a single uninterrupted administration or dynasty inbred its way back up into the trees. Most religions that outlived their founders were those that supplanted a hereditary priesthood with some form of outside recruitment and/or rule of celibacy. Vigor, Lhari decided, demanded constant infusions of fresh blood. Ditto for the military: Knights Templar, Assassins, 82 Janissaries, Leathernecks, Legionnaires ... no worthwhile fighting organization ever recruited from within. The laws of physics placed only a limited total energy available to any organism. Someday when she had achieved time and position Lhari would experiment. Just now she had no excess energy to dissipate in vengery. Twice in her researches Lhari had come across an ominous line: NO ONE LEAVES TGO. That seemed in contradiction of her theories. She didn't want to leave. Lhari would have gone ecstat just to get in. Maddeningly, that seemed to be a question of "Don't call us. We'll call you." Time passed and, although graduate school beckoned, TGO did not. Seeing life slip through her hands-the first twenty years already wasted and nothing accomplished- Lhari Haddad settled for second best. They did have nice gray uniforms with maroon/wine red decor that set well against the totally nonreflective smoothness of her sable skin. Experimenting with computer-montages, Lhari decided that the piping, combined with shoulder boards and stand-up maroon collar, did an adequate job of framing her well-boned face and lustrous hair. Given any choice in the matter, she would have changed the thick, chevron cuffs. What really decided the matter though was that at least she could find the TGW recruiting office. It was all a waste of time. For three years now she had been in TransGalactic Watch and all of her academy class had risen at least one grade. TGO had not come calling. Three flaying years killing herself, driving her way up to Suffragan Captain of a TGW Candiru class corvette while all those other clots were still playing juvenile games in juvenile officers' messes. Waiting out the lifetime of musical chairs that would- maybe someday-put them where Lhari Haddad already was, and bored stiff. Would TGO ever call? Ambition had become obsession. She looked to the future so much that almost she overlooked the possibilities of the present. Maybe if she made permanent captain. Maybe if she 83 made it before she was twenty-five years-standard. She was sure that if TGO recruiters lurked anywhere, Grim would be one of the more likely spots. Grim is neither temporal nor spiritual capital of Resh but it is that planet's spaceport. Most extraplanetary affairs are conducted by the melange of free enterprise and civil servants who scurry through the steel, syntheses and plastics structures

that conform to spaceport gothic and are all so different from the medina of Menre. The narrow streets of Resh's sacred city are as twisty as the minds of its hereditary, yellow-sashed priests whose lives are dedicated to the Glory of Gri of Might, which god they serve by extracting tithes where they can, alms when they must, and in return perform no useful service to any living race. Crisp in the tights and equhyde boots of her TGW uniform, Lhari Haddad threaded Grim's streets. Dodging cargo carriers and being dodged by odd beings in flowing thawbs, in skintight metallic tunics, in loose straight pants or baggy trousers, or kilts, or nothing at all—save an eagerness to get out of TGW's way. A prompt implanted in her inner ear reminded her of the address she had been instructed not to record on anything outside her head. "Not there," an override came. "Wow that you're in the neighborhood, continue straight ahead to the Imperial Hotel." Lhari had never been there. She'd had no time for offplanet leave. She knew, however, that the ancient Imperial was big enough for whole crews to get lost in. "The Blueskys of Home Bar," the voice in her ear said before she could ask. Lhari had tired of explaining that she did not like bars. She hoped nobody from her ship would be in this one. It was hard enough to establish authority over juniors who looked ten years older than her twenty-four and were in actuality up to half a century her senior. One sight of Suffragan Captain Haddad in the Blueskys of Home and they would be calling her Captain Hypocrite. The bar was so dark that her tinted shades overcom-pensated, momentarily augmenting her vision so that she saw as clearly as a Jarp. After a brief glance at a ceiling 84 holo that portrayed some hard-to-believe blueness of sky, she regarded the early afternoon's jockeying for position-and-pairing with distaste. A dozen busts she supposed were locals toyed with Marytinis and similar fake drinks, biding their time until some spacefarer paid for another round of colored water while examining the merchandise. The girl at the end of the bar smiled at Lhari, then quickly turned away from a glacial TGW glance. "Haddad?" In spite of that brief instant of total vision before her shades adjusted, Lhari had not seen the lean, hungry-looking man in skintight black leotards and winedark cape. "Please try be inconspicuous," he added as he motioned her to a corner booth. "Are we being watched?" "Like first year at the academy." First year was when cadets shed any lingering shyness— when acclimation to cramped fighting-ship quarters was accelerated by furnishing a single unwallled shower and toilet facility for all sexes. "Can we talk?" The hungry-looking man handed her an earplug. "Use your homeplanet dialect," he suggested. "And I'll not use mine." (Lahari caught the brief singsong of a "Hdu, bu hau?" in the instant before her earplug settled down.) The doorway dilated and a pudgy spacefarer stood squinting inward. The girl at the end of the bar who had smiled at Lhari Haddad attached herself to him and they made a slightly erratic progress to a booth some distance from where Lhari and the lean, hungry looking man in skintight black leotards were sitting. The other husts all moved one stool closer to the door. A replacement appeared from some back room to take the last stool. Lhari considered the impersonality of assembly line processes. Like waiting for promotion within TGW, she mused. She studied the man across from her, intensely aware that he had not paid her due homage. She knew from 85 having managed crews that he displayed no hint of any other preference. In the race for recognition had she been neglecting her appearance? (She had been doubtful in the beginning. The message had not come through regular channels and she had carefully examined Candiru's comlogs for any time bomb, which was argot for a coded message that would activate only at some later time—the equivalent of an older navy's "sealed orders." The unalterable blackbox records contained nothing.) Lhari had awakened with the gentle insistence of that voice inside her ear. She had clicked her teeth and made it repeat. Doubt remained. She knew that with patience any commnet could be penetrated. Total security was as unattainable as a state of grace. "Behind me," the man in the winedark cape was saying. "The one who just came in. By the way, did you have to wear a uniform?" "Uniform of the day. Why shouldn't I wear it?" "My fault," he apologized. "It just never occurred to me that anyone

would put one of the damned things on unless it had to." He paused. "You're not one of those odd types who has something against looking your best?" "If it's for the good of the service." He sighed. "Get a good look but don't let him see you." "The man behind you?" "Let us pray the good captain has already ingested enough Heaven High to have dulled his faculties." "Why?" "Because he prefers well-constructed, dark-skinned women. Get out of here inconspicuously and change clothes in time to beat him to Hari's NY Bar." Lhari stared. "And then what?" "You're going to pick him up." A slight spastic movement parted Lhari's firmset lips. "How do you know he'll leave?" (She was delaying, and knew it.) "Because he's going to have an annoying experience 86 just as soon as you've gotten out of here and in position. Do it properly and he'll follow you in off the street." The lean man paused, not looking at Lhari the way she was used to seeing men see her. "You-uh-do know how to attract men?" She swallowed that bitter pill. "I-guess so. But-" "Yes to all your questions. The career you ruin can be his or your own. Since he is not a nice man I wish you success." Lhari struggled to hide her wild surmise. It was so ... tacky. On the other hand, it was a beginning. She rose and strode toward the door. As it dilated Lhari suddenly stopped and turned to the hust at the end of the bar. "You," she said. "Stand up." Smiling mechanically, the hust slid off the bar stool and posed. Sexy, but not too blatant, Lhari decided. "You'll do." Upstairs the girl began undressing. "How much?" Lhari asked. "How long will you need me, sweetheart?" "Sweetheart, I've never needed a man or a woman in my life. How much for those 'clothes' you just took off?" 8 Ere the cock crows thrice one of you will betray me. -Jewish Resistance Leader Vettering farted and belched with a total lack of inhibition. He despised Jarps. He bedded only those human females who could appreciate his heavyhanded peasant humor. And yet Zo felt a nagging affection for the big lout. Whether because he had never known better or for more admirable reasons, Vettering did not complain. In combat he fought to his limits just as he performed every other act in his gross life to ten full tenths of his ability. Eating, drinking, honing his slicer-Vett had little taste and less originality. What he had that Zo envied, was a tremendous capacity to enjoy. Sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought Zo would have traded his soul for the other man's simple animal ability to live. One day at a time, with no thought for the morrow and no regret for yesterday. Lady Soraya's (or Hakeema's as she preferred) ministrations were enjoyable enough and had helped Zo through a bad transition but Hakeema could take the young man away from himself for only brief periods. The rest of the time Zo lived with Zo. He was not afraid of a fight. Yet he was intelligent enough not to enjoy fighting for its own sake. For Zo there had to be a reward, and a reasonable hope of winning. 87 88 Even the tiger occasionally appreciated the protective coloration of its stripes. Zo had taken on a cloak of piratical conformity and risen accordingly until Artisune Muzuni had rewarded his devotion to an ancient and profoundly conservative profession with a berth as second officer of Murtadd. Zo recalled his first recreational leave with a wry smile. Even now he did not force himself on women. There was, he had discovered to his bemusement, a universe-ful ready- some positively panting to supply whatever he could imagine or desire. At the moment none could give him what he wanted, which was to be somewhere else. Vett farted and blossomed with a smile of relief. "So I saved your life," he said. "You'd do the same. Wouldn't you?" Zo clenched his nostrils and waited for the ventilation system to do its duty. He waited longer than usual since the air scrubbers, like everything else onboard Murtadd, had been damaged when Artisune Muzuni's fleet turned off the Tachyon Trail only days after collecting a ransom from Bleak. Although Zo was barely learning the trade himself, he had reason to believe that his commander-in-chief's technical qualifications were not equal to the audacity and fighting skill that had made his nineteen-ship fleet a menace to the spaceways. Artisune Muzuni had been heading toward the Corsi Cluster for another raid. Unsure of his aim, he dropped back into normal space. Well off, almost midway between Bleak and his destination. They were waiting for him in

the middle of nowhere. Where only someone with a disabled or sabotaged SIPACUM might be expected to pop in, the pirate had found himself at the focal point of a hemisphere of TGW and TAI ships. There remained only one move on the tridee chessboard of space combat. Artisune Muzuni & Co. lit a shuck for Forty Percent City. "Plaining spacers all wrinkling their noses," Vettering 89 was saying. "Ain't none of them know what a really bad planet's like." "I spent two years-ess on Bleak." Zo lied absently. His mind was on more urgent matters. "You did? When?" Zo hadn't really expected the pudgy spacer to bite on that venerable chestnut. "Last Friday," he said. Vettering yawned, stretched, and farted again. "How'd you like to grow up on a planet with fifteen percent oxygen and one-point-five hydrogen sulfide? And that's not counting all the really bad smells." No wonder Vettering doesn't mind a few farts! Now that he had the information, Zo could not imagine what to do with it. Anyway, they had other problems. Murtadd's Ship Inboard Processing and Computation Unit (Modular), SIPACUM, had been penetrated. Zo had not been in space long enough or learned enough to know how it had happened but he knew there had to be some kind of trace on them: some kind of emitter onboard Murtadd that could transmit through a warp, or a wormhole, or ... only Shiva knew how. One of the things Zo's augmented studies and apprenticeship had taught him was that no unaided human or computer could have predicted exactly where in the multidimensional infinitude of space they would reconvert from tachyons into "normal" matter. Not unless something was reading Artisune Muzuni's dangerously spur-of-the-moment mind! The-combined TGW and TAI fleets had been there . . . waiting. Zo was unsure whether Artisune Muzuni's unpremeditated next move had been expected by the other side. The combined fleet had sat there for nearly four seconds, every ship's DS trained on the pirate's close-grouped nineteen spacers. The Muzuni fleet's SIPACUMs had dithered an eternity of microseconds before switching to the secondary circuit that was always on line . . . ready to challenge the desperate odds of an unprepared bolt for Forty Percent City. During those seconds the combined TGW and TAI forces 90 could have blown Artisune Muzuni & Co. to glowing cinders. Why hadn't they? Eight ships survived the jump, meaning that Artisune & Co. were still slightly on the happy side of 40%. The extent of damage to the eight survivors was being reported with painful slowness by SIPACUMs that balked unexpectedly now and again. Portions of their memory had been wiped or processors damaged. An hour off the Tachyon Trail and Zo still had no clear idea where they had come out. SIPACUM offered a tentative opinion that they had backtracked and were somewhere near Bleak, which seemed equally improbable and undesirable. Visual sensors indicated a dust cloud. So? The only star close enough for a reliable "signature" was a distant red giant and a small black companion surrounded by uninhabitable gas-giant planets, some of which teetered on the edge of a Helmholtz reaction and were almost stars in their own right. "Plaining spacers and their superoxygenated air," Vettering growled. "Smells nice but Booda's Balls, it makes me metabolize so fast I'm always hungry! Now, like this is just about right." Zo marveled at the pudgy man's ability not to see or not to think about their situation. They had survived the forty percent odds but now Murtadd's SIPACUM was in worse shape. They were losing air from several sprung seams. Shiva only knew what the next jump would bring. "No visible damage from the aft command station," Zo reported into the comm, "but we're down to point five six kigsquissm." By that he meant the kg/cm² of air pressure that Vettering was enjoying all the while he farted and belched into the thin, barely breathable mixture. Kigsquissm was an anachronism but nobody used kilopascals after TAI gave up enforcing the Galactic Standards and Language Act. "They're going to hit us again," the captain's edgy voice rasped over the comm. Zo flipped the battle stations alarm. Before it could 91 begin shrieking there was a brief buzz and the foul, thinning air stank of ionization. "We're losing," Vettering said. Zo had not thought the other man was noticing. "Knewed it since that first jump," Vettering continued. "I been suckin' round that flaining Jarp ever since we went City." Vett despised Jarps. Doubly since he had been repeatedly raped as

an inducement to improve his hand-to-hand skills in the first days of their training. That was before they were permitted to tinker with telepresences and all the augmented DS of a fighting suit. Busy with his checklist, Zo hardly listened to the big man who manned a console on his bridge. He had known it was all over too-known it the instant he had first scanned the hemispherical formation of that fleet that focused on them. But what could he do? Vettering's voice dropped. Scratching at the hairy expanse that overlapped tight-at-the-waist, loose-at-the-thighs green shorts, he added, "Next time let's go the wrong way." Zo knew he had heard wrong. Glancing up from his checklist, he saw Vettering looking intently at him. Hastily, Zo turned down the comm. "Artisune Muzuni & Co. is dead," Vett said. "They just don't know it yet. Next time the head hancho says jump, we go our way and they go his. Three of us can man the ship." "Who else?" Zo really didn't believe it. Gross, uncaring Vett hatching a plot . . . "Sisterslicer's with us." The faint tendrill of hope that had been worming through Zo's desperation abruptly shriveled. Sisterslicer of Jarpi was constantly circulating rumors and mutterings that everyone ignored. Sisterslicer's fanatical loyalty to Muzuni was exceeded only by the transparency of its efforts as agent provocateur. Zo studied Vettering from the corner of his eye, not looking lest the amiable lout see his death sentence. Zo 92 would not kill him. Wouldn't have to. If Sisterslicer was in the plot, Vettering was already dead. "I'll have to think about it," Zo said. He made a warning gesture as he turned the comm back up. There was something outside. SIPACUM was too erratic for Zo to know what but it made little difference. The eight remaining ships were unable even to go Forty Percent City. They gathered in a tight little knot. Crews suited up. They pushed cannibalized parts from one to another with suit rockets, ignoring the whatever that seemed to be watching and waiting. As long as it didn't attack, they were still ahead of the game. Sweat formed, dripped. Four days passed in frantic activity. It began to look as if seven out of the eight spacers would be able to jump. Murtadd, next to smallest in the shrunken fleet, was nevertheless one of the survivors. Zo worked, knowing it was useless. Knowing that something lay waiting just beyond his perception. "Zo report to the con." Zo pushed and floated his way through the companion-ways of Murtadd, zero-geed for repairs-and because the gravity torker drew power they could no longer spare. Grasping a final stanchion, he swung himself into the command center. Flanked by two Jarps, whose height emphasized his shortness, Artisune Muzuni's severely tailored black silk business suit was rumpled. One knee was ruptured. His obi was stained but he retained his ornate prasswork holsters and twin stoppers. His epicanthic eyes were as expressive as a parking ticket. Sisterslicer's sweet face was gentle as the poison its tongue eternally dripped, dripped, dripped among the pirate crew. Red's huge round eyes showed . . . Suddenly Zo knew what the pirate chief was going to ask. "Skipper of the Murtadd's just bought it," Muzuni said. Since his captain had been sorely wounded, this came as no surprise to Zo. "Looks like you're it." Zo had not risen to second in command without seeing 93 through more subtle traps than this. Now that I'm all suffused with joy and gratitude he'll drop a bomb and see what my face gives away. Zo chose his words with care. "I pray to all allowed gods that I may merit and justify your confidence in me." "Somebody has to do a dirty job," the pirate chief continued. "If you take the command you take the job." "I'll do my best." Artisune Muzuni handed him a cassette. SIPACUMs worked off preprogramming stored in tetradecimal array. The tetra-bubbles were still called mem-chips after some long forgotten device, and were too small to see without a strong light and good eyes. For ease of handling and labeling, the bubble crystals were encased in a cassette the size of another long-forgotten device. They looked like razor blade wrappers. "My ace in the hole," the pirate chief explained. "I'll not mention the system since something seems to be listening in on us. When you get there the warehouseman will give you whatever you need.'" "What will I need, sir?" "Seven of the newest SIPACUMs you can find in stock. All modules. Do not take external cargo, by the way. There may not be time to unhook and maneuver

when you get back. But any spare in-hull room could be filled with lampreys. The main thing is to blueshift back here." Zo considered the cassette and the captain. Jarps' expressions did not correspond to humankind's but Sisterslicer's triumph was transparent. Red did not look happy. "Will you be going with me, sir?" "I've got to hold things together here." "I'll need a couple of crew." "Take Vettering." Zo hesitated. Any way he looked at it, Vettering was dead. Why die with him? "Before I do that, Captain," he began, "there is something you need to know about." Sisterslicer's disappointment and Red's faint smile told Zo he had made the right decision. Zo knew it too. It had been gross, farting, fumbling Vett's idea. Let him face the consequences. Zo was not responsible. (He still felt rotten.) 94 Artisune Muzuni's smile was bland. "In that case, give me back that cassette," he said. "You'll have much better luck with this one. Crew, you said?" Zo asked for Red and, playing safe, suggested that the Jarp select a third crew member. Red chose another Jarp. Before Zo had readied their departure Artisune Muzuni dedicated a burnt offering to Tao's altar. The Lord of Equilibrium accepted the smoke of Vettering's left testicle with His usual lack of comment. While Zo, with the aid of the Jarps, was pushing off far enough from the cluster of repairing ships to make a jump, he analyzed the substitute cassette in Murtadd's still balky SIPACUM. Once the coordinates were read, he programmed their reciprocals into SIPACUM. He stood grimacing in thought. Then, just in case somebody knew his mind better than he did, Zo interspersed a few random selections from a series of already random numbers. Still feeling the attention of that something on the back of his neck, he turned to the Jarps. "Red," he said. "You can still back out." "Whither thou goest I shall go," it replied. Zo was sure he had heard that old Jarp phrase somewhere before. "T'lee," the other Jarp said, then adjusted its openwork helmet. "I may not be smart," it said, "but I know when to get off a sinking ship." Murtadd went on the Tachyon Trail. Zo didn't know where he was going but it was damned sure not where Artisune Muzuni sent him. "Thrwet'l?" The second Jarp was younger and shorter than Red but with the same limpid oversize round eyes and heartshaped face. Its warheads jutted more stubbornly erect than any postpubescent human female's. It rubbed against Zo with the joyous and uninhibited sensuality of a housecat. It saw better than humans in dim light and got around capably with bat-sonar in no light at all. Its name was Trill. Red touched Trill's head with a mo(fa)therly gesture and its helmet began emitting Erts. 95 "Where are we going?" it demanded for the hundredth time. "Why ask me?" Zo snapped. "Ask SIPACUM." The ship's unit was acting up, giving almost-right answers but never quite enough information to make an intelligent decision. Zo still had that eerie feel of being watched. He could not continue wandering forever in this near-disabled ship. In the days since they had abandoned the Tachyon Trail and dropped back into normal space they had suited up and gone outside to burn off Murtadd's name. In a brief fit of sentimentality Zo had renamed the ship, changing it to something nearer his broken heart. "Murtadd" signified a renegade from the vows of some ancient religion—a man who was allowed three days to repent or face execution. The Hajjya Sufi's new name had once meant Holy Wisdom, of which too little was spread too thinly about the universe. Poor stupid bungling Vettering! Shiva curse the farting, belching slob for forcing Zo to choose! "I don't know where we're going!" he snapped. "I don't even know where I am." Red's gentle eyes glanced up from where it had been coaxing the balky SIPACUM through endless comparisons of their surroundings with the standard star charts. Since the universe's appearance depended on the angle from which it was viewed, each comparison had to look at the chart from every possible angle. There were seven million charts. Even with SIPACUM working properly, each comparison took over a second. Normally, a spacer captain had some general idea of where he was, and could narrow the search considerably. Zo hoped they would be lucky and find it soon. To go through every chart from every angle at one per second would take eighty one days—ess-for-standard. They had about thirty days left before hairline cracks in the hull left them without air. "Ever hear of Alachi?" Red asked. "Hear of

it, you wide-eyed witling! I was born on Alachi!" "Want to go back?" 96 "Are we near?" The Jarp pointed at the display. Shiva! There's some justice in this gray universe after all! Zo had been four when he was conned into leaving-a few days over sixteen years-standard on slowmoving, 1.454-G, technologically backward Alachi where a normal lifespan was fifteen. He remembered how excited folks had been when someone spotted the faint evening-and-dawning streaks of orbiting ships. After all these years Terra Alta Imperata ships were back! There would be trade and travel again. All true, but not quite the way they had expected. A generation of their best and brightest had traveled. They had been traded. And Zo had joined his captors. For the last three years-ess he had traded in countless other primitives. Now he could make amends. Go back down to Alachi and warn them about. . . about Artisune Muzuni? No; that pirate would not be back. Zo knew now that others had been and would be again. Such planets as Alachi were "protected." Protected from whom and what were moot questions. From his augmented studies and just plain crew talk Zo knew that Muzuni might have hung on forever if he'd been content to continue trafficking only in slaves. TGW and TGO gave lip service to human rights but their main concern was to prevent war along the spaceways. Artisune Muzuni held a planet for ransom and they worried. He held two planets for ransom and they acted. Zo hoped he had gotten away in time. "We'll scuttle ship," he said. "It's one thing to rearrange profiles and paint out names. It's something else to delete every possible signature old Murtadd leaves whenever that creaky tachyon drive comes on." Round eyes stared at Zo, limpid brown pools of dismay. "Twoo!" Trill protested. Red did not correct the smaller Jarp's helmet setting. "Abandoned on a primitive planet?" it wailed. Zo was suddenly sick. It might be his planet but what 97 would his people think of Jarps? Even if the creatures weren't hounded and exorcised to death, what kind of life would it be for the two of them far from home and with never a hope of seeing another of their own kind? He shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean it." "What do you mean?" Trill demanded. Zo hesitated, looking at them. "We're in business for ourselves now." (Red's trans-lahelm was getting worn and scratchy. "Our first need is repairs-or a better ship. Either requires cred-stells. How do we go about getting some?" Since leaving his home planet Zo had learned only one occupation. Now TGO and TGW were making that profession dangerous. Still, he did know a world where there were easy pickings. Knew it rather well. He looked questioningly at the Jarps. "Do you have any ideas?" Red and Trill studied him mournfully from limpid brown eyes. "I was a mere babe when I was torn from my parents," Trill explained. "Into slavery." "There is a human expression," Red said. "Something about a bird in the hand-' "You don't know any other way to make money either, then?" "Most spacefarers don't work for wages," Red said. "They sign on for shares of profit. Profit or loss depends on the skill of their captain." "And there's only one skill among the three of us." Zo sighed. "All right then. We go to Alachi." "Your home-world?" Red's horror was undisguised. "We won't be staying long. I was a boy when I left home. Since then I've grown up into something different." "What does that mean?" the Jarp demanded. "A man has to start somewhere. Once I've acquired some capital . . ." Zo paused, looking into four huge, perfectly round limpid eyes. "Maybe then I'll be able to afford a conscience." Two: Ulf 9 We're going to teach these scoundrels to respect human rights-even if we have to kill every last one of them. -Reliable Government Source Ulf could not break out of the dream. Struggling toward wakefulness he kept slipping back into some never-never land where ideas and images he had never imagined were crammed-funneled into his overloaded mind. Overlying this kaleidoscope of forced learning was some visceral knowledge that he had been buried alive. Deep in his dream he strained to bend knees and elbows in a box that was too small for movement. Slow as the azaafrunn's blooming, the conviction grew that he was not dreaming. Ulf was in some kind of a box-a container no larger than one of those godzoon-wicker baskets in which the wood-poor Neverminders buried their dead. He ought to be panicked by this knowledge. Instead, Ulf lay uncaring in his cocoon, waiting and absorbing

things he had never dreamed existed. A confused memory-montage recycled and he could not turn off images of the frantic daylong shuttling of the factor's "army" up to Catenary-hour-long reigns of terror that started with crushing acceleration that made breathing impossible and then abruptly shifted to a weightlessness that made it even more impossible to keep hastily gulped breakfasts down. Vomit in freefall was even less appetizing when breathing had been interrupted so long that folks gasped and inhaled no matter what. Why Catenary! Everything Ulf had ever read about space gave the ships such romantic names as Coronet or Firedancer. The huge roundeyed-creature he learned to call a Jarp had spared a moment from their chivvying of still one more 'minder recruit into the shuttle's cargo bay. With gentle sweetfaced patience it explained that Captain Zo had named his ship in honor of some elder on his native planet--an ancient wise man who had used ancient uncalibrated-ruler-and-dividers methods to instruct young Zo in geometry. Wakefulness advanced and receded as Ulf lay in the coffin. Vision ended only seems away when he opened his eyes. The air was lifeless as a salt cavern's. No hint of the pungent azaafrunn odors whose changes marked the seasons on yellow-sunned, yellow-aired, yellow-everythinged Nevermind. Ulf had never breathed filtered air before. He drowsed, wondering vaguely why he knew the air he was breathing was filtered, scrubbed, and recycled. Who told him the oxygen was electrolyzed from waste water with an apparatus that had changed little since an ancient time when ships fought underwater on some legendary planet out on the rim? Then his eyes focussed well enough to decipher PULL HANDLE TO RELEASE. Another timeless interval passed before Ulf realized that PULL HANDLE was not written in Nevermind, the only language he could speak. He pulled it. There was a faint hiss of equalizing air as the foot of the pod opened. Ulf squirmed and abruptly he was drifting outward, feetfirst into zero G. Then he recognized the endless stacks of sleeping pods in a cargo hold. And Ulf knew where he was. He was abruptly and intensely aware that something had gone wrong. He had helped the offworlder to muster the factor's "army." He had supervised the three liftoffs it had taken before the shuttle had them all in orbit. Ulf had directed the rednecks he despised into these holds. He had explained, repeating Captain Zo's instructions that they would be jumping immediately into hyperspace. The spacefarer told him there was neither air nor food nor accommodation for so many people on what was usually a violently emetic experience for a first-timer. There had been a tacit understanding that Ulf-and Alianora-True God, where is she? In here with all these rednecks? Neither of them was to be part of the mercenary force. Ulf was ship's company! Even the dead Factor had warned him that under no circumstances was he ever to think of enlisting in that "army" Captain Zo had promised high adventure in space. What am I doing here? I'm not supposed to be in any flaming cargo hold! Blinking and squinting in the sudden light, Ulf saw that he had not been first to awaken. The youths he had recruited into the factor's army floated in a glowering cloud, grasping stanchions and sleeping pods to hold position in the zero gravity. Some were positively green from G-sickness. Mostly though, Ulf thought they looked mad. At him. Only three or four of the three hundred sleeping pods remained closed, which meant that nearly every redneck had awakened before Ulf. What happened while I was asleep? Why am I in here with all the rest of them? A pod opened and a yawning, blinking girl's legs shot out, drawing every eye for the instant before she hastily pulled her parachuting skirt back around her ankles. Alianora! Where is she? Ulf had a feeling he wasn't going to like the news but this clump of glowering 'minders could not be ignored. "What happened?" he asked. "What's wrong?" The hatch opened and a huge compartmented box floated in, pushed by an improbable being a head taller than most 'minders. Its limpid brown eyes were three times too big-and ringed in wine-red fur. The rest of the near-naked creature's body was bright orange. Its trunks concealed-just barely-the usual male equipment. The beast's upper body bore a pair of firm, improbably jutting warheads encased in a garment that consisted mostly of straps and peek-a-boo. A huge boy Ulf recognized as

one of his latest and more reluctant recruits pointed silently. Other rednecks gathered around the compartmented box to accept food. "So?" Ulf asked. "Didn't you see any as we were boarding? Most spaceship crews have a few Jarps mixed in with the humans." The huge boy pushed closer. Having grown up small and bookish, Ulf had no difficulty in recognizing the signs of approaching violence. Now he remembered the huge boy's name. Osman bent his knees and sprang from a bulkhead, aiming a fist straight at Ulf in the zero G. The fist was followed by the whole weight of his body. Ulf's final doubt dissipated on recognition of an unfriendly act. Pulling at a stanchion, he got far enough aside to spoil Osman's aim. The larger boy squirmed and "swam," struggling for body English. Ulf directed three stiff fingers knuckle-deep into Osman. Satanic rage deflated with a plaintive whistle when the huge recruit sensed a foreign body penetrate up to his sweetbreads. Reaction drove Ulf back into the path of two other Neverminders, both larger than he and more inured to long days stooping over shin-high azaafrunn bushes. As they began pounding on him from opposite sides, Ulf collected himself into a foetal ball. He straightened with the abruptness of an undogged kapult spring. The combined kick and push slammed the larger youths into opposite bulkheads. The one whose head made the loudest noise stopped moving. Several others who had been converging on the factor's storekeeper also stopped. "Now what's going on?" Ulf demanded. Silence. Ulf rotated to face the largest. "Since you have no better use for your tongue, I'll rip it out of you and wipe my ass." "You sold us," the endangered tongue said. Ulf had heard Factor Jaris in unguarded moments when the fat bastard-the fat dead bastard-had grouched over the number of mouths he had to feed and how much 105 money a mouth would bring on some planet with a chronic labor shortage. Which was neither here nor there. Ulf had not sold his fellow Neverminders deliberately. He had recruited them for a mercenary army on Jahpur. For all he knew, that's where they were bound for. "If I sold you," he snapped, "then why am I not home consoling your lonely wives? Why am I not off enjoying my enormous profits on some pleasure planet? What induced me to seek joy in this same cage with the sweating likes of you?" "So you got burnt too." "I haven't had time to look into things," Ulf said. "But if what you think is true, I have one suggestion." There was no reply but Ulf had everybody's attention. In the silence another pod opened and a drowsy girl slipped out feet first. It was not Alianora. "Anybody see the Lady Factor?" Ulf asked. The girl who had just emerged from her sleeping pod rubbed her eyes and Ulf noted that they were slightly crossed. "One of them bigeyed animal thangs come and took her," the crosseyed girl said. "She han't come back." Locked up with a load of farmies that want to kill me! Even if I live through the next ten minutes, what can I do for Alianora? Ulf was totally powerless. The farmies were closing in. "A simple suggestion," he repeated. "We already listened to your suggestions." "I say kill him." "Let's hear it." "He and the Factor cooked this up." "Cooked what up?" Ulf demanded. "How do you know we're not on our way to Jahpur just like the captain said?" "Your flaining spacer captain already sold six of us," the man with the endangered tongue hissed. Extending fingers, he enumerated: "Hassan, Sri Bandahar, Ott, Yokhann, Nozizwe, and Tandazele." Four boys and two girls. Among the better looking of that year's crop of Neverminders. Ulf didn't want to be- 106 lieve it but he knew he'd better get used to the idea. ' 'How long have I been sealed in that pod?" "Couple of weeks." "Meanwhile the rest of us all been eatin' the kind of swill that bigeyed buggerer drags in." The short boy pointed at the Jarp, who ignored the insurrection while it handed out hotpacked rations and squeeze bottles. "Are you sure they weren't recruited into some detached unit of the maharajah's army?" Ulf knew it was a forlorn hope. "Marched right off into the Handcuffed Cornholer's Brigade," the enumerator snarled. Why did they keep me in the pod longer than the others? Afraid I'd stir up trouble? "Might pay to recall I'm the only friend you got," Ulf began. "If I'm a slave I intend to escape." And unlike you ignorant clods, I intend to make a success of it. "Kill the bastard!" The voice came from the rear. "Puttin' on airs and talkin' big words in spacer just like we ought to

understand-" It was Ulf's first realization that he was no longer speaking 'minder dialect. So that's why I slept longer. Ulf's native cunning had gotten him out of the azaafrunn fields and into punching an antiquated computer in the Factor's office. Had the spacefarers decided he was worth educating a little more than the average slave? He shifted mental gears, trying to speak Neverminder and knowing there were no planetary words for half the things onboard ship. A heavy boot came flying. Used to throwing in gravity, the boot's owner aimed high. As it passed overhead Ulf caught it. "Whose?" he demanded. No reply. Ulf stared at the glowering Neverminders. "There will be no more of this," he said mildly. "Sez you and who else?" "I am going to inspect everyone in this compartment," Ulf said. "Anyone who has lost a boot must learn not to lose the other." 107 The lack of emotion in Ulf's voice reminded the others of how they had once picked on this quiet bookish boy- and of the series of misfortunes that had overtaken his tormentors. As Ulf kicked off the bulkhead they swam to avoid him. The boy with one boot was bigger than Ulf. Now that his anonymity had disappeared he was also quaking with terror. The other 'minders shrank away. I don't want to do this. Maybe I can give him another chance . . . and have them all over me the second I turn my back or go to sleep. Ulf opened the single blade and handed his pen knife to the cowering wretch. "I-don't want it." "This is do-it-yourself time." Ulf struggled to make his voice as emotionless as that spacefaring stranger's who had twanged a dart into the Factor. "Bull-" "If I am forced to dirty my hands removing your eye, I'll be so annoyed that I'll not stop before I've removed several other pieces of your spineless anatomy." Icy-faced, Ulf held out the knife. Unwillingly, the boot thrower took it. Ulf turned his back on the man to whom he had handed a knife. Never having witnessed a bullfight, several Neverminders gasped. "I'm waiting." Saying it, Ulf realized he didn't care which way his gamble turned out. If the lout killed him his problems would be solved. If the bluff worked . . . There was a grunt, followed by a whistling intake of breath. Ulf turned with the cold, stylized disdain of a matador. Blood and vitreous humor slithered down the boot thrower's cheek. "Now clean my knife." Knowing the contagion of misfortune, the others gave one-eye a wide berth as he staggered drunkenly into the toilet-bath. True God, Ulf thought, surely someday one of them will 108 pump up his courage. I've got to get out of here. I've got to find Alianora! "Now," he began in a voice of quiet reasonableness. "Your lives were in my hands when you picked azaafrunn and I kept the Factor's accounts. It was I who quietly 'adjusted' those accounts and saw that you all had something to eat and shoes to keep your feet off the gravel." (Ulf had never done any such thing but .now was not the time for a too scrupulous devotion to accuracy.) "Those of you who do not wish to follow my orders now are free to form your own plans. I ask only that when you're caught and tortured, you not falsely implicate me or mine. "I and mine will not be caught. Mine will remain silent, revealing nothing to any outsider. We will kill immediately anyone within or without our ranks who does not know how to hold its tongue." Ulf paused for a moment. It was not all that different from a recruiting meeting to Recapture Nevermind's Past Glory and Place In The Sun. Except that here Ulf had no godzoon beer or pistrel. "Those who are mine will move to this side of the compartment. Anyone not totally and unquestioningly ready to do my will in all things-over there." At first there was no movement. Ulf waited, neither smiling nor frowning. He had learned a little about it from the Factor but... propaganda was always an iffy business. Should have given them more time-let them digest my prompt and decisive ruthlessness. Ulf was not too surprised when the still snuffling one-eyed boy was first to move to his side of the compartment. In the end they divided one third for him and two thirds against. True God, how can I stay alive? Half of those who joined are just waiting for a chance to get close and slip it into me. I'm safe as long as I'm locked in a sleeping pod but how can I know what's waiting when I open it? The Jarp still drifted about the compartment handing out hotpacked rations and squeeze bottles. "Thweet'1?" It stopped to adjust the setting on its translahelm. "Everybody get something to

eat?" It asked. 109 Ulf had not. "Ever make it with a Jarp?" Ulf had not even seen a Jarp apart from that chaotic moment in the master bedroom, and sporadically during the hours that followed. "How about something to eat?" he asked. Ulf had not even technically made it to joyous, self-effacing finale with a human female. Would have if that flaming spacer and one of these creatures and the Factor had not all come bursting into the master bedroom only moments short of Ulf's moment of truth! "Uh-do you know what happened to Alianora?" "Who?" the Jarp asked. "The lady who came onboard with me." Seeing the alien's puzzlement Ulf added, "Beautiful. Very long legs. Chestnut hair. Lovely set of warheads. She has a perfect skin and a full, firm jaw-" Ulf was silent, remembering the dimple he could get lost in. "All humans look alike to me." The Jarp paused. "The one you were slicing that night we landed?" Abruptly Ulf realized that all Jarps looked alike to him. He nodded. "Pos, that's Alianora." "Captain Zo's giving her some special instruction." "Special instruction in what?" Ulf was instantly suspicious. "In what she does best, I suppose," the Jarp said. "Are you sure you've never-" Ulf wanted to die. Locked up in this hold, what could he do? He knew what he could do if he ever got out. First order of business would be to kill Captain Zo. How many Neverminder rednecks would he have to kill first? "No food for you," the Jarp said. "It'll just make you sick this soon after waking up." "I ... see," Ulf said. Until this instant he had not really been hungry. The Jarp fixed gentle round eyes on Ulf. "What does Catenary mean?" it asked. Ulf searched his mind for information that had not been 110 there before he boarded the spacer and entered the sleeping pod. "Catenary," he said, "is the name of the curve in which a rope or chain droops when strung across a gravity field." "Can you think of no other meaning?" Ulf could not. "Try another period in the pod." Ulf wanted to ask how he could get out of it next time-with two thirds of the 'minders probably sitting around just waiting for the foot of that pod to open. With them all listening he dared not ask. Forcing himself not to display the glum hopelessness he felt, Ulf propelled himself headfirst into his pod and activated the latch. Abruptly Ulf was awake again, not knowing whether he'd slept an hour or a month. Foremost in his mind was the memory of enemies outside. He had to emerge feet first. How many ways could he do it? He breathed deeply of the scrubbed, sterile air. He flexed his arms and legs in the limited space and was abruptly aware of a respectable hunger. This time-if he survived reentry into the cargo hold-perhaps the Jarp would give him food. He strained to reach the pocket in his baggy pantaloons. No room to bend his elbow. Gasping and twisting, he finally got his left hand over and captured the penknife that no spacefarer had bothered to confiscate. Superoxygenated and ready, he kicked the pod open and shot across the cargo hold with a single lunge. Grabbing a stanchion, he swung his back to the bulkhead. A few sleeping pods gaped but most were sealed. Abruptly he knew that while he slept another batch of Neverminders had been offloaded and sold. The one-eyed boy was among those who had not. "Welcome back, leader," he said. "We feared you'd sleep forever." Such devotion was touching. Ulf drifted back to his sleeping pod and saw that the Neverminders had not been unanimous in their affection. His pod was dinged where makeshift tools had struggled to pry it open. Something was broken off in the hole to which only ship's personnel 111 had the necessary key. The continuous hinge along the bottom edge of the opening was-True God, those were teeth marks! "How many?" "Master?" "How many 'minders were sold off since I slept?" "None, master. But food and air run low and the Jarp says there are engine troubles." One-eye shrugged. "That, at least, is why most of us take turns sleeping." The hold's hatch opened and a Jarp pushed in the huge hot-box, cumbersome but weightless in zero G. It was handing out packaged meals when its huge round eyes focused on Ulf. "Thrweet'l?" It made an embarrassed movement to adjust its translahelm. "What else does catenary mean?" it asked. "Catena," Ulf recited, "is from some dead Urth language. It means chain." "You begin to understand," the Jarp said. "Come with me." "Where to? When can I eat?" "You've learned the meaning of chains," the Jarp said.

"Now you must learn the value of silence." "Master!" the one-eyed boy wailed as Ulf stepped out of the hold. "Do not forget us!" As he followed the Jarp down a companionway past closed cabin doors Ulf realized that total despair was the only environment sufficiently fertile to grow a new religion. He considered his responsibility to his new flock. Fuck them all! 10 Spare the rod and spoil the evening. -Kelly P. Cast Ulf had no way of knowing what awaited him at the end of the companionway. Farmies all think I'm the expert on spacers-even those who still want to kill me. They may know more about the ship than I do. Ulf's brief acquaintance with Catenary had been while loading his fellow Neverminders into the cargo hold. He had never visited any other part of the ship. Alianora, if he was to believe the crosseyed 'minder girl (and/or this Jarp who led him past a sequence of lookalike cabin doors) had escaped the cargo hold. Out of the wok and into the fire? Ulf remembered the speculative way she had studied black-ringed, almost-handsome Captain Zo. Poor Alianora! Maybe beauty was a curse just as the Book of the One True God proclaimed. Beauty had brought no great joy to the azaafrunn festival queen's brief career. Chocolate-eyed Ulf had scraped the sparse beard from his own chin often enough with Nevermind's barbarous razors to know he was less than ugly. What had it brought him? The only thing that had kept him alive and out of the azaafrunn fields was a quick mind. Am I going now to be sold? Will I escape? Or will I find ways to enslave whoever thinks to own me? What's happening to Alianora? The sleeping pods seemed able to impart all kinds of 112 113 knowledge. Forgetfulness too? Ruefully, Ulf could recall little to remember or much to forget between him and Alianora. Would he ever get an opportunity to finish what had begun so well? The Jarp knocked and opened a door without waiting. Instead of entering, it pushed Ulf inside. Standing uncertain in dim light, Ulf heard the door snick closed behind him with a heavy finality. "Come closer. Stand in the middle of the room." It was a woman's voice-he thought. Ulf was unsure how many races existed among spacefarers. It could be something with seedpods and tentacles for all he knew. He moved to the center of the dim-lit cabin. "'Do you 'minders all wear those bag things around your bottoms?" Ulf had always worn pantaloons loose enough to turn around in. The black and indigo tights affected by spacefarers were . . . disquieting. Ulf had supposed that once he became a spaceman he would become accustomed. So far the opportunity had not presented itself. "Awful places, those cargo holds. Drop those rags down the chute and step into the shower." Ulf's eyes had accustomed a bit, but he was in the center of the room and the glare left the corners in darkness. He squinted. "If you want to get on you'd best learn not to dawdle." The voice was low. It sounded human. Like a woman. Ulf had not been wearing much the first time he met a spacefarer. And now that he thought about it, Captain Zo had been totally unshocked-as if there was nothing unusual about walking in on someone slicing a piece of cake! Do they have any morals at all? Do they obey the commandments of the One True God? To Ulf's limited observation spacefarers seemed less afflicted with modesty than the longsleeved, highnecked shoetop-skirted Neverminders. And no matter what their ways, they are the ones who give me orders-at least for now. He undressed and went into the shower. 114 This machine was more thorough and had a more delicate touch than the high speed production unit in the cargo hold. He braced himself, gasping and gritting his teeth while it scrubbed him in places where nothing apart from his own hands had ever scrubbed before. True God, I'm being handseled by a machine! Don't they do anything the natural old-fashioned way? His bath terminated barely short of gonadal cataclysm. The machine blow-dried and powdered him. He returned to the other room, wishing for a towel like Neverminders used. Such seemed unknown among spacefarers. There was nothing to cover his nakedness. His eyes had accustomed now. Cautiously, he inspected the cabin. He saw no one. He passed through the other door of the bath and stuck his head into the adjoining cabin. He recognized the bed. Other furnishings' functions were unclear. The cabin contained neither human nor Jarp. Captain Zo grinned as he entered the con-cabin. "Offhand I'd say it's time I relieved

you." As Candila studied the view of her cabin her dark, amethyst eyes warmed with interest. "How thoughtful of you," she murmured. "Is that the one you told me about- the poor boy who was interrupted at some worst possible moment?" "If I hadn't been so busy keeping that flaming drive together I'd never have made the mistake of putting him in with the others," Zo said. "They're his own kind, from his own planet, aren't they?" "They've also arrived at the somewhat exaggerated conclusion that he's responsible for all their problems. If we don't keep him away from them we may end up with a piece of totally unsaleable merchandise." "Intelligent, you say?" "He'll take the ship if he can!" Candila stared. "And you want to let him out of the hold? Give him the run of the ship?" 115 "How many stells will he bring us dead?" Candila signed. "One of these days you'll be too smart for your own good." "He'll atrophy if I keep him in a pod forever. And with you and me and Red standing watch-on-watch . . . who stands guard over him?" "Why look at me?" Zo smiled. "Unreleased energy just builds up until it explodes." "It does get boring when you're involved with some new acquisition," she admitted. "But if there's any real grit in the boy, a slice of cake won't take his mind off Other matters." "Perhaps not," he said, remembering events long past. "But if he thinks he's seducing the first mate and that she's going to back him up when he makes his move against the man who caught him . . ." Candila gave her captain an admiring glance. "There are times," she said, "when I suspect a strain of pure evil in your hard, handsome head." "I relieve you," he said, and eased himself into the first chair. "Relief." His woman sighed. "Just what everyone needs and only some lucky few ever get." Turning to Zo, she asked, "Any r6le suggestions?" He passed a hand through shoulder-length ringleted hair. "You'll have to play it by ear," he said. "But if he tries to pull some shitkicker country boy act, don't believe it." "Isn't he?" Candila wore usual skintight shipboard attire in a blue that was almost black except for the ten-sems-wide stripe that ran down each side of her body from armpit to ankle. She was young by spacer standards, with a trim athletic body and the lithe muscularity that was standard equipment on high-G planets. At first glance she seemed of the same race as Captain Zo-the same smooth darkness of skin and a prominence of nose that Egyptians caricatured when Greek mercenaries first overran their empire. It took a second glance to see that the light brown ten-sem stripe down the sides of 116 her skintight and totally wrinkle-free suit was not cloth, although it might have been considered decoration. The brown was the same color as Candila's face and was composed of Candila. "Just because he's not educated doesn't mean that boy's not smart. So's that hyper-leggy piece of the Factor's cake that he was slicing." Zo grinned and ran an appreciative hand along the open strip down her suit. "You will, as is your custom, do exactly as you wish. And you'll dither away countless hours selecting just the right outfit." She gazed at him, brows up questioningly. Well-shaped, those brows. "I sense that you're trying to tell me something." "What you have on may be everyday work clothes to you but the elders of your own planet would stone you, Candila. Nor is that standard attire on Nevermind. Do you want to fascinate the boy?" "It's always more pleasant than rape." "Then my humble suggestion is-go as you are." "You're sure?" Zo sighed and patted his first mate's firm round bottom. "Clothes are nice but even that young innocent in your cabin knows something that no woman-and I include Akima Mars-ever seems to've worked out." "And what profundity is my captain about to deliver this time?" "Slicing is fun. Every boy wants to try it. Ask that planetbound shitkicker and he'll say you can slice boys. You can slice Jarps. You can slice HRal. Best of all, you can slice young, wellbuilt, willing women. But no matter how exotic, how alluring or enticing, you cannot slice clothes." "Men!" Candila snapped. She left the con-cabin and drifted toward her own, wondering if Zo would ever find the time and the money to get the G working properly again. She stopped to look at herself in the first full-length mirror she found. Her work uniform was clean. Why not? She opened the door to her cabin. 117 "Well, hello!" she greeted. It was the first time a woman had ever walked in on Ulf when he was naked. For an

agonizing moment he didn't know where to put his hands. True God, she was almost as beautiful-almost as young, almost as longleggedly lissome and irresistible as the Factor's lady. The late Factor's lady. Staring at the woman in skintight blue-black who smiled at him, Ulf could not make himself say the Factor's widow's name. Nor could he control the abrupt levitation of his yataghan. What am I supposed to do now? He had devoted hours to that brief interlude with-the Factor's widow. Hindsight was so marvelously accurate. Looking back, he could not see how or why he could have doubted Alianora's intentions for an instant. This was different. He was no longer on Nevermind. Spacefarers had different ways of dressing. Different ways of thinking. Maybe what was obvious to him was not at all obvious to this handsome dark woman with the almost-black hair that-that she was unpinning! As it came loose, Candila's waist-length hair flared free of gravity, framing her strongwilled face in a delicate glowing halo. Sitting-floating actually-on what Ulf eventually recognized as a couch, she beckoned. He pushed himself toward her and caught a stanchion. She grasped his waist and pulled him down to hover on the couch beside her. "Pull here," she murmured, and touched a tab at the back of her neck. He pulled and realized for the first time that the rather broad stripe down the side of her body was not some other color of cloth. The work suit peeled off like a second skin. She squirmed this way and that getting out of mid-calf equhyde boots. She balled and tossed her clothes into the same hopper that had devoured Ulf's baggy pantaloons. "Punch us up a couple of Lanatian Cherries and some Heaven High," she said, "while I go rinse my stash." Ulf was so mystified by the first instruction that he never heard her second remark. If he had he'd have been 118 shocked-at least until he learned that, for lady spacefarers, the phrase signified "take a shower." "luh-what?" "Fix us a couple of-" She saw his helplessness and took pity. "There's a first time for everything," she said. "I wasn't born in space either. What's your name?" "Ulf. Ulf Jort." "Mine's Candila." "Is that all of it?" "Outside this cabin you call me First Mate." Candila punched up the drinks and the Heaven High. Leaving Ulf staring into his, she tripped into the shower. Remembering how his first and only slicing session had ended, Ulf was torn by conflicting desires. One moment he wanted out of here-even if it meant back into the hell of a walking cargo hold with every hand against him. Yet he remembered the brief feel of firm warm flesh when he had pulled that tab-and the matter-of-fact way she had stripped and gone to freshen up. All long and ripply and . . . naked. The Factor-the dead Factor-had taken Ulf under his pudgy wing for his skills in accounting. Ulf was not sure what Candila wanted but he was reasonably certain that her books were no more out-of-balance than her body. "I feel much better now." As a freshly scrubbed first mate drifted across the cabin toward him, capturing one squeeze bottle on the way, Ulf felt immeasurably better too. With no baggy pantaloons to hide behind there was no way to conceal his burgeoning emotion. "I-uh-" "The gods gave us speech in order that we might hide our thoughts," Candila said crisply. "But a stiff slicer tells no lies." She captured Ulf's in a no-nonsense fist and squeezed. Hard. He almost yelled from the sudden pain. Surveying his wilting slicer, Candila said, "All things in good time. First, have a drink." She lit up a joint of Heaven High. Since smoking was unknown on Nevermind, Ulf observed closely. She passed him the joint and he 119 sensed a brief erotogram as his lips touched something just out of hers. "Nature," she explained, "is wonderful but human ingenuity can always improve upon it." As the drug began soaking into him Ulf began to see the wisdom of his new friend. She was lovely, knowledgeable, fullbodied, firm, and here. She was ready. She was willing. One look at her and Ulf knew he could never survive the aura of concentrated eroticism long enough to do either of them the slightest bit of good. He held his breath, fighting back humiliating visions of blurting, spurting failure. Then the Heaven High began to work. "Aaaaaahhh!" It was lovely to relax beside a warm, willing woman. Candila put down her squeeze bottle. Moving gently without encumbering gravity, she scooted onto his lap, twisting her upper body until full, firm warheads brushed his chest. She

kissed him. He savored armsful of naked- not nude-tautskinned woman and wove unhurried visions of a long, love-filled evening. "That really is good stuff," he murmured. "Mmmmmmm," the very naked woman replied, and silenced him with a thrusting tongue. He held it as long as he could. When he came up gasping for breath she murmured, "Just like tennis." "I beg your pardon?" "Anyone can bat a ball around," she said. "But to become an expert and to extract true joy from the game requires constant practice and one other thing." He blinked. "What else?" "An experienced and willing teacher." "What next, teacher?" "I believe it's time to work on your stroke." 11 There is only one right way for a machine to run. The ways it can go wrong are so infinite that every operating engineer lives with constant terror. -Kislar Jonuta (R.I.P.)

Alianora Sammak had never volunteered to be beautiful. She had merely accepted it, just as she had accepted early on that Smallholder Sammak, informally known as Poppa, would never be anything but a smallholder. She also knew that his inability to impregnate his wife with anything more valuable than a stepladdered series of daughters would keep him in the lowest category of smallholder, falling slightly deeper in debt each year to Factor Jaris. When Girdek Jaris began sniffing out Poppa with broad hints about all the honors and advantages that would accrue to the queen of the azaafurun festival, Alianora had known instinctively that any honor or advantage was likely to be as fraught with strings as the yearly lottery box where dodders bought strings at a cred a pull until the lucky one came out with a company chit for a keg of godzoon beer. The preliminaries had not begun before Alianora sensed all the strings that pulled her in ways she did not wish to go. In spite of seeing it all, understanding all that was coming, when Factor Girdek Jaris made his formal offer Alianora had been horrified at Momma's advice. "Take it," Momma said. "In the end he'll have you 120 121 anyway. You might as well be the Factor's Lady 'stead of his whore." "But I-Momma-he's so old. He's so ugly. He's so fat." "So am I. It comes from having five daughters and only half a man.'" "But I wanted-" "So did I. So did we all." Momma sighed. "Take your fat husband. Take his fine house and his servants and all the fine clothes he'll give you. It'll be more'n I ever got." "But Momma, if I had a baby looked like him I'd just die." Momma had given seventeen-year-old Alianora some brief and practical advice on contraception, explaining the only method available on overpopulated Nevermind. Her daughter was shocked. "In my mouth! But Momma, that's dirty." "Don't take near's much soap to warsh that thang off as it does to whiten one swaddling cloth," Momma snapped. "And don't you go tellin' me what's dirty till you spend twenty years gittin' up at all hours to wipe five little asses and wonderin' if your man'll bring home any soap tomorrow." In the brief period that she had been wife to Factor Jaris Alianora had not really had time to settle down to a full-fledged hate. She followed Momma's advice and was mildly amazed that her husband made no more demands of her. For the first couple of months. Then Girdek Jaris explained one night that, no matter how much he enjoyed her ministrations, they must face the problem of an heir. "You know the law," the fat Factor explained. "If I die without issue it'll all go to that distant flipshit of a cousin. He'll make damn sure you get nothing." Alianora saw the wisdom of her husband's demand. She explained, however, that it was the wrong phase of the outermost moon for starting a dynasty. "Next week," she promised, and mollified her factorly husband with her usual inducement. 122 "Aaaaaahhh!" he observed just as he dropped off to sleep. Alianora, meanwhile, determined that if she was condemned to give the fat Factor an heir, the least she could do for her own satisfaction was to be one hundred percent sure that it was not his. And if that flaining spacefarer and his bigeyed animal had not interrupted things at just the wrong moment, she'd have succeeded in giving Jaris a much more handsome son than he deserved. Events had conspired against her. Poor Ulf was so inexperienced that he had never guessed that most of his difficulty was because Alianora was still as virgin as he. She was now barely two full strokes past virginity. Nor was she even a little bit pregnant. "Ever make it with a Jarp?" the thing that was leading her down the companionway

asked. Fresh from a sleeping pod, Alianora stared at the round-eyed creature. "Are you the same one-" "I saw your husband die," the Jarp said diplomatically. "Do you-can you crossbreed with humans?" "No but we have a lot of fun trying." "Are you . . . ?" Alianora studied the bright orange . . . person. It was more than a head taller than she. It wore very little clothing. Snug briefs bulged with something that did not seem very female. A bra composed mostly of straps and peek-a-boo openness confined a pair of what they called warheads that jutted as firmly and uncompromisingly onward and upward as one of the Factor's recruiting speeches. Even at fourteen when she had begun to bloom, Alianora thought, hers had never pointed that way! "I'm both," the Jarp advised. "Someday when you've nothing worse to do maybe we can get together. If you're busy, just send that boy around." They "swam" side by side. "Where are we going now?" "Captain's cabin," it told her. "Captain Zo?" "Only one per ship." The Jarp opened a door and 123 caressed Alianora's firm fundament along with its gentle pushing her inside. The cabin was dark. She felt her way around, afloat, bouncing gently off one surface after another. "Wish I had a light," she grumbled, and immediately the cabin was lit. Swift exploration proved that she was alone. Having sensed the dark, ringlet-haired spaceman's appreciation of her festival-queen body, Alianora had a fair idea of what awaited. That prompted her to search the cabin for a weapon. She found none. Despairing, she retreated into womanhood, willing to face the fates worse than, providing she could face them well-bathed and -kempt, and adequately dressed. Ship's hold offered little luxury and less privacy. She still wore the clothing she had donned, without underwear, in less than twenty seconds that night in what had been her home's master bedroom. She shed the boots and longskirted traveling suit-and discovered a benefit of gravitylessness. Lifted and lofty, her breasts stood even higher than the Jarp's! Of course her hair was afloat, too. Naked in the empty cabin, she spent half an hour doing what she could with the limited tools at hand. Unsatisfied but resigned to the condition of her clothes, she turned to herself. The shower worked just like the one in the cargo hold. This unit was more thorough, however, gently exploring and flushing orifices never plumbed by her husband. To Alianora's surprise, there was pleasure to be had in surrendering to a machine. Scrubbed, dried, and powdered, she stepped from the shower and reached for her clothes. They were gone. Captain Zo was not. "Very nice," he said with an appreciative smile. Before Alianora could react he handed her a filmy peach-hued peignoir. It was not all that different from the garment she had used to seduce Ulf into giving the Factor an heir. She snatched the pinkly diaphanous fabric from his 124 outstretched hand. Turning her back, she slipped into it. It covered little, emphasized much, and was tight nowhere. "Where will you sell me?" she asked, as if casually. She sensed that the captain was startled by the question. Perhaps he had planned on some macho-cringing game with a naked beauty cowering in corners. "I hadn't really given the matter much thought," he said at last. "We don't always sell every piece of cargo." "Isn't piece of cake the proper term?" He shrugged. "Some are born to slice and others to get sliced. Neither sex monopolizes the active role." "What's that supposed to mean?" "Females command ships larger than this one." Zo smiled. "Space is not the way it was on my home planet." "You had a home?" She turned to face him, knowing she was whorishly "clothed." "Everyone comes from somewhere." Zo emitted a brief humorless laugh. "Alachi has a few mountains and seas but my home is-if anything-slightly more backward than Nevermind." "Some other dungpile where a female, no matter how able or intelligent, is just some kind of a machine to produce babies and give pleasure?" He grinned. "Sounds like you've been there." "I've been on Nevermind." "As I recall during our brief meeting, you were bending the 'minders' rules rather adroitly." "Do you recall anything I said that night?" "Perhaps if you'd give me a hint." "I kept my bargains with father and husband. From this day forward I'll be owned by no man!" "We're all owned." "Who's your master?" "Catenary!" Zo snapped. "Broken down and barely running: short of every spare and with barely fuel for the next planetfall. Do

you think I own it? This flaining ship owns me!" "And you own me?" He stretched his legs and floated down onto the couch. 125 He studied his gleaming mid-calf boots for a moment, then looked up at Alianora. "Pos," he sighed. "I own you. You are mine to use in any way I see fit, or sell to whom I please. If you're of a legalistic turn of mind it's right of conquest. The principle supersedes all other rights in any code." Alianora's look was high of chin, and cold. "If you seek justice," he continued, "try Forty Percent City." "Where's that?" "I've not the foggiest idea, and I pray to Shiva's Radiant Rectum that I never learn. Should you-or if you find perfect justice-kindly send me a message. You'll have discovered something no one's ever found in this universe." "I will not be used!" Alianora snapped. "Nor will I use an unwilling woman! The universe is replete with young and supple females who will administer with alacrity to my every whim. I take no joy in rape. That door you cannot take your eyes from is not locked. If you can't find your own way back to the cargo hold just ask anyone you meet.'" "But!-" "Have second thoughts?" Zo grimaced. "So, my dear, have I. And since a slight vibration has developed in the main drive, I'm afraid I've no time to discuss philosophy." He turned and opened the door. "Plaining wornout P-P's going to put us all in Forty Percent City!" he snarled as he flung himself down the companion way. Laciily bedecked as if for a wedding night, Alianora sat thoughtful and alone in Zo's cabin. Momma's advice had helped her to survive on Nevermind. Was Momma's advice applicable everywhere in the universe? Alianora did not know how to pilot a ship. Even if Captain Zo were to give her Catenary she could not find her way back to Nevermind. More important to the former azaafrunn festival queen was the knowledge that she did not want ever to see again that dismal yellow-sunned, yellow-skyed, yellow-soiled, yellow-cropped flatness that the 'minders called a planet. 126 She was still thinking when Zo returned. This time he was sweaty and worried, with grime on his blue black work suit, and with his boots smirched. "You still here? Get back to the hold. If you ever change your mind and if we're still alive, tell the Jarp." Alianora reached a decision. Kneeling awkwardly in no gravity, she braced for leverage and began tugging off Zo's scratched boots. Then she worked herself around and began massaging the lump of hard muscle between his shoulders. "Some days nothing goes right," she observed. He emitted a brief bark of a laugh. "You have just discovered Murphy's Law," he explained. "The principle is universal." "What's that?" "If there's any possible way anything can go wrong, it will." "Queen!" she spat. "Of what?" Alianora explained about the azaafrunn festival, and about the deal between her father and the Factor. Zo studied her admiringly. "So you were just trying to produce an heir?" "Why else would I give myself to still another man," she asked, wide-eyed, and he saw that she was serious. "Shiva's Scrotum, he must have been a disgusting piece of pork fat!" "Ulf?" "Your husband. The Factor." He sighed. "Believe me, girl, I know the 'joys of innocence.' On Alachi the base rule was always keep females pregnant and/or barefoot. But you-did you ever have one fleeting moment of pleasure?" "I felt real arousal for the first time in my life with Ulf. And that hadn't lasted long enough for me to stop hurting when all of you came bursting in." Zo was incredulous. "No imagination? No fantasies?" He had a flash of his initiation by "Hakeema." So long ago! "Months with a man slicing you every night and you 127 never once closed your eyes and thought of someone young and handsome?" Looking everywhere but at him, Alianora outlined the extent of her carnal relations with her husband. Zo was astonished and let her know it. "Granted, it would be difficult to construct much of a fantasy under such circumstances," he commiserated. "But did no one on Nevermind ever tell you it works both ways?" Her face showed him clearly that she did not begin to understand. "If the gods exist it may be true that they created woman for man's pleasure. But have you never asked why they created man?" "Many times," she admitted, in a pitiful little voice. "True pleasure comes from giving pleasure. The best things in life are free-even to slaves." He began kissing his gentle way down her throat, tracing erotic circles around her breasts,

tonguing walnut-hued nipples into full-fledged erection. "Mmmmmmmmm," she observed. She was gasping with emotions imagined but never experienced while his educated lips explored her navel, explored a cautious path down the firm roundness of her belly and into the upper reaches of a chestnut pubic jungle. She had experienced no more than a few hours of null-G. At first she had been nauseated but soon she got over that. Now, writhing in space seams above the forgotten couch, she was aware only of the corded muscularity of a pair of arms around her bottom while their owner maintained contact. (Some subvocal command had dimmed the lighting and changed its color to a faint pink that was ineffably more exciting than the eternal everywhere-yellow of Nevermind.) And ... a storm was abuilding inside her. She had hovered nightly over the Factor's straining member, licking it into submission and receiving an occasional pat on the head that reminded her of her position in the hierarchy of the great house. Girdek Jaris's tiny furry pet received more pats per diem than did Alianora. 128 Nothing on Nevermind had ever prepared her for what was now happening. Instead of her pleasuring some fat, uncaring man, this hardmuscled, jet-ringed, almost-handsome man was deliberately forgoing his own pleasure. She felt it when he abruptly spun her bottom until they floated end-to-end in what she would learn to call sixtynine, which made no sense in tetradecimal notation and was unknown on Nevermind. It made a great deal of sense when she felt her thighs being parted by the bullish insistence of his head. But why was she squirming and gasping? The Factor used to do that-usually in the instant before he filled her mouth with the juices of love. Now it was she who was flowing. She felt her thighs parting against her will, clamped them shut again, and trapped a pair of ears. Imprisoned in an erotic scissors, this man's busy tongue did not surrender. She felt a rosy wave of joy suffuse her longlegged body. She was moaning, squirming, rocking her pelvis in an ancient rhythm. And that tongue would not go away. A little shriek escaped her when her labia sighed apart and his agile tongue explored the circumference of her swollen femininity. She wished he would stop it-stop it at least long enough for her to catch her breath and think about all the new things that were happening to her. She had always controlled her body. Now her body was controlling her! Hearing a faint continuous moan of joy, she was shocked to realize it was coming from her. Tension began building in her midsection. His tongue worked in lazy circles until Alianora's thighs were clasping and unclasping spasmodically, branding the tender skin of her inner thighs with the imprints of two flaming ears. His tongue drove deep where no man had gone before. She tried to relax, enjoy it, take what life would give her. Her body would not let her. It was strange. She had always been in control of her body. Now it was taking over, making her squirm and moan with delight while this marvelous tongue plumbed secret pockets of pleasure within her. 129 And the tension! Her belly felt as if she was full of the rubber bands that little Neverminder boys twisted to power their toy kapults. Twisting, stretching, growing ever tighter until she knew something was going to burst. Firm, hardmuscled hands grasped her buttocks, fingertips toying with the tender strip between twin apertures. How had she lived so many years in this body without knowing its potentiality for pleasure? She felt herself soar, floating off the couch until her only contact with reality was the pair of arms around her bottom, the head between her thighs and that remorseless torturing tongue. Some tiny demon was twisting her insides into knots. It hurt but the hurt was so good! Drowning in pleasure beyond her wildest virginal dreams, she heard a thin keening moan and was shocked to know it came from her sagging mouth. Would he never stop this ceaseless caressing, kissing, licking? She wanted him to stop-if only long enough to convince herself that all this was really happening- happening now, and to me! If she had known this back on Nevermind . . . She thought bitterly of the endless errands she could have invented for the Factor-the nightlong meetings in distant places while she and Ulf . . . (Poor Ulf . . . what was happening to him? She had used him shamelessly. But maybe if the One True God had just granted them a few more minutes . . . Would she have learned to 'joy herself as fully with that

handsome inexperienced boy?) Would she ever stop 'joying this hardmusclcd spaceman? Still grasping her bottom, he licked, kissed, caressed, drove his tongue into unimaginable places. Each dart of that tongue increased the tension until she knew she was going to be torn apart from the sheer joy of love. It was too much. Great pink roiling waves of passion suffused her longlegged body until she was near fainting. He would not stop. Gasping for breath, he substituted a finger for his tongue and found another secret trigger deep within her. 130 " Aaaaaaahhhh!" She knew it was her voice. She felt a great ripping, whirring within her, as if a dozen kapult springs had released all at once and then the tension was easing. She felt herself melting down into a tiny puddle of passion. "Now that," her lover murmured, "is what your husband could have been doing for you every time you did for him." Floating and suffused with a lazy satiation, she abruptly realized that this man had made no demands on her. He had done all this just for her pleasure! Did I learn selfishness from the Factor or was it bred into my 'minder soul? He prodded her gently through the dim light and into the shower, but instead of turning the machine on he tended to her scrubbing. Running slick soapy hands up and down her body, in and out, until her lassitude was replaced with renewed desire. She began scrubbing down her tormentor. Moments later they were once again playing love's old sweet song. This time she was resolved to do her part. Some time later she asked, "Will you show me how to run the ship?" "It would take years and I haven't the time." Alianora was silent. Zo detached himself from her smooth, satiated body and drifted across the room to a cabinet. "Take this." He handed her an outsized capsule. "Swallow it now and it'll be diffused throughout your system by the time you can get into a sleeping, pod." She gazed at him through soft, misty eyes. "I don't think I'll have any trouble getting to sleep. What is it?" "Can't recall the exact molecular makeup," he said. "I believe it's called Introduction to Astrogation. Digest it and I'll see what I can find on ship handling." "I just take this and I don't have to study?" "Not exactly. It'll make the tapes and holos seem familiar-as if you were reviewing something you already know instead of just plowing head-on into new and totally confusing territory." 131 "Shouldn't ship handling come first?" "What's the use of handling a ship if you don't know where you're going?" Abruptly Alianora remembered the filmy peignoir she was wearing. "I can't go back to the hold in this!" "Take the pod in the next cabin. All cozy and safe from rapacious males, females, and Jarps. Come along and I'll tuck you in." 12 Never say goodbye until the bus is actually moving, -Kelly P. Cast Lhari Haddad knew that flying a spacer took less skill than was once required to drive a ground vehicle. Still, there were good drivers and bad drivers, now as then. The real skill lay in accessing SIPACUM. Ship's Inboard Processing and Computing Unit (Modular) did the donkey work of running a ship-even programmed robots for scraping and painting and all the other grubby little maintenance chores. The units were human-oriented and accepted commands in Galactic (or in any other language if so instructed). It was difficult at times to remember that SIPACUM was just a machine since most machines did not talk back or chew out humans who asked things beyond a machine's ability or limited common sense. Ship handling, in the long run, hinged on an ability to trust instruments-but not too much. So what am I doing here on this ridiculous assignment? Teetering along on too-high heels, Lhari recalled bits and snippets of academy lectures: "Bad captains fall into two categories: those who dither about the con-cabin, mistrusting their instruments, kibitzing SIPACUM until the computer begins to sulk-which drives a chronic worrier deeper into despondency. 'The other kind of bad captain trusts instruments too much. Skippers who ignore the little warning signs-the 132 133 printout that was almost right. . . The rounding-off error that puts a ship two meters off Course on a short run . . . That same excision of one decimal place will lead a too-trusting captain into light years of frantic Where am I? when the Tachy on Trail leads to a distant system." She could find no way of applying the knowledge to her present assignment. Unless luck . . . Being a good captain involved an element of

luck. Luck seemed to improve, though, as captains gained age and experience-the instinct that could feel when there was something wrong. Unlucky captains did not grow old. Suffragan Captain Lhari Haddad, TGW, was barely twenty-five. She was an expert at ship handling. She was less expert at walking on high heels. The "clothing" she had bought from the hust at the Blue Skys of Home Bar fit well enough. Lhari was still uncomfortable. It was not that she was practically naked in this slinky skintite with its multitude of oval-shaped cutouts to show flashes of unadorned Lhari that were sexier than nudity. (Left arm covered; right arm bare. Left leg bare to the hip; right covered to the stirrup at the bottom of the skin-hugging leg of her bottle-green tights.) First year at the academy took care of that kind of delicacy. It was just that almost-Captain Haddad used clothes as necessary tools-something to keep her warm or cool. To the outrage of lesser classmates, forced to use every wile and every aid available, Lhari had never had to lure suitors. They swarmed about her-disproving the adage that honey attracted more flies than vinegar. Like honey and vinegar, Lhari had no particular interest in flies-or men. Just pests to be brushed away before they could become a permanent nuisance. Now she had to catch a fly. He was sniffing the bait. The pudgy spacefarer had exited the Blue Skys of Home a moment after she had shed her TGW uniform and hastily donned the hust's perfume-drenched working clothes. Yet it was hard to be sure . . . the man emitted a belch and continued cursing. What did that slightly built man with the epicanthic fold do 134 back in there to drive him out? To Lhari this jacko did not seem the type who would leave without rearranging some furniture on the way. "Booda's Balls, cut it with the double-time! You're making him run just to keep up with you." She obeyed the prompt in her inner ear. It was hard to tell about voices but she supposed it was the man she had met in the bar-the one who had looked her up and down doubtfully and asked if she knew how to attract men. Threading the streets of Grim as a hust was a different experience from striding down a hastily cleared path as a TGW officer! Strange creatures in loose pants, in tight pants, in no pants at all made remarks she did not understand-save that some seemed to be insulting her and others were inviting. Hands caressed her bottom. Lhari was outraged. Yet what could she do? She was supposed to be a hust. It was worse than hard to walk seductively in 15 sems-high* platforms. Doubly so because she was unused to Resh's gravity and because the shoes were slightly too loose on her trim feet. She stumbled. A lean, hardmusclcd spacefarer with shoul der length jet ringlets and an almost handsome face caught her just short of pitching headlong into the gutter. "All right?" he asked. ' Lhari remembered the role she was supposed to be playing. "Yes, thank you." And thank all permitted gods that he didn't attach himself to me and screw up the operation with that fat fool behind! But he could have tried. Hari's New York Bar loomed ahead. "Slow down," the prompt in her ear warned. "Give him time to see you go in." Lhari entered the bar. Without the automatic adjustment of her TGW shades, she could see nothing. Then her eyes adjusted to the dim light. She saw the ancient, wooden-appearing bar with prass rail and mirror. Above the mirror was the obligatory portrait of a naked lady. Pretty fleshy, this one. * Six inches. Old Style. 135 She studied the bartenders, unsure whether they were human or dolled-up robots. The bartenders, after one brief glance, paid scant attention to another unescorted hust. She sat near the end of the bar and ordered a Marytini. A moment later the pudgy man came in. He wore the usual spacefarer's skintite but this man's body bulged in the wrong places. A little tailoring and he would not look bad. But skin tight and flaming red ... "I'm Vett. What's yours?" Lhari choked in the garlicky melange of alcohol and other odors when he belched. When he lifted one leg and settled onto the stool beside her, Suffragan Captain Haddad longed for the aseptic comfort of Candiru's con-cabin. The spacefarer turned to a hovering bartender. "Throw that possum piss away," he instructed. "Bring the lady a tall plass of Alive and draw me a mug of Starflare." Lhari thanked the fates that he had not forced her to drink beer too. Not that Starflare with its ancient open-fire brewing was not an excellent beer. She just didn't

like anything with alcohol in it. She was reaching for the lemon and errus flavored mineral water when Vett captured the plass. Lhari's thirst disappeared when he sprinkled a pinch of dust into her plass. "Just Heaven High," he said. Captain Haddad did not find an aphrodisiac in her drink reassuring. "I thought you were supposed to smoke that stuff," she guessed. "This is a water-soluble extract," Vett explained. "Go along," the voice in her ear said. Before she could do that the man who had taken possession of her grabbed both drinks in one big hand. With the other he half led, half dragged her across the room to a booth. Lhari considered spilling the mixture. It would do no good. I'm in TGO now. Isn't this what I wanted all my life? It was not working out the way she had expected. The Gray Organization did important work. TGO was the real 136 force for law and order in the universe. So what was she doing dressed and painted as a hust, sitting in a bar and sipping this gagsome concoction while a pudgy man concentrated on feeling her up? I know I'm supposed to seduce him but can't he even wait until we get off to ourselves in a room somewhere? He was practically undressing her. Lhari suffered agonies of embarrassment. Save me from the searing, she prayed. If any of my crew show up in here and see me dressed this way-with this drunken slob mishandling me. . . Two men entered the bar and settled at a table across the room. While they were as far away as it was possible to be in the limited space, they were directly across from Lhari and Vett. All they had to do was look up and they could see ... Neither man looked up. One held a sheaf of printout. He spread it on the table and they ignored drinks to concentrate on whatever the papers held. Lhari endured Vett's caresses. Ah lah, is he going to tear that warhead off? Now he had a hand in her crotch. Lhari gritted her teeth and sipped at her drink. She tried to smile and act as if she was listening to whatever nonsense the pig was muttering while he blew half-metabolized alcohol in her ear. So this is how Heaven High is supposed to act! Glad I never took any before. It was not Heaven High that was doing it to her. Vett had also put just the tiniest smidgin of tetrazombase into the powder that lent bite to her harmless drink. Lhari's vision began to narrow until it seemed as if she was looking through a tunnel. At the far end of the tunnel was one of the two men who pointed at printout and checked off item after item. That short one with the shoulderlength hair . . . that's the man who kept me from falling. Did he really lift me off the ground in this G with just one hand? Clumsy hands were trying to undress her. "Later," Lhari managed. "Not here in front of all these people. There' ll be plenty of time." 137 "Then let's get started." He saw me. The short man with all those muscles looked up and I know he remembered me. He smiled. Across the room the pair shook hands and abruptly remembered their drinks. The taller one accepted the sheets of printout and handed the hardmuscle man an envelope. Some kind of a business deal. I wonder what they're selling. He's cute. I wish it was him running his hands over me instead of this clod. The tall man departed. The short man with the high-G body ordered a second drink and sat relaxed. His eyes met Lhari's again. He waited till Vett was busy looking down her cleavage (very close), then gave her a warning shake of his head. Lhari didn't need the warning. She was already sorry she'd ever gotten into this. But what could she do? If she retreated now her future with TGO would become past. She raised her eyes. He gave her a grin and shrug of sympathy. Funny. Must be that Heaven High stuff. First time in my life I've ever wanted-ever felt anything for a man. And why couldn't I be with that handsome stranger across the room instead of this awful belching-? Responding to some signal Lhari had not seen, the bartender came to their table and handed Vett a mag-coded room key. Vett lumbered to his feet and caught Lhari by the hand. He led-dragged her upstairs. In all fairness, how was Vettering to know this hust was a virgin? He had been pleasuring himself for several days. Satiation and too much alcohol had just about done for the fine fighting edge of his slicer. When he encountered difficulty he drew the logical conclusion. She was deliberately tightening up. For some crazy reason this flaining hust was keeping him out in the cold. "To meltdown with it!" Vett

snarled. He would not be mocked by a hust. She just lay there, not doing anything to help. He gave up trying to thread a needle that seemed to have no eye. 138 He gave her a hamfisted slap alongside one ear. Lhari's head jerked. Her eyes watered and her mouth opened in astonished outrage. Before she could close it the windfilled giant had moved upward astraddle her and now her mouth was full. Her throat was full too. He seemed to be trying to find her sternum from the inside. This isn't really happening. TGO agents couldn't put up with this! It was happening. She wanted to spit it out-bite it off-anything to get out of here. Meanwhile that smidgin of TZ was doing its wicked work on top of the Heaven High he had forced into her. Lhari could not move. She could not do anything unless this disgusting man told her to. I can be here all night. Forever. He can take me off to his ship and lock me up and nobody will ever know. This is how women become slaves. And it's going to happen to me! It did not. Vett made a final lunge and she was drowning in fluids but at least it wasn't hurting her throat so much now. After a few moments he was on his feet. Tossing her a couple of stells, Vett said, "Kid, if I did my job half as bad as you do yours, I wouldn't have these to throw away." Wretched and retching, Lhari stared through tear-filled eyes. "Don't ever go thinkin' you earned them," he said. He softened at the sight of her tears. "Kid, you're in the wrong business." He tossed another stell on the bed beside her. "Buy yourself a sewing machine." Vett left the room. "Don't let him just walk out. He's going to lead you to the object of all this fooling around." Lhari managed not to sob. She spat and gargled and could not rid herself of ... "Hurry up! He's getting away." She struggled back into the hust's skintite garb and 139 strapped on the fifteen-sem platforms. The side of her face was still stinging from Vett's blow. If I don't get to a medic soon my eye's going to be black. Eyes still half blind from tears, struggling not to retch, she made her teetering way downstairs. Oh ah lah! He's still there. He'll see me looking like this! She was not thinking of Vettering. The combination of drugs had imprinted her onto the shorter, hardmuscler man who had just concluded some kind of deal. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked. When Lhari Haddad stumbled and nearly went headlong in front of him the jet-ringed man scooped her up with a smooth, graceful gesture. "Of course you're not all right," he said. "Let's see if we can get you back to your ship before the duty officer gets wise." "Duty officer?" Lhari mumbled. "Why can't I jus' go home with you?" "My first officer would not be thrilled," Zo said. "Try to hang onto my arm and I'll get you out into the fresh air. Maybe we can get you back up to your ship nice and quietly before you get any more blots on your copybook." He sighed. "What ever induced you to take up with that slob?" "Orders." "Shit!" The voice in Lhari's ear rang loud and clear but the voice in her ear had not been drinking the same concoction she had. It did remind her, though, that she was TGO- that this was supposed to be a secret assignment. "Wha' makes you think I'm not-uh-what I look like?" Zo almost paraphrased the voice in Lhari Haddad's ear. Shiva's Scrotum! She's working undercover and she's about as subtle as a bull rhinophant and here I'm so busy trying not to get screwed by Honest Hassan that I didn't even notice! Half walking, half dragging, she made it out of Hari's. 140 The street was brilliantly lit by reflections off the space station and power satellites, augmented by a couple of real moons. As if this was not sufficient, the municipality of Grim had provided public lighting for those few odd corners that used to be available for things best not done by the light of day. People paid surprisingly little attention to an almost-handsome man doing his best to hold a barfing beauty's head where she would do the least damage. Wiping tears with the back of her hand, Lhari turned to her rescuer. "Who tol' you?" "Terminate. TERMINATE! Can't you make that flaining amateur shut up?" "Regulation haircut?" Zo asked. "The academy class ring you forgot to take off? The way you've worn uniform boots so long you can't handle heels?" He sighed. "Bet if I undressed you I'd find a tattooed serial number somewhere." "Do you want to?" Her eyes were suddenly all large and soft. "Want to what?" "Undress me." Zo rolled his eyes hopelessly. He glanced

around. "Taxi!" Not a single flyer in sight. "Taxi, damn it!" At last one stopped. The machine had no driver. "Where to?" it asked, in a nice-enough voice. "Can you take this uh, person back to her ship?" Zo asked. "Preferably in some way that will attract the least attention?" "Happens all the time," the machine sympathized. "What's your ship?" Lhari Haddad fought against the TZ that made it impossible to disobey any order or ignore any question. After an instant's hesitation she uttered a reluctant "Candiru." "Uh huh!" the flyer said. "TGW no less! I've no hands, good sir. You'll have to put it inside." Zo was lifting Lhari, who had just succumbed to a fresh 141 bout of nausea, when six out-of-uniform spacefarers rounded the corner, heading for Hari's. "Booda's Balls, would you look at that!" a young man exclaimed. "The old bitch herself!" another breathed. "Hey man, where you going with our captain?" "A slaver. I know it!" Zo stared at them. "What possible use or resale value could anyone find in TGW personnel?" It may not have been the smartest thing he'd ever said, but Zo had put in a long evening with Honest Hassan and then he had blundered into Vett-who still failed to recognize him-and now on top of this he was stuck with Vett's hust-who was not a hust-and damn it ... Don't I have enough problems without getting involved in whatever cloak-and-dagger games TGW's up to? Next thing he knew it would all turn out to be his fault. Four men and two women were already convinced it was Zo's fault. One of the women followed the sensible course. She used her minicom unit to summon the nippers. The men were less prudent. They advanced on Zo in solid phalanx formation. Shaking his head with exasperation, Zo let the limp Lhari sag to the pavement. "If you really want her that bad, she's yours," he said. "But I suppose you're all too young and not sufficiently wise to settle this sanely." They were not. All four of the youngsters advancing on him were cleancut, handsome, recruiting-poster types. They were taller than Zo. They were also, he knew, from planets that boasted considerably less gravity than Alachi. Glowering, hunkered down in the manner of Terasak wrestlers, they came in range. Zo squatted and fell backwards. As his weight came onto his arms he flipped his body upward and kicked with both feet. Two youngsters in the middle of the line emitted involuntary 'uffs as hardmusclcd legs uncoiled and heels 142 drove sems-deep into solar plexi. It was the last thing they had to say for several days. The pair on the ends of the line stared, unbelieving. Zo inserted a muscular leg between the ectomorphic limbs of one and pushed. The crewman's head struck the walkway with a squashed-melon sound. The final member of the quartet was nursing a fractured ulna when the Grim policers arrived. "Slaver," one of the female crew accused. "He was kidnapping our captain." Captain! What in flaining Sheol was she up to playing hust? "I was doing no such thing!" Zo snarled. "Where would I ever peddle that bundle of incompetence?" "You'll have to come with us,I' the nipper said. "Perhaps," Zo bluffed. "But first, I'd like to review my status on this planet. There may be a question of extraterritoriality.'" "No way," the policer said. "Everybody's treated the same on Resh." "Including the priests of Gri?" From the nipper's reaction Zo knew he had hit a sore spot. "Why don't you just chat up the Alachi Embassy," he suggested. Resh had no Alachin consul. Nor had any other planet, but it could take time to determine that fact. Meanwhile, the nipper knew who would be for burning if by some odd chance the Reshi planetary council should happen to be in need of some strategic material from a planet he'd never heard of. The policer scratched his head. "Would you like a curbstone trial?" "You can put it in your report that I demanded one," Zo said. Curbstone trials had progressed since the ancient days when this legal procedure consisted of emptying one's wallet to the arresting officer. The Grim policer produced the necessary equipment for measuring pulse, respiration, sweat, and several species of brain wave. 143 Zo passed the interrogation with flying colors. The policer looked at those TGW crew who were still functional. "' Satisfied?'" "I don't believe him," one woman said. "Captain Haddad just isn't that kind of a person." The nipper shrugged and began arranging the pressure cuffs on Lhari, who was just recovering from a fresh bout of vomiting. Under the horrified stares of her

crew, Suffragan Captain Haddad corroborated her almost-handsome rescuer's story. "And then when that belching bastard couldn't get it in," she continued, "he stuffed it down my-" "Isn't that enough?" Zo demanded. The nipper shrugged. "Do you know how to stop her?" Drugged into compliant loquacity, Lhari droned on, detailing degradations suffered at the hands and other body parts of one Spacefarer Vett. On and on and on. (Zo wished her crew in hell but no one was interested in him anymore. They stared, eyes huge. And they listened.) "I did it under orders," Haddad insisted. "Whose orders?" "The voice inside my head." The Grim policers seemed to find this amusing. Zo waved down a flyer and made his escape. Lhari Haddad awoke in her cabin on board Candiru wishing and praying to all permitted gods for amnesia-for instant extinction. She wanted to die. The perfection of her death wish was equalled only by the perfection of her memory. She recalled each agonizing detail. How she had made a fool of herself in front of crew! What she had endured with that brutal belchfart spacefarer! She remembered his annihilating parting remark. "Buy yourself a sewing machine." Why couldn't I leave well enough alone? I'm a good officer. In another couple of years I could've been an admiral. Instead I had to try to get into TGO. No wonder they call it The Gray Organization! Dirty! 144 And see how they take care of their own! Told me to drink it and then just left me there to suffer the consequences! Dirty, disgusting ball of flab! What would have happened if I'd told him I'm a virgin? What difference? How can I ever face crew now, after last night? And he was so handsome! First time in my life I ever felt anything for a man and look what he did to me-abandoned me in the street with crew looking on while a bunch of anile planetary nippers dragged the whole sickening story out- Lhari dragged herself to the sanbloc and had a bath. It could not remove the dirtiness she felt inside her. Nor could it remove the growing conviction that all her troubles stemmed from a single source. She could not blame TGO. She must have made it known in countless ways how eager she was to join. At last they had given her a chance-and she had muffed it. It wasn't that horny spacefarer's fault either. He was too slowminded to be capable of creating a disaster of these proportions. The little man with the epicanthic fold in the first bar? Not really. He had warned her. Told her in so many words that she had let ambition interfere with womanhood. Even asked me if I knew how to attract a man! Only one person had the intelligence to have been able to prevent this debacle. Not Lhari Haddad. Not Vettering. Not the stupid little TGO man who should have known better than send Captain Haddad on this grubby little assignment. And he was so cute! First man ever lit a fire in me and see what he did! Left me alone in the street. It's all that evil Captain Zo's fault that I lost my chance with TGO, that I've got to come back here to TGW and face crew and . . . I could kill him! Emerging from the shower, Lhari recalled another vivid line of last night's disturbing dialogue. "'Slaver!'" "What possible use or resale value could anyone find in TGW personnel?" 145 At least she knew what her lover really thought of her. Gritting her teeth and stifling her snuffle, Lhari knew what she had to do. Crew would never respect her again. She would never respect herself until she saw Captain Zo dead. 13 Only as Caesar's slave have I known freedom. -Shaw Heaven High was a decided improvement on nature. Ulf recalled his first frantic attempt to outrun the flame front of explosion back in the Factor's master bedroom with Alianora. His first reaction when lissome Candila, totally stripped for action, snuggled onto his lap had come with an abruptness that actually thrust all that warm willingness away from him. Candila had laughed and squeezed his rebellious member into submission. Now, an hour later, Ulf had gone through the standard warmups. Instead of blurting and spurting in ignominious eruption, his slicer retained its fighting edge. Candila had kissed him and licked him in places he hadn't known he had. Ulf had returned the compliment with interest. Thanks to Heaven High and an experienced instructor, he had finally settled down to a long, deliciously slow and deep stroke, leisurely exploring her depths and experiencing a prolonged pleasure far beyond the usual novice's frantic

stabbing against a stopwatch. "Mmmmmmmmm," Candila observed. Ulf searched for a reply and found none. With his lance still combat-ready, he stopped his metronomically slow stroking and they rested. Locked together in joyous satiation. 146 147 Happy with the knowledge that joy would continue uncon-fined for as long as they wished. "Nevermind must be a pretty-ah, uptight planet?" Candila guessed. "Mmmmmmmmm," Ulf explained. "Long skirts, no bare ankles, separate places along the riverbank for boys and girls to bathe?" "What's a river?" Candila pulled his face from between her warheads and saw that the boy was not joking. She explained. "Wonder if I'll ever see one." "Why not?" "I'm a slave!" Ulf snapped. "So am I." She got her hands around his buttocks and drew him deep into her, grinding and twisting until he reached new depths of unplumbed Candila. "Slavery sure is hell, isn't it?" "You?" Ulf was so startled that for an instant his slicer almost lost its edge. "Did that godzoon rat of a Zo kidnap you too?" "I have never bothered to relieve him of that impression," she said. "Where you from?" "A little deeper and you might speed up just a trifle. Aaaaahhh yes, that's just about right." He contorted himself to lick her dark-brown nipples without backing out of her, a maneuver that was less spine-fracturing without gravity. He had nearly forgotten his question when her voice came with dreamy reminiscence. "Captain Zo owes me one life. Sooner or later ..." For an instant Ulf almost forgot what he was doing. An opportunity! Now how can I use it? Absently, he thrust a little deeper, to be sure to maintain his erection. She hates him. She likes me. It's just a matter of time. True God, am I already such an expert with women that I actually forgot where I am and what I'm doing? He began concentrating on his stroke. "Tell me about it," he murmured. "Not so fast." She sighed. After a moment she added wonderingly, "And you've never seen a river!" Her eyes 148 glazed. Partially in sensuality, partly in memory of the river-of Daresslam. She told him about it, and about her. Ulf let out a luxuriant sigh and realized it had been hours and, thanks to Heaven High, his fighting edge remained undiminished. He got his hands around Candila's hips and drove slowly, deeply. "That's nice," the ageless woman with the unbelievable amethyst eyes breathed. "So what happened when you finally got to the end of the river and back to your own people?" She shrugged. "You can't go back. It became so boring that when Captain Zo came raiding I let myself be caught.'" Ulf stared. "You-wanted to become a slave?" "There are worse things." 14 Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be. . -Victorian purple patch. Far worse things than slavery exist in the universe but Zo and Candila never plumbed the possibilities of Alachi's misery-simply because they never went back. Once onboard Murtadd Candila immediately entered a sleep-learn pod along with the others. Zo and the Jarps shared the remaining air. Before they were halfway to Bleak even Vettering would have complained. Red surveyed Zo from huge round eyes. "It's growing." The Jarp referred to the crack in the hull. Zo had tried to weld it. Later he tried to limit the crack's growth by drilling holes at the ends. Each time the crack outran the stop-holes and continued, until now it ran halfway round the ship's pressure hull. The middle of the crack had spread so wide that they were laying broken bits of sleeping racks across it to keep patches from blowing through. All three slept in spacesuits. Counting the days and the diminishing air, Zo wished he dared put one of the Jarps into a sleeping pod. Neg-the three of them were barely coping as it was. And there was that presence about the ship-a lurking something that waited and watched-that had not left them 149 150 since before Zo's decision not to share the fate of Artisune Muzuni. Zo was no more superstitious than any rational man- which meant that in moments of stress his credulity was beyond the bounds of any religion. He forced himself into an analytical mood. A neurosis? He was certainly entitled to one . . . but Jarps were not renowned for their faith in anything. They felt it too. No time to investigate. The damned ship was breaking in two! Finally they reached Bleak. The new acquisitions sold for more than the dying Murtadd. More miners, at zero wage. Zo engaged passage offplanet on a commercial liner-a piece of luck that, for Bleak's single

yearly passenger ship to happen along just when Zo needed transportation. Counting his creds, he confronted the Jarps. "Do you mind?" he asked. "We need a ship," Red said. "If that'll make the difference ..." "I swear-" .Zo shook his head. What can I swear by? What good are oaths? "I'll do my best to get you out before you atrophy." He was already shipping two pods with live cargo in them. Candila's eyes and face needed reconstruction beyond the hasty patchwork of his first aid kit. A sleeping pod was the only way he could halt gangrene. And he did not need an ignorant and officious Umm nattering about while he strove to stretch his limited funds across financial chasms where lurked strange, toothy predators in business suits. He removed two more pods from Murtadd before the breakers took possession and the Jarps also became fragile, handle with care, this side up cargo from Bleak to Meccah. Once there he engaged a ground car and took two pods to the Medcenter. The other pods went into bonded, dutyfree storage. Not, he hoped, for long. Finding a ship was less easy than he had hoped. There were suitable vessels for sale but the price was seldom right. Finally his patient word-of-mouth paid off. 151 Catenary was a tired old ram-scoop, the duckbilled platypus of the spaceways. Catenary's price was right. Too right. "Papers in order?" Zo asked. "Perfectly." "Good. Let's go to the port captain and have her checked out." "Ahh, umm ... no need for all those formalities." "I see." "I could come down a little on the price." "How little?" The price immediately dropped to half. Zo sighed. "Where is she?" "Dead storage orbit." "I'd have to look at her." They shuttled up and Zo inspected Catenary. Not too large. About right for the only business he knew. Fast and maneuverable in normal space. "How's the SIPACUM?" "'Three years old.'" Later model than anything he ever sent me after. "By the way," Zo asked, "whatever happened to old Artisune Muzuni?" The dealer gave him an odd look. "News must travel slow where you come from. That pirate and his whole damned fleet just up and disappeared." "For good?" "TGO'd give you better than Forty Percent chance of being right.'" Zo felt a frisson as he sensed how close he had come to those same odds. "Are you planning on trading in the Qualaran system?" The dealer's eyes were less casual than his tone. Zo hadn't really thought about it. "If I acquire this bucket, along with its questionable pedigree, how many more systems will I have to stay out of?" The dealer bit his lip. "Well-" he began. The list was appalling. Even worse was Zo's visceral conviction that he had not 152 heard it all. He had, though, pretty much used up all his options. He named a figure. "Final offer and I've already bought her. Now tell me all the other places you didn't mention." Before he finished hearing them Zo thought he was going to be ill. But Catenary was the only wellfound hull he could afford. I'll make one more run. Pick up some more sentient cargo and then maybe I can get out of this business-get a clean ship and a clean line of work. ... He forked over his creds and accepted Catenary's papers, such as they were. He rescued the Jarps from their pods and they lifted. One quick run was not enough. It took two before he could spare the time and the creds to bail Candila and Umm out of the Medcenter. "Ever make it with a Jarp?" Red asked the older woman as they boarded the grubby Catenary. Umm's reconstruction had not cost as much as Candila's but mother and daughter were now equally attractive-each apparently about sixteen. Umm took one look at her first Jarp and screamed. Zo meanwhile took his first look at a restored Candila and almost creamed. "You look tired," she said. "I am. Two runs while you were-occupied." "The . . . same kind of cargo?" He nodded. "I uh-brought you a present." Candila was unexpectedly reserved. "Do you have a cabin where I can show it to you?" Catenary was still in longterm parking orbit and the G-spin was off. Zo grasped her waist and propelled Candila in the proper direction. She felt just gloriously good. "Where are you going?" Umm demanded. "Red! "Zo called. "Whatever you say," the Jarp said. Turning to Umm it added, "You've a few things to learn about shipboard life. Come to my cabin and I'll start explaining." Umm studied the strange, orange-skinned creature. She 153 saw huge round soulful eyes. She saw firm, high, female breasts. Reassured, Umm did not notice the Jarp's bulging, single-testicled crotch. The other Jarp was

behind Umm. With one pushing, one pulling, Umm entered their cabin. "All right," Zo said, "what's the present?" Silently, Candila worked the zippers on her skintight ship's suit. Inside, she wore a replica of the filmy hareem pants and prass-cup bra that had lured men along the length of Alachi's only river. She wore them well. Zo was-impressed. He caught his breath. Lips compressed, Candila said, "You paid for it. It's yours." Zo stared at this delectable product of Katushiro's cosmetic surgery and his own colossal repair bill. She had opted for violet-amethyst eyes. Against the smooth chocolate of Candila's skin the effect was-unusual. So unusual that he felt an instant surge of desire. Gods and gods-do I need a hug! But . . . the set of her mouth . . . "Are you sure you want to do this? You've not had much luck so far with men." "What does want have to do with it? I'm property." "Not mine! You're free to leave whenever you wish. Take your Umm as you go." Candila's violet eyes opened wide. The firm resolution of her lips softened. Suddenly she was weeping. For the first time, Zo suspected. Curled into a foetal ball, she drifted toward him. He patted her shuddering shoulders and then Candila was howling and sobbing all over him. "We're in the same business, kid," he explained when she had quieted down. In spite of no gravity she "sat" cuddled in his lap, still clad only in prass nosecones and full, transparent pants. And there was no hint of erotic current between them. "Remember what happened to Katushiro?" he began. "With a holdful of potential trouble I need crew I can trust-onboard for a share of the profits, and not just because I happen to own them." 154 "I-" Candila did not know what to say. "You don't know anybody else and I just happen to be the first man you've ever encountered in your rotten life who didn't abuse you." "Yes." Tiny-voiced. "Hardly a sound basis for any longterm relationship." Candila sniffled. "You're not prepared to make it on your own. Want me to find you a new owner? The universe is full of kindly old men who'll treat a girl right and see that she's properly set up in life." "Can't I stay here-with you?" He closed his eyes, holding her. "Only if you want to." "I-think so." "You're stuck for the duration of the run, then. Afterward, you're free to leave. How are you on ship handling by now?" "I've never done it but ... it all seems to be there in my mind." "Good. Get so'me sleep. You'll be on the con before you know it." Zo closed the cabin door on her astonished face and pushed down the companionway. He was about to rouse the Jarps from their cabin when he heard somebody giggling. It sounded like Umm. Zo frowned. The last damned thing he needed was more problems. Am I taking my mother-in-law along on a slave raid? 15 Buy 'em stockings and the next damn thing you know, they'll be wdntin' shoes. -Neverminder proverb Ulf returned to the present with mixed awe and rue. True God, how quickly we become spoiled! It seemed only minutes ago that he had been praying, straining, and gritting his teeth with the effort not to erupt before he could do what was required of him by the Factor's lovely, leggy lady. Now he had immersed himself so deeply in this fantastically sexy lady's story that he had totally forgotten how deep he was in her smooth, firm body. "A little faster," Candila murmured. "Aaaaaahhh yeeeeeeeeess, that's . . . about right." "So after having already been stolen once, you still let Captain Zo kidnap you," Ulf prompted. "Are you happy as a slave?" "Life has its ups and downs," Candila said, "as well as its ins and outs. A little deeper now, please." "You'd kill him?" Candila recalled a wise and long-married woman who, asked if she had ever considered divorce, firmly answered "Never!" then after a moment of thought added, "Of course I've often considered murder." Amethyst eyes looked unblinking into Ulf s chocolate ones. 155 156 "Hardly a day passes that I don't think about it," Candila said, He swallowed. "What did he do to make you hate him so?" "Would you like an alphabetized list?" Ulf s eyes widened. "Among other things," Candila told him, "Captain Zo sold my mother-sold poor old Umm!" This was perfectly true. "We've got a problem," Zo had said. "Be thankful she stayed onboard," Candila had murmured. Well fortified with stells, they had taken a suite in the Hotel Lex in Komodi on Jorinne. Many colors greeted them but the fact that all were pastels made the suite lovely and restful. Also weird-though Candila was charmed by that

weirdness. The all-over carpeting seemed to roll and flow, rearing softly here and there into furniture that was rounded extrusions and lumps in a suite seemingly coated in a form of teal blue indigo. (That coating ran right up two of the walls, too. The other two were pale green, in the main room.) Candila changed into something sexy and sprawled languidly and comfortably "on" or in a ... couch? From there she watched her man. Zo was not relaxed. "Flaining Jarps are so frazzled I can't get any work out of them." "How was I to know it would turn out this way?" she asked. He shrugged. "She's your umm, not mine." "You're the captain." "What would you do?" "Do I look like a Chank?" Having grown up with sisters, Zo was not totally disconcerted by this non sequitur. Still, it outraged his sense of logic when feminine mentality casually achieved tremendous GOTOs, bypassing millennia of programming and still-somehow-getting to the point. "You ask the damndest questions." he said. "I don't 157 know. I suppose you could pass for one. No matter what planet, humanity's pretty well homogenized by now." "Could my mother pass for a Chank?" "I suppose-as long as she didn't try to con a native. But why pick Shankar?" "If you're setting up a fake ID, isn't it best to pick some place nobody's that interested in-and where record keeping may not be quite up to TGO standards?" "Why give your mother a fake ID?" "So we can sell her," she said in a perfectly equable tone. Zo's jaw dropped. "She raised me," Candila said. "She was kind to me. I'm trying to repay my debt." "How?" "Look, love, I know her. Why do you think she's getting so fat and blowzy? A year ago she was as young and attractive as you made me." She puckered him a touchless kiss, and meant it. "But she's locked in the same ship with me-with only one man. Umm's upbringing won't let her seduce her daughter's man. That leaves only Red and Trill. Zo, she's turning into a sunflower!" He smiled-briefly. He just hadn't realized how . . . sensuous Umm was. "I can't afford to rebuild her again. We're barely starting to break even." "Then we'll just have to find somebody who likes fat women." "Fat chance!" Then Zo grinned at the bittersweet memory of a pudgy old friend who despised Jarps. As he recalled, that old friend had doted on well endowed human females who were not afraid to belch. The poor jacko had only one testicle nowadays. He worked it overtime. Zo did not know how-but miraculously, Vett too had escaped the holocaust when Artisune Muzuni went Forty Percent City. Since his reappearance along the spaceways, Zo's old "friend" had dedicated his life to getting two-for-one. He wanted both of Zo's. 158 The universe is, to put it mildly, rather large. There is, however, a tendency in any society for like to seek like. Spacefarers were always running into one another in the oddest places. The reasons included neither coincidence nor miracle-only that, for the average spacefarer, there was no universe. Ninety-nine percent of the spacefaring fraternity's lives were bounded by a few hundred spaceports-separated by months of boredom. Zo and Vettering had crossed paths a dozen times. Have I changed that much? Zo's face was older now, with lines from nose to the corners of his mouth. His high-G body was creased and corded like an anatomical drawing. Jet ringlets hung shoulderlength instead of close-cropped as in the old days. Once in a crowded, ill-lit bar Zo had bought Vett a drink. The bumbling, belching, farting, one-balled dolt had not recognized him! Now, grinning at the memory and possibilities, Zo began to think. "Excuse me a moment," he said. Candila sipped Lanatian cherry gently laced with Heaven High and waited. She was not impatient. The evening would be worth waiting for. Idly she stroked a softly azure-draped breast, flicked its perfumed tip. And shivered in anticipation. Zo activated room service and invoked the port register. He popped a question or two. "Hah!" "Hmrrrrm?" Her voice was kit-cat lazy, like her stretch. "Golden Porkchop is in port. Berth number Y." "So?" "I've just figured out what to do with Umm." Candila came alert and showed emotion. "I want her to go to some nice man who won't mistreat her." "He'll love her. By the way, what's your umm's real name?" "Althis. You're going to sell her?" "Nope. We'll give her away." Zo called Red up on board Catenary and instructed him to ready the lady for transfer. 159 "What will you gain?" Candila asked, scratching her breast. "A cabin, some work out

of those fobbied Jarps, and a little peace of mind. Believe me, your umm and this man will hit it off. Even if the poor bastard does want to deball me, I still kind of like him." Zo shrugged. "We went through a lot together." Candila sat up quite straight. "You can't give her away," she said firmly. "Why?" He looked reminiscent, thinking of old times while admiring the jut her straight back imparted to her excellent chest. "If I learned one thing from Captain Kat, it's the value of advertising." "What's that supposed to mean?" "Zo! If she costs nothing, then Umm's worth nothing. Any owner will treat her accordingly." Her eyes-gemstone optics, rather-pleaded for understanding. He sighed. "I suppose you're right. I'll get Honest Hassan to handle it." "If you don't get a good price, don't let her go." "I'll hold him up for every stell I can-providing your umm goes to Vettering." "So now he'll be your stepfather-in-law?" His face crinkled with delight. "Shiva's Scrotum!" he roared. "Would Vett ever meltdown if he knew!" She did not seem to share his amusement. "How can we make sure she doesn't let it slip?" "Does your umm even know my name?" Candila pursed her lips. "I doubt it." "And if you and she should ever meet again, is such a lovely and well endowed young lady going to admit she has a daughter older than she is?" "You," Candila said, "are an evil man." "Isn't it fun?" Smiling lazily, she held up her arms to draw him down with her. "Mmmmmmmmm." The door dilated. A woman-a dauntingly big woman-with raven hair and olive green eyes stood regarding them. 160 Zo and Candila had solved their problem. They had celebrated with Heaven High and several other concoctions. They were in the midst of a more carnal celebration. "This is a private suite!" Zo snarled. "What in Sheol are you doing here?" Damn, was she ever tall! Hardmuscled too, from the look of her. Not an ounce of flab or softness except for the huge matched pair of warheads that jutted as firmly as her jaw. "I'm doing the same thing I've been doing ever since your former employer went City," the huge-bosomed woman said. "Think back and you may remember my presence." Zo knew. Since before he had redshifted from Artisune Muzuni's misfortunes, he had been aware of something watching and waiting. Nevertheless, it had never occurred to him that all his doubts and fears and lookings-over-his-shoulder would someday materialize in the form of a 183-sem-high amazon in a costume so outrageously erotic he could not begin to describe it. Call it superstition; call it deduction. Call it those unspeakable terms he sometimes applied to feminine intuition. Zo knew immediately that he had no secrets from this capable stranger. "Who are you?" Zo was trying for outrage. He knew he had already hesitated too long. "Valustriana See." She made a mock bow. The movement almost spilled those splendid warheads out of the top of her off-shoulder "blouse." Candila stared, having assumed the standard bedclothes-pressed-to-the-bosom posture of a woman interrupted when naked and abed. She shifted her stare from the intruder to Zo who improvised a hasty diversion. There were, he reminded himself, more important issues than privacy and/or the exact angle of a pair of brobdnagian warheads. "How did you do it?" he demanded. "Not even Muzuni knew where we were going to come out. How did you have a fleet waiting at the exact spot?" "TGO has its ways." (TGO's ways were not what Zo suspected but Valustriana 161 had no intention of telling anyone that there was no real trace through hyperspace. Never had been; never would be; never could be. The combined TGW/TAI fleet did not blast Muzuni to nothingness that day because there had been no fleet. (The whole illusion of a hemisphere of ships with all DS trained on Artisune Muzuni's battered fleet had been created by a single lamprey.'A more sophisticated lamprey that, instead of leaving SIPACUM in a strait jacket, loaded it with a single holographic delusion that checked out as real from any angle-and forced that same delusion onto the SIPACUM of every ship in the pirate fleet. (If the forces of entropy ever realized that no TGO fleet existed-that it was all done with mirrors . . . That was this tall, olive-eyed woman's job. To keep them all believing there was a fleet out there, that most of their comrades had died, and "Going to do you a special favor, boy. I'm going to let you live. But just remember, boy, from now on your ass belongs to us." "You have committed acts of piracy against the public

order," the amazon continued. "The penalty, as most of your cohorts discovered back out there, is irreversible death." Since he had not been blasted then, and since he had not been blasted now, Zo suspected the existence of alternative penalties. TGO justice. And only a year ago I told Candila there was no fate worse than death! "You are TGO, I suppose?" "Not unintelligent," Valustriana said with a hint of smile. "Just misguided. I suppose you fell in with evil companions just like all the rest of us poor, misguided, antisocial souls." "Who is this woman?" Candila demanded. Valustriana See studied Candila. "You," she mused, "must be Onesima's protegee-and sole survivor of the unreported Suravomaru. Did you contribute to the late and unlamented Captain Katushiro's disappearance?" Candila gasped and shrank into an almost-smallness. Zo realized now that he had been waiting for this moment ever since he and the two Jarps had cut their losses and stolen Murtadd. Now the chickens were coming home to roost. Except that this know-everything woman did not look the least bit chicken. "What do you want?" he asked. "Do you know the man who wants both of yours?" Poor Vettering. I didn't want to do it but he got himself in that jam-and then tried to drag me down with him. Why should I have paid the price for that gassy slob's stupidity? Zo waited to learn how much interest and carrying charges had been tacked onto the price. "You will keep yourself available," Valustriana said. "I've got to make a living." Zo was improvising frantically. "If I have to hang around here-either you put me on salary or put me in storage where I'm no use to anybody." Valustriana See shrugged. "Go ahead and work your ship, Captain Zo. Just ... no more piracy, firm? And," she added, "you've cost us considerable time and bother. You'll work that debt off." - "How?" "From time to time you'll haul a bit of cargo-perhaps a passenger for us. I know we can count on your silence." Sweating, Zo considered the bind. They would squeeze him to death-force him into all kinds of illegal acts and if he got caught by some alert TAI agent . . . then Zo would be on his own. "I'll do it," he said. "But if you expect any willing service and real use out of me, it'll have to work both ways." "You're making demands on the organization called Gray?" He nodded, trying to look solemn and confident and matter-of-fact all at once. Valustriana See seemed amused. "What are your . . . conditions, Captain?" "I'm barely scraping by because I'm barred from trad- 163 ing in too many systems. Clean up Catenary's papers so I can make a few stells once in a while." "It'll have to be on a case-to-case basis," the tall woman said. "If ever we have need of you in some system you can't enter ..." She waved a (large) hand. "Enjoy your evening," she said, as she backed out of the dilating door. Zo stared at that door, jaw clenched and working. So much for relaxation. Candila rammed herself against him, gone all naked and trembly, and hung on. "Zo . . . what does that all mean?" "It means I don't have to pity Vettering anymore," he said, staring at the door without seeing it. He stroked her halfheartedly, on automatic. "He only lost one of his cubes. Now they've got both of mine in a vise-and they're tightening it up." "Uh, but . . ." "We," Zo told her grimly, "have just become tools, or something like. At the beck and call of The Gray Organization whenever it wishes-or else." "Or else what?" "Or else we can be caught, persecuted, and prosecuted, and jailed somewhere. . . . On the other hand, now that we know this much-the 'or else' is more likely a Mysterious Disappearance for us, if we don't cooperate." "Maybe," Candila said thoughtfully. She leaned away to look at him. "Did you notice one odd thing?" "Several." "No-I mean she warned you against piracy, darling. She didn't say a single word about slave trading!" "Slave trading," he said, "is legal anyhow, most places." "All right then . . . she said nothing about slave taking. I'd call that TGO's tacit agreement to your continuing in this line of work, wouldn't you?" He sighed, and she slipped her arms around him from behind, pressing thoroughly naked Candila warmly into his back. "I hate it!" he snarled, low voiced. "If I could just get a clean ship-a little capital, Cand! Shiva's Radiant Rectum- what I'd give to be in an honest business!" 16 She forgot to mention that the dear departed Bobby was a fox terrier. Cantinflas "True God! He sold your mother?"

The thought was doubly repugnant to Ulf because of his miserable childhood-alone, while his mother served in the Factor's great house. For an instant his lower parts forgot the call of duty and threatened to slip out. Candila writhed in gentle reminder and Ulf, with a grunt, recovered. "Yes. Mmmmmmm!" "No wonder you want to kill him," Ulf said. "I'll help you!" Don't be impulsive. Yes . . . do. She'll prefer a man who doesn't dither over alternatives, "How do we do it?" "Zo's tricky," Candila said. "I've been trying to do him in for years." "Oh. Oh. Really?" She nodded. "Firm. Be careful. If you do come up with a good plan, check with me first. Probably, I've already tried it." Ulf struggled to assimilate that. He sensed a message beyond the mere words. Candila was telling him something-- warning him. But she was also-at last-losing control. "'Now!'" Urgency grated in her suddenly throaty voice, communicating directly with Ulf's hours-old erection. They galloped rapidly for several minutes without moving more than a foot or two and Ulf promptly forgot what was bothering him. Later, in the modest comfort of the cabin they had moved him into once the Jarp reported teethmarks along the hinge of Ulf's sleeping pod, the boy remembered. Not stupid. Survived on Nevermind. In time I'd've owned the Factor's 1400 kloms-if I'd just been careful and kept out of Alianora's sight! After his hours-long bout with the captain's lady, Ulf should have been ready to drop into the exhausted sleep of total satiation. Instead, he was nagged with a feel that there was something not . . . quite . . . right. They got me out of the hold-away from the rest of the Factor's 'army.' Does that mean they trust me? There was a simple way to find out. The cabin door dilated at his command. Ulf began exploring. He had no profound knowledge of Catenary or any other spacer. Logic, however, demanded some kind of security onboard a slaver. He was out of the hold. How close to the con-cabin will I get before somebody stops me? The .25-G in this part of the ship was enough to keep his feet on the companionway decks. He moved in long scooting strides-occasionally fending from the overhead when he forgot and bounced too high. "Want to make it with a Jarp?" Ulf's unhelmeted pate hit the overhead with a resounding thump. He had not heard the soulful-eyed alien moving up behind him. "Uh-not right now," he apologized. "I've just uh-" Abruptly the grav fluctuated again. As he floated in mid-companionway Ulf suddenly realized it had not been pure surprise that drove his skull into the overhead. "Thrwe'etl!" the Jarp said, and rushed past. Pulling a seamless shirt over his head, a harried Captain Zo burst from a dilating cabin door. His eyes widened briefly when he saw Ulf loose in the tunnel but he said only, "Please try to stay out of the way." He dived past, heading in the same direction as the Jarp. 166 Ulf hadn't the foggiest whether the captain was angry or just tired. Both, he decided. More interesting than Zo's emotional state was the face that peered from the dilated door. "Alianora!" "Ulf!" Ulf glanced hastily around. Nobody looking. He shot into the cabin before the door could close. "Are you all right?" (They both asked it at once.) That was followed by a sudden embarrassed silence. Ulf now wore a white shipboard coverall that fitted like a second skin. It left no room for conjecture around his crotch. Alianora . . . He stared at the deep-purple sort-of minisarohg she sort of wore. It pretended to cover her left side from armpit to hip, slanting across to show a shocking slice of Alianora, without making the effort on the right at all. There her breast was bare-save for its fascinating blue-and-green decor. He stared, wondering who had applied that paint, remembering his deprived youth on Nevermind. Was it less than a month ago that I strained my eyes and sprained my neck for a glimpse of ankle? Recalling his last moment alone with the former queen of the azaafrunn festival, he felt an instantaneous revival of desire-as if he'd not just escaped from a marathon encounter with lovely, ageless Candila. "It looks like we're both all right." A hint of a grin played about Alianora's mouth as she surveyed sudden activity in the crotch of his skintight pants. "At least for the time being," she added. "Did he . . . mistreat you?" Alianora hesitated. "Not really. But I don't like being owned any more than I liked it on Nevermind." "Do you want to go home?" She shook her head emphatically.

Chestnut ringlets float-danced grav-lessly. "Neither do I," Ulf said. "Not after . . . not now that we know what else there is. But . . ." Alianora studied him. 167 "It would be nice not to be owned." She showed him a warning look. Ulf glanced around. Captain Zo 's cabin was considerably larger and more comfortable than the one assigned to him. "One day," he said. The cabin was probably bugged. He didn't give a damn. Still, there was no point in broadcasting his intentions. "One day," he repeated. This time he pointed at the cabin, at himself, and at Alianora. She captured his hand and he felt resurging passion as she began tracing a finger over his palm. Then he came to his senses and saw what she was doing. Sleep-teach pods. Useful things. Back on Nevermind, like any other woman, Alianora could barely spell her name. Now she was tracing letters in the palm of his hand. YOU FLY IT? "Not yet," Ulf muttered. "But I'll learn." CHANGE CASS? Ulf looked up from her tracing. He had seen Jarps and others change the thumbnail-sized teaching cassettes in sleeping pods. It seemed simple enough. He nodded. Finger to her lips, Alianora crossed the room and opened a cabinet drawer. Hastily, she grabbed a handful of cassettes. Ulf distributed them inside the waistline of his closefitting coverall. True God, she was beautiful! "Dressed" in this revealing costume, sems and sems of shapely leg bare and bare, she made it impossible for him to concentrate. He tried to remind himself that he was exhausted-that he and Heaven High had just 'joyed the captain's lady far longer than he would have believed possible. Abruptly the grav force came back on. He thumped heavily to the deck and Alianora landed partly on top of him. It was a delectable tangle as she sorted her endless legs from his. He was groping gleeful handful when she pulled away and shook her head. G FIXD, she spelled. Z COMING. Thank the True God at least one of us has its head screwed on right! Ulf settled for a hasty kiss and made 168 tracks back to His modest cabin. There he started tugging cassettes out of his pants. He couldn't even understand the titles. He squinted at printing barely readable without a magnifier. At first he thought P-P stood for the drive. After a while he realized that this double P indicated a Planetary Pilot, useful only for the final approach after five nines* of the run had been accomplished via the subspace plot from an SP cassette. He shuffled the handful of cassettes, knowing only that he did not know enough to use them. Then he found one labeled PRACTICAL PILOTING. Ulf smiled. After slipping that one into his reader he composed himself to sleep. His dreams were troubled with interruptions and abrupt shifts of subject matter. The largest interruption was when Candila came into his cabin. She studied the sleeping youth and the fistful of cassettes he had tried to hide. Frowning, she directed unblinking amethyst eyes toward the reader built into his bed. She changed the cassette. When Ulf awoke he saw immediately that the cassette had been changed. What mystified him was what it had been exchanged for. He had spent the night absorbing ELEMENTS OF ASTROGATION. So (someone . . .) knew he was training himself to handle the ship! There had to be a joker somewhere. I'll go on assuming I know it all and then, the first time I try it I'll suddenly discover just what important little thing I don't know. He sighed and began reading the manual. After a night's preparation he zipped through it. He read it again slowly-looking for the hook. Next sleeping period he tried again to learn something about piloting. He awoke with a fair knowledge of Defense Systemry-which seemed to be the current euphemism for armaments. In any event, the mystified young man now knew how to aim and fire what was still called a gun, although it was not. Candila still took hours of his time each day. Delightful * 99.999% 169 hours they were-but they cut into the time he wanted to spend in learning. She was kind and not really demanding. It seemed to Ulf that she spent more time teaching him how to enjoy his own body than in joying hers. Still, there was something he did not understand. She wanted to kill Zo? Maybe . . . Ulf had tolerated 'frunnpickers. Privately, he had despised them. All the more so because he knew how easily he could have been one. Having minded store and handed out groceries and credit, he could read their transparent faces. I knew they hated me. I used to make jokes at their

expense. Jokes so far above their sunscorched heads that they never even knew they were being made fun of. It had been mean, perhaps. Petty. But it had taught him one invaluable lesson. Ulf could tell when he was being patronized. 17 If 'twere done, 'twere best done quickly. -Francis B. Marlowe

Air pressure was low in Golden Porkchop. Oxygen content was only fifteen percent instead of the usual twenty-one. Scrubbers worked after a fashion but ship's air was still redolent of weeks-old cooking and worse. Vettering liked it that way. It reminded him of home. It also kept the cargo docile. Oh, it killed a few of the weaklings, but Vett had developed an eye for which warm body would survive. The others hardly paid their freight costs and too many weaklings in a load only made it that much harder to sell the next batch. Raising his leg to sit on the high stool in the con-cabin, Vett farted. Umm/Althis covered her smile by drawing a fold of dayglo ruby sari over her nose. "I suppose you'll blame that on my cooking too." Vett gave her ample bottom an affectionate pat. "We been cleared yet?" Before his mate could reply the comm chirred. "Uh?" Vett asked. "Port Authority clears Golden Porkchop outbound for Panish." "Thanks." Vett had no intention of going to Panish and Port Authority knew it. 170 171 "Message," the voice added. "Is your printer on?" Vett told the printer to come on line. While he was running a preliminary check with SIPACUM the printer spat a tongue of fax and turned itself off. IF YOU WANT TWO FOR ONE YOU'LL FIND HIM NEAR-ING BLEAK. "Flaining fink!" Vett growled. "Of course I want him!" "Want who?" Althis asked. "Man I used to know." "What'd he do to you?" "I don't want to talk about it." Since one of his testicles had been sacrificed on Tao's altar, Vettering had worked the remaining gland overtime, proving to himself and to the universe that although Artisune Muzuni was dead, Vettering was still alive, still slicing, and still hunting for the former friend who betrayed him. "I'll get that muckfoot Zo even if it costs me the other one!" "Zo?" Althis looked thoughtful. "Seems I've heard that name somewhere." Have I been talking in my sleep again? The printer stuttered briefly for a second time. TGW IN PURSUIT BUT IF YOU HURRY YOU CAN GET THERE FIRST. Who's doing me the favors all at once? As if in reply the printer emitted a final: PS: I BOUGHT A SEWING MACHINE. Vett studied the printout. What the flaining-? And abruptly he remembered. Acting like she didn't like it and like all the time she was loving it. Crazy damn stash! Wonder how she knew just what / wanted. "Ready to break orbit," SIPACUM said. "Fine," Vett said absently. "Firm. But hold it with the jump. We're going in a different direction." "Have you looked for the hook in it?" Alianora asked. "Of course there's one," Ulf agreed. "But where?" "Captain Zo wouldn't teach you astrogation and ship handling just for the fun of it." 172 "And I can see now why he held off on the piloting- aaaaahhhh, that feels good!" "It's supposed to. Why didn't you try it that night in my husband's bedroom?" "Like piloting, I guess. You really can't get the hang of it unless you know the other stuff first." "What do you suppose a ship like Catenary would cost?" "What difference does it make? We can't even buy ourselves." "It still beats picking azaafrunn." "Or digging piggotsite," Ulf added. They talked more freely now because it had become apparent that Zo and Candila-even the Jarps accepted that Ulf and Alianora were a pair. Nobody seemed to attach any importance to who shared a cabin. The remainder of ship's company was too busy keeping Catenary's balky drive running to take much interest in the sweet nothings these youngsters were constantly murmuring. They might take more interest if they realized I'm just about ready. Plans for mutiny were nearing maturity. "Ulf to the con-cabin. On the double." The voice was scratchy. Like everything else on Catenary, the aging comm needed maintenance. Ulf looked a question up into Alianora's eyes. She rose gently, unplugging their carnal connection. "Might as well save it," she said, and gave the broken connector a farewell caress. Still struggling with his pants, Ulf reported to the con-cabin. "Candila's exhausted," Zo said. "You'll have to take it." "I relieve you, sir." Thanks to sleep-learning and constant reading of manuals, the response came automatically. However, in spite of all his studies, Ulf had only briefly held the con-and always under

supervision of Zo, Candila, or one of the Jarps. True God, he's actually leaving me alone here! Ulf dropped into the first chair, not bothering with the 173 security button that would strap him in if this were a combat situation. Arrayed in a crescent before him was a profusion of multicolored minidisplays, toggles, buttons, telltales, readout panels, scan-winkers-every possible device for attracting a busy or distracted life-form's attention to some minuscule discrepancy from the norm. Can I do it now? Can I take Catenary and Poof the man who put me in with slaves? Who's with me? Who's against me? He recalled Candila's demand that she be consulted about any plot to kill Zo. ("Probably I've tried it already,") she'd said sadly. Ulf grinned wryly. Even fat Factor Jaris had known how to lay better, more subtle traps than that. Who's with me? Half of the Factor's private Neverminder army still languished in the slave hold. Even if he could trust them, Ulf did not want their help. If those 'frunnpickers ever got loose on the ship, could he control them? In any event, taking Catenary would not require vast numbers of cannon fodder-trained only in the use of kapults. The ship held only four crew members, including Captain Zo. Write off Candila. With 20-20 hindsight Ulf knew she had kept him slicing himself silly for reasons that had little to do with doing in her captain. He had seen what happened to intractable and/or unsaleable human cargo that had atrophied after too much uninterrupted time in a sleeping pod. Thank the One True God I'm smart enough or handsome enough to draw a good price or it could happen to me! He stared at too many lights and saw none. Thinking. Who's with me? The Jarps? Ulf didn't know how it was on other ships. All he had been able to learn indicated that their home planet was unprotected. Not even TGW's nominal injunctions against slave raiding seemed to apply. Chronically crew-short spacers recruited or stole Jarps, paying them nothing apart from room and board. 174 Yet, Red and Trill seemed content aboard Catenary. The older (or at least taller) Red, was in charge of slave hold and, as ship's cook, saw to it that everyone ate. Trill trailed Zo, handing him tools when the captain's muffled blasphemies emerged from the innards of machinery that was constantly breaking down. Forget about the Jarps. Ulf studied the displays before him. No course changes were scheduled for several hours. Space was clear and relatively empty along this route. A lesser shipmaster-or one whose ship was in better condition-might have secured the con-cabin and taken his chances. Maybe that's just what he did, leaving me in charge here along a stretch with nothing to do and no way I can fob anything. SIPACUM was one of the few things onboard Catenary that seemed to be functioning properly. Ulf reviewed his accelerated studies. Pills could not impart an education but a pill, plus a sleep-learn session made it possible to skim through a manual and think, Oh firm! I knew that all the time. Why didn't I remember? He invoked the log and flight path. Sometimes it could take quite a while for SIPACUM to find SPOSE (Safe Point of Subspace Entry), which usually had to be done several times during an average-length run. An immediate, unplanned change of course was another matter. To jamcram was commonly called "Going Forty Percent City." Probability for survival (with undefined damage) was just above 70%. The probability for survival intact was a comfortable 59.7731-to-infinity. That left, however, a 40.2269% probability of ... whatever happened to those ships that vanished. Theories abounded. If some alternate universe existed it was a long way off. At least as far away as the Realm of the Dead. To the best of Ulf's knowledge nothing had ever returned from either place. He had heard of Corundum. Write off Corundum. Who's with me? 175 Ulf knew he would be up against four: Zo, Candila, and the Jarps. Down in the hold was a gaggle of men-well, males- who might follow him if they thought he showed some chance of winning. Ulf needed those farmsters like he needed diarrhea in a spacesuit. Who's with me? Alianora came into the con-cabin. She scooted into the mate's chair beside him, nice in scarlet shirt and black shorts. They looked at each other in silent surmise. "All quiet in the cabins," she murmured. They're all asleep! Will I ever get another chance like this? "You and me against the universe?" She grinned as she said it. Tension lurked behind the lavender-lipped

grin. Ulf considered. Do I really know as much astrogation and ship handling as I think I know? Could I and Alianora manage Catenary on our own? (Under present management four experienced spacefarers were all dropping from exhaustion.) It's all happened just the way I planned and prayed! Here I am in charge of Catenary. / could kill them all. . . or just push them out the airlock. Here I sit with the ship I wanted and the girl I wanted. Ulf didn't know what to do with either. He peeled his gaze off a meter or a kilometer of Alianoran leg. Their owner was looking at him. True God, I thought I was ready. Am I just cautious or am I afraid? He had to say something. So far he was Her Hero. How long would he remain so? Show the slightest hint of chronic loser syndrome and this girl-woman would abandon him! She was a survivor. Alianora would attach herself to a winner. That, he suspected, was why he liked her. (That and those endless legs.) What kind of stash-brained stupidity would choose life with a loser? After a microsecond's dither, inspiration rescued him. "Where's the hook?" he murmured. Alianora was suddenly thoughtful. 176 "Replace radar viewscreen with schematic." He said it only to gain time. Was there really a hook? He knew Zo and Candila were tired. Even the Jarps were complaining. In spite of this being his first voyage into space, Ulf had absorbed enough manuals to know that ships did not constantly skate on the thin ice of disaster as Catenary seemed to be doing. Why? Zo's not stupid. He seems a competent captain and he understands accounting as well as I do. Why's he broke? Then Ulf Jort thought he knew why. Captain Zo had been delivering a cargo of mechanical azaafrunn pickers to Factor Jaris. Zo had not collected his fee for that run. Ulf suspected that no matter what planet or what space between the planets, certain immutable economic laws would prevail. If Zo was undercapitalized to begin with . . . Catenary needed spares and repairs. The poor son of a bitch probably cobbled up that Nevermind slaving deal on the spur of the moment--just to salvage something from the picking-machine deal that Alianora and I queered for him. Which meant that if Ulf were to take Catenary--kill Zo and all that--all he would gain would be another man's troubles atop his own. Choosing his words carefully, he started to explain this to Alianora. Three words into his rationalization she said, "Change it back!" "What?" She pointed, bare armed. "The screen. Quick!" Before them, above the banked console array, the radar readout now displayed a 30 x 50-sem screen crosshatched like an oversized sheet of graph paper. "Lookout!" Ulf snapped. The screen jittered back to its normal three-dee radar display. In the lower corner, coming up fast, was the tiny telltale blip of a ship. "ETI?" Ulf asked. "Three hours, twenty-one mins . . . mark!" SIPACUM replied. 177 "'I knew I saw something just before that screen changed,'" Alianora said. Ulf was almost thankful. A ship on an intersection course was almost surely bad news. At least now he didn't have to make up his mind. "You'd better call the captain," he said. 18 Always remember that a kindness will never go unpunished. -St. Kallipygast of Mt. Athos "Pirate or Policer?" Candila was still rubbing sleep from her eyes. Zo was at the con. He had fed the blip's "signature" into SIPACUM and was waiting for a report. The blueflame hell of a drive was alike for most ships. What SIPACUM was searching for in its quest through its library of logged ships was the spectrum that resulted from one-part-per-ten-million of impurities in the drive. Once SIPACUM sniffed at a ship's tail, the computer's reliability and memory were several orders of magnitude greater than a bloodhound's--whatever that legendary beast had been. This, naturally, created a growth industry among those skilled at tuning a drive, enabling a ship to thread the spaceways without bells, flags, and whistles. To some extent it was possible to tune a drive. But only to some extent. Privately, Zo thought the chimerical Captain Jonuta's skill at altering his P-P drive's signature had grown with repetition. Ulf and Trill manned Defense Systemry amidships. Red was feeling up Alianora, who absentmindedly slapped its double-thumbed hands away while she checked tracking on the aft DS. Candila said, "I hate to mention it at a time like this." 178 179 "I see it." Zo was already programming SIPACUM to analyze the signature of the second blip. "Maybe it's chasing the other one instead of

us." "And maybe, as your umm used to say, krill will someday fly." The universe, Zo constantly reminded himself, consisted mostly of space. Even between the closepacked stars at center of the Galaxy distances were still-literally-astronomical. He had learned early the impossibility of drawing any space map to a true scale. "Betelgeuse," one of Muzuni's cassettes had explained, "(the red star in Orion's belt) is so large that if humanity's ancient home were placed within it (with Sol at the center) Earth would only be two-thirds of the way out toward the surface.'" The diameter of Betelgeuse was about twenty light-minutes. Draw that huge star the size of the dot atop a letter i and a light year, drawn to the same scale, would be about the distance from Earth to Luna. Wise captains constantly reminded themselves that the display on SIPACUM had as little relation to reality as did most computer models. Considering this, Zo was able to see the odds of accidentally encountering another ship-even along a well traveled route. Somebody had tapped into a port authority's public records to learn his course and destination. Somebody was chasing him. SIPACUM chirred and the display jiggled. Golden Porkchop, MIRJAM. Vettering! Never did learn the name of his home planet. Mirjam's probably just some port-of-convenience. But it does seem fitting that he hail from a planet whose capital is Windbreak. Zo shrugged. It didn't matter. Vett had finally connected two and two. Now he was on Catenary's tail. He was out to get two for one. SIPACUM had already trained its detectors on the second blip and was once more searching data for a "signature." 180 "They couldn't have come at a nicer time," Candila said. "Our whole flaining ship held together with plasstape and patches." "Red," Zo said, ".have you gotten all the cargo secured?" "T'lee-Sorry. Pos." The reply came scratchy and metallic over the comm. "They hopped into their pods when I explained what happens if the grav quits again while we're maneuvering." Zo winced. Even suited up it was a messy job scraping off the walls. Also an expensive waste. Wonder who Vett invited along in that second ship. Wonder why he bothered. Of course, Vettering would have no way of knowing the desperate condition of Catenary's engines. I just hope DS performs a little more reliably than the G-generator. SIPACUM chirred again and the screen flickered. TGW Candiru, RESH: Haddad. Candila emitted a huge sigh of relief. "Nice to know there are some honest people out there," she said. "Do you suppose he'll redshift?" Zo didn't know. Slaving was not legal everywhere but TransGalactic Watch understood the facts of economic life. As long as the raids were not on member planets or too blatant, TGW looked the other way. In any event, Vettering was in the same business. Piracy was different. Since property was more difficult to obtain than people (who reproduced automatically) TGW took a dim view of any activity that hindered the legitimate acquisition of wealth. Trade was sacred. Life was merely cheap. The problem was that Vett was not out for a profit from this ran-even though it was a two-for-one deal. Zo was being pursued by a man with an obsession. A man who might not hesitate to blast Catenary out of the spaceways- even in plain sight of a TGW patrol. Zo was in a worn out, barely functional ship. "ETI with Golden Porkchop is now three hours, seventeen mins," SIPACUM intoned. "ETI with Candiru calculates at thirty one mins later." 181 Zo waited, not bothering to ask the next question. "Nearest SPOSE is (string of coordinates) yielding 98.093 probability of immediate conversion to tachyons." (And thus redshift/escape.) "Otherwise, earliest opportunity is (string of coordinates)." Both areas lay deka-kilometers beyond the point of course intersection with Vettering's ship. The first chance to jump into subspace would come 12.601 mins after Vett's estimated time of interception- nearly three quarters of an hour before TGW's arrival on scene. "For what we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful," Zo murmured. "Is there anything we can do?" Candila asked. "We can make it expensive." "I'm sorry." "So am I-for the others onboard." Candila looked at Zo and they both laughed. "If we ever had tombstones I know what I'd like on mine." "Uh-huh?" "Up till now everything was fine." Zo considered the possibilities. He could go Forty Percent. It might be intellectually satisfying. He had always wondered what happened to ships that jamcrammed and

never returned. Meanwhile, he had three hours to kill. The thrill of battle . . . hours (sometimes days) of sitting around waiting, jockeying for position, learning bladder control. And then when the moment of truth comes it all happens so fast I may never have time to realize I made a mistake. Three hours to kill . . . / really don't want to kill the poor bumbling bastard. At least he knew how to live. No matter. Like it or not, Zo knew his only chance-his crew's only chance-was to kill Vett. How? "Everybody go suit up," he suggested. "No use dying over a little thing like no air." He considered his limited alternatives. Space combat 182 was a three-dimensional version of naval warfare in which the classic maneuver had been "crossing the T." In an era of wooden ships and iron men, this permitted whichever fleet had created the crossbar of the T to fire broadsides at an enemy bow or stern-to-and thus able to reply only with those few guns that could fire fore or aft. Space combat still involved crossing the T-only backwards. The advantage lay with the ship that approached another and could open up with everything in line-of-travel. The target could respond only with whatever peashooters were available for snooting sideways or astern from a craft moving so swiftly that accurate aim was impossible. At near light speeds, a ship faced the possibility of something shot rearwards still moving in the same direction as itself, albeit more slowly. All motion was relative. This relativity also made it possible for a ship to zap itself by firing straight ahead and then flying into whatever ion or particle beam was fired. SIPACUM, in combat mode, prevented this by shooting always at a slight angle- and forcing a ship always to turn in the direction away from its fire. None of this was going to save Zo's life. Vettering was on his tail-the favored position. He was moving up. The TGW ship would witness the attack. TGW would do as it saw fit with Vett. By that time it wouldn't make a bit of difference to Zo. "ETI three hours," SIPACUM reported. Three hours at their relative kinetic vectors was a respectable distance. SIPACUM's assumption was also that Zo's ailing drive would continue functioning. If it quit, Vettering would be on them sooner. Candila returned to the con-cabin. Zo helped her zip up, giving the dayglo orange spacesuit's bottom a pat as he scooted off to get into his own. "Everybody ready?" he asked when Candila had finished zipping him and checking his suit. "Suited and ready," Red reported. Ulf and Trill were also ready. 183 Zo keyed off the drive. "What happened?" Alianora's despairing inquiry came over the tinny comm. "He'll catch us anyhow," Zo said. "Why wait for the inevitable?" Ulf rolled his eyes. He'd have been quite willing to prolong it as much as possible. Zo was not considering suicide. With the drive off, he was that much harder to see. Vett would also assume that his old enemy was jockeying around a SPOSE preparing to jump, and would disappear into hyperspace in another instant. It might tempt him to do something even more rash than attacking a peaceable stranger in full view of TGW. Meanwhile, Zo instructed SIPACUM. Catenary's tiny attitude jets fired for nearly a minute, by which time the ship had developed a respectable longitudinal spin. When the spacer had rotated 90 degrees, jets began retro-firing. "ETI one hour, SIPACUM advised. Golden Porkchop was still driving fullbore toward Catenary. Vettering had no way of knowing that by the time he came in range Zo's ship would have rotated a full half circle, and that Vett would meet Catenary bow-on instead of facing its relatively unarmed flanks or stern. Zo stood little chance of winning but at least he'd do some damage. The little chronometer on the console flashed time-to-intersect continuously, final numerals constantly accelerating. Vett was closing rapidly, now that Catenary's drive was off. Abruptly the numerals on the chron stopped accelerating. Zo frowned. He was starting to itch and it was impossible to scratch when suited up. "What does it mean?" Candila asked. "Means we both went to the same school," Zo growled. "He knows what I'm up to and he's doing the same thing." "Can you get him as he goes past?" Zo shrugged. "SIPACUM will do its best but he'll only 184 be in range for a microsecond. If he's doing it right he'll be partially turned at the ETI." "Will he get us?" "Not then. But he'll match velocities somewhere ahead and then we'll be back on square one: same relative

positions with him on my tail-only both headed in the opposite direction." Changing his tone, Zo demanded, "SPOSE on present vector?" SIPACUM responded with the same string of coordinates. Zo swore. "If I weren't so tired I'd remember we're still moving in the same direction even if we're slowing down-uh get set!" The drive came back on as Catenary completed its end-for-end turn. For an instant the acceleration was crushing. Then it hiccuped twice, forcing them against security harness. "Drive nonfunctional," SIPACUM reported. Rather unnecessarily, Zo thought, and knew it was over. Abruptly Catenary glowed. Balls of static charge formed at the tips of knobs and switches in the con-cabin. Inside his suit Zo felt his ponytailed hair struggling to stand on end. He clamped his faceplate down to shut out the stink of ionization and burning insulation. Just as abruptly it ended. "Porkchop?" Candila asked. "Gave us a broad-beam sweep as he went by," Zo said. "Once he finishes turning and matches speeds, he can narrow the beam and take proper aim." "Electromagnetic pulse has destroyed extensive portions of drive control circuitry," SIPACUM reported. "Like the snake that's been chopped in two," Zo muttered. "We're dead?" "But we'll keep on wiggling till sundown." He considered the closing-time figures on the chron. The TGW ship was within easy range of his signal. Perhaps Candiru would avenge him. "Try it," he said. 185 "Catenary reporting attack by unidentified ship," Candila told the comm. "Request assistance." Do I want vengeance? Poor Vett. But I can't just sit here and let him kill me. I have to try to save my people. "Catenary, this is Candiru, Captain Haddad commanding. Do you remember me?" At lightspeed the signal had a noticeable time lag. Shiva's shriveled scrotum! Galaxy full of ships that pass in the night and every fool onboard thinks it's unique-I'm supposed to remember it half a lifetime later. Do I know her? "You picked me out of the gutter." Captain Haddad's voice came brittle through the aging comm. "And then you tossed me back.'" Zo looked at Candila. The scenario could have fit any of do/ens of former bits of cargo. She shrugged. Then Zo remembered. That night on Grim!-when the girl with the GI haircut was trying to make like a hust! He had felt sorry for her. It was just that feeling sorry for a stranger shouldn't be carried to such lengths as going to jail on a bum rap. Now he searched for something to say. His nose was itching unbearably. He opened his faceplate to scratch, clenching nostrils at the stench of ionization and burnt insulation. At that instant another bolt of energy hit Catenary. The vidscreen exploded into millions of overloaded pixels that raced apart like a bomb full of sand. Zo gasped and held his breath for an instant. "Sorry," he managed. "You'll have to take over." "What happened?" "I'm blind." Wordlessly, Candila reached for the emergency narcotics. She pushed a pill into his mouth. He bit on it and in a moment the lines in his face began to relax. "Get the boy up here to the con," he said. She gave him a look before realizing that he could not see it. Her voice came soft. "Ulf? Can you trust him?" "What difference does it make? By the time I can 186 stand the feel of a pair of emergency eyes it'll all be over.'" "Ulf to the con," Candila said. "And you'd better hurry." Ulf had dreamed and schemed for command of Catenary. It had never occurred to him that he might end up in charge of a disabled ship only moments away from destruction. "What did TGW have to say?" he asked. "Captain seems to have some kind of an old grudge against us," Candila said. Zo felt his way to a corner of the con-cabin and strapped himself down. He felt drugs beginning to alter him. His eyes still hurt but he had risen to float above the pain now, godlike in an artificial nirvana that would last until . . . Shiva's Scrotum! Catenary was now so disabled they couldn't even go City! "Position?" he called. SIPACUM began emitting coordinates. "Looks like we're just about lined up," Ulf guessed. "Give me a plot." The screen that could comply had already blown up, taking Zo's eyes as it went. Candila was rummaging about for a spare screen module. There was one . . . she hoped. Spares onboard Catenary were increasingly rare. The analgesic gave Catenary's master a detachment he had been unable to seek amid the dreary series of breakdowns and emergencies. He began to understand what was happening. That flailing woman has decided it's

all my fault. Freed from command-and now that drugs were clearing extraneous input from his data bank-Zo saw clearly just how Lhari Haddad's hormones had misdirected her. He was doped now . . . just as Captain Haddad had been soaring that night on whatever mixture Vett had forced into her. She had fixed-imprinted on Zo! Not because he was gallant or handsome. Only because he had kept her 187 from stumbling in the street when she struggled to walk on stilt heels. Seeing her a second time there in Hari's place . . . Is a smile and a nod a declaration of lifelong devotion? Shiva sear me if I'm ever polite again to any stranger! Zo sighed, realizing that there was a sort of justice in the universe after all. Someone in TGO had once told him, "We may not get them for the right crime-but we get them." Lhari Haddad was going to get Captain Zo, slaver, for selling his fellow Alachins. All three ships lined up? "What's the time?" Zo demanded. "Anybody have a suit-chron still working?" "ETI four minutes," Candila told him. Strung out in an almost exact straight line. Zo nodded. He didn't need a screen or plotting board. He could visualize Catenary suspended in space. Vett had overshot while he was turning ship. He was behind (ahead) now. Facing backwards, Catenary's few still-functional weapons could not point at Vettering. They were aimed at the TGW spacer. If I could just con Vett into shooting past me . . . into grazing Candiru, then this Haddad . . . person would have to do something. Candila was thinking along the same lines. "Catenary is transmitting unalterable blackbox protest at inaction from TGW ship Candiru in the face of attack by pirate," she intoned. It was bluff. Catenary could no longer transmit a homing pigeon. Zo supposed that Captain Haddad knew it. "Two missiles enemy-launched just short of intersect. Probably lampreys." That was Alianora's voice, and meant that the aft radar was still working independently of SIPACUM. It also meant that Vettering had not forgotten them. "TGW won't help?" Ulf was outraged. "Afraid not," Zo said. "If I can't get a shot at that pirate behind us, at least I can put a hole in those pusillanimous pricks!" Ulf snarled. 188 He began firing attitude jets, aiming Catenary's forward ordnance the hard way. "How soon will you be ready?" Candila asked. "Thirty seconds," Ulf muttered, concentrating. "Take your time," Zo said. "Even if you hit a TGW ship with everything we've got you won't much more than scratch her." He paused. "But it'll be worth it if-" "If what?" "Candila . . . would you care to say something in your hometown dialect?" "So you do remember!" Smiling, Candila turned to the comm. She spoke in Daresslamite. "Umm, you gave me life. Then one day I gave you life. Are we now to be quits? Or will you do as I instruct?" "Aiwah." The voice was so soft that Zo almost didn't hear. Candila began speaking coordinates. "You ready?" she asked Ulf. "It keeps drifting off." "When you're ready to fire," Zo suggested, "yell NOW and then give TGW everything you can pour onto them.'" "NOW!" Catenary shuddered as huge capacitors released a half hour's power-pak output in a single microsecond bolt. "That pirate's shooting at me!" an outraged voice gasped into an open mike. The voice was interrupted by a crisp sound like ripping a piece of heavy canvas. "What're they hitting us with?" it moaned. You're getting hit by two ships at once, thanks to Umm. I wonder if poor Vett ever guessed that he's my stepfather-in-law. Umm had left a mike keyed open, pouring Candila's coordinates into Vett's SIPACUM. The salvo he had intended for Catenary had veered slightly-just enough to miss Zo's ship and hit Lhari Haddad on top of everything Ulf could pour into Candiru. Sensing the coming jolt, the TGW ship's SIPACUM had immediately gone into combat mode. In the microsecond before the front half of Candiru was scorched to a 189 nonfunctional crisp, the TGW craft had returned the compliment with interest. Neither Candiru nor Vett's Golden Porkchop was capable of movement. "I think there might be time now for one of you to see if there's a pair of spare eyes somewhere onboard," Zo said and quietly, now that there was time, passed out. 19 Win a few; lose a few. Winning's better. -Kelly P. Gast Not much time, Zo knew. Damage control would already be hacking away on both craft. "I think we'd best inspect the TGW ship first," he said. Ulf stared. "We're going to board a TGW cruiser?" "Of course not. We'll offer them assistance." "Didn't she get you in

trouble with the nippers back on Resh?" Candila asked. "I'd like to assist that bitch into the narrowest vein in the deepest mine on Bleak!" "It'd serve her right," Zo admitted, "to land in the hold with the rest of the cargo." "She was willing to see us die," Alianora said in no pretty voice. Zo looked at Candila. "I lied to you once." "Only once?" She gazed at him, one brow up. "Red, damn it, where are those eyes?" Candila slipped out of the second chair and disappeared. Moments later she returned. "So often wonder how we look through another's eyes," she said musingly. "I first saw you through these." Zo turned blindly toward her voice. "You kept them all this time?" "I did," Candila's voice was soft. "And what lies have you told me since that day?" "I told you that there are no fates worse than death." 190 191 He sighed. "For those with some sense of proportion, like me or my flatulent old friend out there, that's probably true. For others..." "I wish her six months of hell and slow death digging piggotsite," Ulf said cheerfully, and Alianora smiled. "TGO would retaliate," Zo said. "You've found some better way to punish the bitch?" That was Candila, one eyebrow up, looking hopeful. "Maybe. You can't blame her for it all. After what Vett put in her drink, she wasn't thinking too clearly. More important than punishing her, I may be able to get some superspook heat off us." "Worthwhile-but she was working undercover, or trying to, anyhow. Don't we have enough trouble with TGO?" "I found them!" Red yelled. "Thanks," Zo told the Jarp, without mentioning that he no longer needed them. "Another damned expense getting a permanent pair," he muttered, adjusting the strap on the emergency eyes he had once given a girl in Daresslam. "Ah. Well-Candila, hold the fort. You might tell Vett to prepare to receive a combined boarding party. Not for a party." He turned to Ulf: "And you may as well see what the inside of a TGW spacer looks like. Break out the shuttle." It was Haddad herself who opened the port. Looked like hell. Six hells, uniform a wreck, lots of skin showing. Smudged, sweaty. "Where's the rest of your crew?" Zo demanded. Suffragan Captain Haddad, Lhari, of Candiru bit her lip. In spite of her dishevelment and a scorching that made her clothes strangely brittle so that they fell off in interesting ways, she was still remarkably pretty. Combat and sweat had baby-curved her hair. "There have been several irregularities of procedure here," Zo snapped. "You may consider yourself under arrest." "By whom?" Haddad bristled. "Captain Zohajar Imamou of Catenary, who has already transmitted a full report on your failure to respond to 192 a distress signal. Either you're in league with that bloody pirate who attacked me or you're worse." "What could be worse?" Haddad's voice was neither crisp nor authoritative now. To Zo it seemed that she might-finally-be realizing just how far beyond the call of duty her hormones had led her. He reminded himself that if he did not destroy her first she might still destroy him. "What's worse?" he snapped. "Incompetence! You failed as a hust. You're no better as a TGW officer. Now get cracking and turn out your crew! I want depositions from everyone-including the blackbox record of whatever insanity you plugged into your SIPACUM." Haddad's collapse was neither dramatic nor immediate. She merely seemed ten sems shorter and ten years younger. Zo felt sorry for her. In over her head, she was a living embodiment of the Peter Principle.* "I uh-there are no crew onboard." "Another timewasting lie like that," Zo snarled, "and by Shiva's Radiant Rectum, I will sell you on Bleak!" "See for yourself." "Ulf!" "Sir?" "Check it out." Ulf pushed off to get his first look at a TGW ship-at any ship apart from Catenary. Zo floated, stopper trained on Captain Haddad. She seemed to grow smaller and younger by the moment. / can't let up on her. The second I do she'll have me by them-if Vett doesn't get them first. "What in Sheol ever got into you?" he demanded. "Do you think TGW's going to stand for this kind of scandal? They may not value you much but ships cost a few stells." "1-Candiru was in for refitting. Crew were all on leave. I-uh-took her up for a test run." "Took her up so you could come looking for me with no witnesses!" * Each person rises to its level of incompetence, then spends a lifetime there making wrong decisions and misery for everyone else. 193 Haddad did not reply. She knew now that she had made a fool of herself-had destroyed what little career

she had left with TGW. And all for a man who had really done her no harm. She should have been chasing the man who pumped her full of tetrazombase. Instead, she had helped Vett. "Nobody," Ulf reported. "She really is alone." "I think we'll board Golden Porkchop now," Zo said, after thinking that one over. "All three of us. Any of the heavy ordnance still working?" "Most of it, I think," Ulf said. "It just looks like those combined shots stunned SIPACUM for a moment or two." They stopped at Catenary. Zo directed Red and Trill to board Candiru and train whatever would shoot on Vett's still-drifting Golden Porkchop. "I'm going too," Candila said. "Of course," Zo said. "It seems the very least you could do." Which leaves Alianora alone onboard Catenary except for cargo. If my ship was capable of moving I'd worry. Vettering did not know what had gone wrong. One minute he'd had Catenary in his sights. SIPACUM'S, that is. As he had expected, the TGW ship held back. That crazy bust must've really loved the way he rammed it down her throat! Must've had some heavy connections too. Was I getting it on with some TGW admiral's private stock? To meltdown with her! I can have a better time with Althis. Althis had slimmed only a little. Yet she was attractive- certainly to Vett. He wished she were a little better at ship handling but a man couldn't have everything. She made it up in other ways. And he could trust her to handle routine chores at the con. Althis was loyal. So why did she screw up so completely? Althis had not gotten things wildly and totally wrong. Just the tiniest bit out of whack ... so that the salvo intended for Zo missed and managed to hit the TGW ship. Candiru had retaliated instantly-before he had a chance 194 even to think of apologizing. And now Vett was going to have to explain things to a boarding party. He sent one of his Jarps to let them in. In spacesuits it was hard telling her from her but Vett thought he recognized the hust who enjoyed putting on an I don't want to act. She was the only one in standard TGW gear. "Hello, Vett." The voice came mechanical from fore and aft speakers in one of the civilian suits. "You! I know that voice." "Pos, Vett, it's me," Zo said. "Been a while, hasn't it." Vettering's eyes narrowed as he squinted at Zo's suit. Since Zo still wore temporary eyes inside the tinted and reflective helmet, the other man didn't get much of a look. At last his slow mind began putting it together. The woman in the TGW suit ... in the same boarding party with Zo! He recalled the vaguely familiar man who had been haggling across the room with Honest Hassan. "Should have recognized you then," Vettering growled. "We all make mistakes," Zo said airily. "Yours was firing on a TGW spacer that was coming to the aid of a merchanter being denied the right of innocent passage." "Merchant ship my flaming ass-you're a slaver!" "Does the pot call the kettle black? Or perhaps you've had time to jettison all the sleeping pods in your hold?" When Vettering did not reply, Zo continued. "Now pay attention, all of you. We need an official version of what happened and our stories had better agree." "Are you offering some kind of a deal?" Lhari Haddad was aghast. "'I'm offering Vettering his worthless life if he'll just get off my back," Zo snapped. "I'm offering Captain Haddad an official version of what happened-one that just might let her continue with TGW." "And what do you get out of it?" Vett demanded. "We'll get to that later." In the background Candila looked at Althis. Neither spoke. Their eyes spoke. Neither mother nor daughter would ever speak of what had happened. 195 "What do you want?" Lhari Haddad asked. "Your Candiru is drifting uncrewed and helpless. The laws of salvage say she's mine." "You can't just take a TGW ship!" "Probably not," Zo agreed. "Even though it's technically legal they'd invoke some kind of 'official secrets' randygazoo and I could spend the rest of my life trying to get a hearing in some out-of-the-way planetary court. That's why I'm leaving you the ship and the sub-lightspeed drive." He paused. "However, I've had a long run of bad luck for which you are not totally blameless. Even in the best of times I could never afford a new military version of SIPACUM, nor any of your heavy DS ordnance. I'll have to go through your stores and see what else I need. You did just finish refitting, didn't you?" "I can't let you strip and loot a TGW ship!" "Nobody's asking your permission. I'm just taking a few parts and spares. And the word is salvage, not loot." "But how can I ever get

home without SIPACUM?" "Slowly. With pocket calculators, patience, and your excellent TGW training," he said. "At less than lightspeed you should manage it in about a year." Lhari Haddad reminded herself that only moments ago she had not even considered returning. To what? "I suppose you'll want my other ball," Vett growled. "To the contrary. I shall require your ship." "Golden Porkchop?" Vettering howled. "I'll see you in Sheol first!" "Have it your own way." Zo turned to Ulf. "Would you and Red please remove his other testicle with a rusty rip saw before you jettison poor old Vett?-without a spacesuit?" "You'd do it, too," Vettering mumbled. "Vett, old cock, in a pinch none of us does what he wants. We do what we have to do." "Is your ship beyond repair?" "No." "Then why do you need mine?" 196 Zo smiled. "I thought it might make a nice present for Ulf and Alianora." And keep them from deciding to steal mine. He turned to Umm, whose clothing was strewn about the con-cabin when she hastened out of various fluttery gaudy purples and burgundies and into a spacesuit. "Perhaps Althis could see her way to giving Alianora some sort of trousseau? Poor girl's practically naked." Zo paused. "Of course she'd still be, with most of that stuff." Ulf gasped. And I was going to kill him! He got me off Nevermind. He got me into space. He got me a ship. Wait till I tell Alianora! Lhari Haddad reached an abrupt decision. "We're shorthanded," she said. "We'll all have to pitch in if we're going to move all that equipment." Turning to Zo, she added, "Assuming your story's worth it." "Simple tales are always best. They don't get garbled in the telling. Now, as I see it, you were just overhauling Vettering for a routine inspection-possibly something a little out-of-phase with his IFF. Then, quite literally out of the blue, comes this great thundering pirate fleet at least half as big as old Artisune Muzuni's-and clobbers both of you. "Golden Porkchop was destroyed immediately. He survived only because he and his crew all happened to be temporarily detained onboard Candiru when the pirates struck." Zo paused and began quoting from an imaginary report: "With Candiru disabled, Suffragan Captain Haddad followed the highest traditions of practicality. No don't give up the ship nonsense for her. Instead, to save the lives of TGW personnel and those innocents whom she overhauled and thus endangered, Captain Haddad, at the risk of her own life and career, opted to save lives and make the best of a hopeless situation. She suffered indignities to body and soul. She saved what could be saved of Candiru." "Grat ..." Vettering muttered, "shit!" Zo ignored him. (Lhari was looking at Zo, bright-eyed.) "Captain Haddad regrets that the whole incident happened so swiftly that she could read no signature. Since 197 the pirates took Candiru's SIPACUM and blackbox, there is no way to determine the pirate fleet's identity. Captain Haddad will devote the remainder of her career to learning who did it and meting out appropriate punishment." Lhari snorted. "Do you think they'll believe that?" "Why not?" Zo spread his hands palms up, brows up. "Vett and all his people will swear that's just the way it happened." Haddad and Vettering looked at each other. Umm and Candila looked at each other. Ulf looked at Zo. Red and Trill looked at Vett's Jarp. "Will they double cross us?" Candila asked. "I doubt it," Zo said equably. "Why?" "I have Candiru's blackbox record of everything that really happened. As long as they can't find that pirate I won't be able to find any of the copies already on their way to various hidey holes, where they will stay until such time as I remain unreported long enough to be legally dead. Isn't it nice to have several people with a personal interest in seeing that I live a long and happy life?" After a pause he added, "And we also have a couple of grateful young friends instead of more enemies. I actually believe Captain Ulf might come to our aid in a moment of crisis-if it didn't take too much of his time." "You," Candila said fondly, "are an evil man." He smiled at her with her own castoff eyes. "I'm learning." It had been a long day. Even in null-G, heavy armament had mass. It took energy to push and energy to stop. Catenary had accepted the ultrasophisticated TGW military SIPACUM from Candiru and was humming to itself as it redesigned circuitry to accommodate the super hot-rod double-P drive of the TGW ship. Ulf and Alianora were already installed in Golden Porkchop. They

were having their first argument. Over what to rename her. 198 Vett and Althis-Umm were aboard Candiru with Captain Haddad. "I'll program them a normal-space course back to Bleak," Zo said thoughtfully. "But that's where we're going!" "We'll be there and gone four times before they make it." Candila smiled. "What's funny?" "I was just thinking of that prissy little Lhari, and Umm, and that friend of yours with the doctorate in advanced flatulation." Zo was beginning to grin, too. "A whole year together in null-G with him sniffing around her tight little bottom all the way." "Going to be a real fun trip," Candila predicted. Then they were both laughing. Epilogue: On Qalara The shining lab's air-purifier hummed and wrought its magic with negative ions and attractor-collectors located in every wall. The backup purifier system waited, five seconds offline. Once the big cylinder had been drained, she snatched a look at the man inside while she moved to check the monitors. A fine-looking man he was too, smoothly muscled with a well-made body. Eyes closed. Chest moving. For the hundredth or five hundredth time she peered at the monitors. Life support systemry. Vital signs telltales called telits. Interior cylinder temp. The body-temp of the tank's occupant. A barely detectable smile of satisfaction touched her lips. She made a minute adjustment of the gauge that controlled the temperature within the lifetank and gave it another glance with one eyebrow speculatively up. The cylinder was man-sized, plus, similar to the cybernetic daktari to be found on any spacecraft. This one was considerably more complex and capable even than those miracle-working "shipdocs." "What's the room-temp, Saboura?" She posed the question without looking at her lab assistant, who recognized the distracted professional tone and was not offended by it. First he glanced at her and at the tall, transparent cylinder-which she was now remote-controlling in a slow move from the vertical to the horizontal. Then 199 200 Saboura checked both CRT screen and the thermometers themselves-one high up on the lab's pale green wall, the other at waist-level. "Twenty-four, Daktari, from floor to ceiling. Uniform." She nodded her oddly silver-haired head and made a sound of acknowledgment. Just a sound, without words. She was busy and her brain was busy. She was preoccupied with the instruments she called her tools, and with her thoughts, and with her "patient." She was a woman of about average height-172 sems or so-of apparent-age . . .oh, thirty. Only recently she had indulged in an apparent frivolousness uncharacteristic of her: overnight her short, walnut-hued hair had become silver, and loosely banged. Yet how could the change be uncharacteristic of her, since she had done it? Certainly she was known to be different. Hers was more the build of a woman than of a scientist, she had been told, by people who quailed when she did not act at all flattered. She was aware that she was a woman and looked like one. Considerably more important was that she was a scientist-physician and furthermore one of dedication who brought some genius to her work, without razzamatazz. No one understood her. That had to be so, because they all said so. (Even scientists were susceptible to "They say . . .") She was Fumiko Kika-daktari, and once she'd have been called Doctor Kita. For a time she had been director of computer maintenance and repair here at Hakimit Medical Center. That was a waste, but she had her reasons. Fourteen months-Qalaran ago she had resigned that post. Immediately she had been offered a considerably more prestigious position by HMC's director. She had turned it down and made a request. Just as immediately she had become far less visible as well as less accessible. Kita-daktari had seniority, and clout, and respect. Her request had been granted at once. She was not questioned- not much or for very long, by anyone-and her obvious desire for privacy even unto secrecy was respected. That 201 was not so unusual when someone here engaged in research; a Project. Particularly when the Project was privately funded and occupied only one lab-area. And most particularly when she was paying her single (!) lab assistant out of her own funds (or her unnamed patron's, more likely), as if she had no concept of or care for prestige. Furthermore she not only did not request a secretary, she even refused the offer of one at HMC expense. Incredible woman! "Up it to twenty-six and a half*, S'boura. Peel your

clothes, if you need to. We're not about to catch anything from him-or he from us! "Temperature increased to two-six-point-five for benefit of the subject," Kita-daktari went on in a different tone, rather dull and businesslike for the benefit of her recorder. That was the unshining button she wore above her right breast, stikttited to her un-crisp shirt of soft combed cotton. Since she knew the antiseptic safety of the lab, of herself, and of the man in the tank, and had anticipated increasing the temp this day of his advent, she wore no lab-coat. Indeed she hardly looked professional (though the senseless fixation on white garments had long since slid into the fog of time past), save for her face and manner. They were enough. That she wore a v-necked, sleeveless teeshirt of pale cream yellow and matching v-legged shorts did not matter. 'Miko Kita had no one to impress. What she wore had nothing to do with anything but her own comfort. The shorts were both loose and longish. Hardly designed to emphasize her womanliness or flatter her body. As a matter of fact she had cytologically engineered a reduction in her own glutei maximi, several years ago. She had no desire to distract a patient or aide or coworker because its eyes could not cease looking at her backside. (It had been a shade beyond prominent.) Unobtrusively, she also made sure that she did not jiggle. (It had seemed intelligent, once, to make sure that her * 26.5 Centigrade; about 80° Fahrenheit, Old Style. 202 lab assistant was female. True, and intelligent of Miko . . . except that the silly essing girl she had taken on had been far more distracted and desirous of her boss than most males would have been. Miko replaced the young woman without having assuaged her desires.) Another glance at the over-monitor showed nothing unusual. Just the same she checked the individual monitors (which it monitored). Right, all firm, and so she told her recorder, muttering. Everything firm. All perfect, beautiful. Everything matched. Heartbeat, pulse rate, body temp- even the stomach, which was definitely functional and indicating a need and desire for food. Decent solid food, for the first time. Brainscan: perfect. Beautiful! "And functioning," she breathed, and repeated it: "Brain functioning." She opened a key, popped up a locklid, and reached into the recess to move the lever. There might have been a fanfare. Should have been, the staring Saboura thought. Instead there was no sound, none at all. Not even a click. "Advent," Kita-daktari said in a louder voice, and her aide joined her in gazing at the cylinder. It rested horizontally, now. Its long arc of a lid slid open and eased into its niche. Cool, real air touched the entirely naked man lying inside that transparent lifetank . . . and he twitched. Very slowly this time, Miko Kita remoted the cylinder off the horizontal and stopped it when its longtime resident had assumed a back-tilted angle of about sixty degrees. "Ready to lift him out, S'boura?" "Pos! Firm, Dakt-" Saboura wasn't given the opportunity to complete his answer. The eyes of the man in the tank fluttered, snapped open. Blinkered. Eyes flared, pupils shrank. His lips moved, and Saboura's stopped moving. But remained open while he stared at the man in the tank-who spoke. "'Ca-a-' The sound was deep-voiced, scratchily throaty and neither normal nor endearing. Dry-throated, ugly. While Kita- 203 daktari started toward him, nervous as the hovering mother she was not, he swallowed and licked his lips. "Ca-an't I . . . wa-aalk out, Mee-ko-oh?" Miko Kita-daktari smiled, holding her posture of arrested motion. "Those muscles have been exercised but never used," she pointed out. "Feel . . . goo-ood," he said in that hoarse, dry tone. But sounding better, oh definitely improving with each syllable. "Good," she told him, moving a step closer. "But unused, nevertheless. Virgin muscles, exercised only automatically. Wouldn't it be a shame, after all this effort, if you tried walking and fell and broke your nose!-or a tooth! Or both." "Uh," he said, in what she took for an affirmation as well as acknowledgment. Very slowly, he rolled his eyes. "Hullo, Saboura." He turned his head, looking at his shining surroundings. "Let me just sit on the edge of that table? I was hurt bad, hmm?" "That's why the padded table is there," Fumiko Kita was saying, but she frowned at his last sentence. "Ah, first tell me a question. Do you know your name?" "Of course. Do you know yours?" The voice was better, less labored. The timbre was improving, though it remained a chesty bass. She

smiled but, brows up, did not chuckle. "What is the last thing you remember?" "Your voice. 'Ready to ... lift him out, Saboura?' Oh-then Saboura started to answer but broke off.'" "Neg, my dear. That is the first thing you remember. What's the last thing you remember?" "Before you let me . . . out, hmm? I need some . . . juice. Food. Last-last thing I rememb-oh, suiting up. I passed Saboura the memorycorder and . . . that's all. I was going to get into the boat. The lander. I was . . . going to . . . uh!" The doctor moved closer now, her face concerned. She was looking into his eyes, which were suddenly chips of black jade, staring. The expression was partly horror, 204 partly revelation. She had seen this face many times-and the one cytologically, molecularly, molecular-atomically identical to it. "Pos, my dear. Hurt bad, indeed. You know now, don't you?" "I don't remember anything after passing Saboura the minimem bank!" "Because Saboura had it, and all your memories," she told him softly. Her hand fluttered, waving her aide to the monitors. She would not take her gaze off the man in the tank. Saboura checked the over-monitor, nodded, and moved closer. "Because I had your last memories," he said, also in a quiet voice. "I-I ... ah, Booda! No! It hap-pened!" "It happened," Miko said, with a brief nod. "I died-I was killed?" Both the physician-scientist and her aide nodded. She also gestured, and Saboura moved right up to the tank as she did. "Our hands may feel chilly, Jonuta," she said. Chilly or not, they closed on his arms and flanks as he sagged, made weak by the ghestliest knowledge any human could hear. He had died. He had been killed, at last. And he was back. He sat on the edge of the padded table, slumped a little, a man of average height or perhaps a shade more, good in the body, lean of thigh and waist. A darkly good-looking man. His down-directed eyes registered what they saw, reported, and actuated brain and speech center. "I'm naked." "As the day you were born, my dear." And Miko added, "What else, on this day you are born again." "I did . . . really . . . die?" "Pos." She laid a hand on his shoulder. It felt good. Strong, muscular. Jonuta's shoulder. It was, although this was Jonuta2; Jonuta's clone. She liked this shoulder, and this man. 205 "You really did die, Jonuta. That body is ... atoms." "Killed? An accident, or-" "We really should hold that back for a time, my dear. After all, you foresaw it-or recognized the strong possibility of your death. That is why you came to me so long ago. Over a year ago. Why we set up this so-secret project. The reason why we performed the simple act of taking a few living cells from you." And she added, "A few. Not just one." "Jonuta is ... dead," he said, and it was the good deep voice of Captain Cautious, rumbling up from his chest. "And Jonuta lives. I am Jonuta . . . cloned!" "Indeed! Indeed! With every memory up to no more than a dozen minutes before . . . before it happened. Surely you would not want those memories, anyhow!" He looked up and one dark thick eyebrow rose in his speculative look. "Memories of death? I might! To know death, to feel it, and to be here, to awake . . . neg! Negatory, Miko. I'm glad I can't remember that! I wonder if it hurt, my dying." He said the last word slowly, tasting it. He tasted nothing. No bitterness. He felt fine. Better than fine. He felt well rested, fit, alert, and healthy. Ready to run a klom or five, ready to stand at the con of his beloved Coronet. A damned good mind in a damned good body in the best of ships, he mused. "It probably hurt," she said. "But not for long." "It was not long," Saboura said. "You were Poofed, Captain. In the lander, in Aglaya's upper atmosphere. Practically instantaneous." Jonuta's head came up. "I didn't even get down onplanet?" And when Saboura shook his head, so did the seated clone. "Damn! In that case I'm damn near broke!" He had financed this, all of this, including Saboura and today's events; his . . . awakening. "Nice of you to say so, Saboura. And who was waiting for me, there above good old Aglaya?" "No one is sure, and no one's bragging," Miko said, rubbing his shoulder. A man's shoulder, a grown man's- 206 and she was the first person ever to touch it! She glanced down. That was a virgin slicer, too. Technically, anyhow. No, in reality, she reflected. It's just been grown! "Jonuta? Are you cold?-chilly?" He glanced at them, at damp faces. "As a matter of fact it's pretty hot in here, isn't it? Could I be running a

fever?" "No no. Nothing is wrong, nothing. We just set the temp way up for you. After all, you've been in that cylinder all your life." "All my life," he murmured, and despite the warmth a shiver ran through him. Then he glanced up again. "Well, let's get the heat turned down. And I'd rather have something on. After all, both of you have!" They gave him a robe and over-helped while he donned it, lest he weaken and fall. The muscles of his clone-body were, after all, as virginal as the rest of him. Except the mind. That was all, all Jonuta. He was Jonuta. He knew everything Jonuta knew, up until the last few minutes. Miko watched him carefully, eyes birdlike, seeking anything wrong. No. He looked like a man putting on a robe. Sashing it. A man who had done it thousands of times before. No, all was well. He was Kislar Jonuta, and he knew it, and remembered everything in his life save the final eleven or so mins of that life. His previous life. Robed, blinking, still disconcerted, with another beaker of fortified papayorange juice in hand, he thought about it. It had worked! And it had begun with Kenowa, really. A chance remark she had made ... "Jone?" she had said, just after they had got themselves back into the parsec abyss after the too-close attempt on his life, on Lanatia. "Jone-you have backup SIPACUM and backup cassettes, my dear. Has the idea of a backup Jonuta ever occurred to you?"¹ He had given her a calm answer, being lightweight and cool . . . and at first opportunity he had acted on the thought she had put into his mind. While Coronet and Srih ': SPACEWAYS #1, Of Alien Bondage, p. 92. 207 were being repaired, on big awful Bleak, Jonuta had leased a sleek little ship and departed. He was gone for six days,¹ and for all Kenowa and the others knew he had merely had to get off that dump of a world-or to get off, and was off getting himself laid somewhere. Kenowa was accustomed to his temporary liaisons, try stings, even infatuations. They were all wrong, of course, and he had never told them. He had been on Qalara. Miko had acquiesced to his proposal, and had taken those few cells to start what was now finished here, in the man in the long rust-colored robe: a backup Jonuta. After that, he had returned to Qalara and Hakimit Med Center and Miko again and again. Each time to "make a deposit" of memories.² They went into Miko's very private no-access computer. While the clone grew and was accelerated toward maturity, so did the memories on file in that bank. After the near-miss on Franjistation³ when he should have died (since Janja had after all Poofed him point-blank), he had headed straight here to record everything anew. TGO had wiped out most of his fortune, and his longtime financing of HMC and now of Miko's private work was draining him badly. He had decided to make a run to Aglaya for some salable cargo, of the two-legged variety. The man called Captain Cautious had been badly shaken and was more cautious still; he had taken Saboura along. And a minirecorder. A recorder of memories. Jonuta's memories. (He had insisted that Kenowa remain behind this time, and yes, HReenee and HRadem of HRalix as well.⁴ Kenowa had argued. HReenee had not. After the kill-attempt at Franjistation, she had seen how things were. Jonuta clove to Kenowa. HReenee had been a dalliance, temporary, an infatuation. Now she knew it. For the first time, Jonuta had told Kenowa that he loved her.) Now Saboura and Miko had told him what had tran- ': op. cit., p. 181. 2: SPACEWAYS #2, #6 and #9. 3: SPACEWAYS #9, In Quest of Qalara, chapter 9. 4: SPACEWAYS #6 208 spired since his very real death. The moment Saboura was sure, he had told Sakyo that they had to get back to Qalara as fast as possible. Since those were Sak's standing orders from Jonuta as well, the three of them-Sak, Shig, and the inexperienced Saboura-had sent Coronet hurtling away from Aglaya. "It's all been in secret," Saboura said. "I had to take Sakyo and Shiganu into our confidence, or felt that I did. ..." "Of course," Jonuta rumbled. So did his stomach, and he frowned. Booda's belly but he was hungry! "-but no one else. As a matter of fact, we decided to preserve secrecy by putting in at Rahman's space station. Sakyo and Shiganu took on cargo for Jorinne while I bought my way onto the first freighter heading here. That way, no one could connect your reappearance with Hakimit-provided that you don't do the reappearing here." Jonuta nodded solemnly. "¹ won't. Where are they now?" "In a hotel over in Tamridah. Coronet's up at Qalara-station

number Two. Sakyō and Shiganu understand not to try to contact us, but we've gotten word to them. Cryptic progress reports. The hardest part is Kenowa. She knows only what happened above Qalara. That you're dead." "I won't ask how she took it," Jonuta said. "She's at the villa?" "Pos." Jonuta nodded. Sak and Shig were in a hotel clear across the planet and had never been near HMC. Or even in communication with the Center, or with Miko. Kenowa was in the villa (might have to remortgage that, damn it) just outside Norcross, a few kloms from here. Good. She'd be working at recovering. Meanwhile rattling around in the place, scared, worried, and-safe, he told himself. While knowing nothing. Good. That was the way he had wanted it. It was the way he had felt it had to be. This way Kenowa had not pestered Miko and Saboura—who had been very, very busy. Besides, something might have gone wrong in the cloning process and . . . bringing me online. Best Kenowa never knew about it at all. If something had gone wrong, 209 she and her hopes would have been dashed off an even worse cliff. Now the point was that nothing had gone wrong. "So you two transferred my memories from the computer to . . . me, and woke me up." Miko Kita nodded. "Firm. That's it, in essence. Your memories remain in the 'puter bank of course, and the other cells remain in stasis, frozen. Seems to me that it would be wise to thaw one, and let me start it, to be sure it's viable." "You'd have to terminate it, though, if it is," he said, frowning. "I don't like that, Miko. That would be like killing me." "Hardly," she said, surprised at his objection. "It would be little different from aborting a fetus. All I need do is see that it is going to develop. That will be enough. Then we could know it's safe to leave the others in frozen stasis." "I don't like it." This time Miko reverted to Kita-daktari and flared at him: "Darn you, Jonuta! You forget about it then, and let me handle my own business!" I'd better, he reflected. And I'd better get back to my business too, and soon. By now she must have been dipping into her own savings. The least a man can do is pay for his own rebirth! With that thought he proved the strength and agility of his new body by enveloping Fumiko Kita-daktari in his arms and straining her close. After just a moment of discomfort—after all, Saboura . . . she hugged him right back. Once he had released her he turned to Saboura, stared into the young man's eyes a moment, and then hugged him, too. "If we keep this up," Miko said in a wavering voice, "this place will be slippery with tears!" Jonuta jerked his head against the welling in his eyes. "This damn place ought to have carpeting anyhow." He didn't rumble; his voice broke. He cleared his throat, turned away, cleared his throat, turned back just in time 210 to see the others break off their happy exchange of glances. "Well now. We can't have a live Jonuta redshifting Hakimit," he said. He glanced up at the chron. 2240. Good. Nice and dark outside, twenty mins before midnight. "So how are we getting me out of here, or have we considered that?" Miko smiled. "I do like the way you say 'we,' Captain Jonuta! We have thought of that, yes." She glanced at Saboura, who amplified. "I left Coronet at Rahmastation with the minimemory-corder and a go-bag. It contained a bit of your own equipment, and an aurasuit Sakyō assured me is yours. And a holoprojection cassette he also assured me is Emergency Only, never used. I think surely this is an emergency. . . ." "An unprecedented one," Jonuta said with a solemn nod. "I've never been killed before, after all. Firm. I know the holoproj. So. We make sure that I am both stable and mobile, and I get into the suit and actuate the projection. You two tell me whether you see anything at all of Jonuta in it! Then I leave here. Now?" Miko shrugged. "With me, Jonuta." "Neg. Separately. We don't compromise you that way, you see, m'dear! Besides, I need to get to the villa. Secretly. Probably best that I work that out myself, just as I work out how I'll spring this on Kenowa. She's not the fainting sort, but . . . she probably will, this time." His smile was perfunctory. "Saboura," Miko said, "please double-check the door and get the equipment." She waited until he had paced away before she moved very close to this new Jonuta. "Listen you," she murmured. "You're mine! Tonight, I mean. It's been a long, long time for us, Jonuta. Tomorrow I'm going to call in sick—no one will even miss me if I don't call in. Tonight..." She paused to

pat the front of his robe, just south of center. "Tonight, my old sometime lover, you're virgin and I want your cherry. I'm even entitled!" 211 When Saboura returned with the go-bag he had taken off spaceship Coronet, he wondered why his boss's color was so high-and why born-again Jonuta was laughing so hard. And nodding agreement to something, all the while.

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