







sedentary, and the air is warm, and the surfaces are clean—and if they insist on monitoring us, we figure we might as well give 'em a thrill. It's mostly women who have to mind the monitors anyway—so we give them something to think about!"

"It's sort of like hitting the ol' swimming hole," Kann added. "Why wear a binding piece of cloth when you can swim in comfort?"

"Swim?"

"Take off those magno-shoes," Kann told him. "You'll see."

"Yeah. Okay. I guess I never imagined space would be like this!" Gann was amazed. "I think I'm gonna like it here."

"That's the spirit," Bardo told him. "Now, why don't you go back to your quarters and get a little more informal."

"Don't mind if I do." The new man smiled.

"Hey, kid," Kann called to him as he turned to leave, "drop these in Cabin I, would you?" The shorts Kann had stripped off came floating gracefully through the air.

"Sure." Gann nodded. He clomped off down the corn-

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dor in his clumsy magno-shoes, which he intended to leave in his cabin for the duration of his tour.

Back in his cabin, Gann stripped down to his underwear and then practiced floating back and forth across the room. It wasn't anything like the simulator back on Magadis; there, though they'd done their best to duplicate the sensations of weightlessness for the students at the Space School, he'd always sensed a sort of atmospheric pressure. Here there was true weightlessness, and it was like nothing he'd ever experienced before.

It took him awhile to get a feel for how hard to push off in order to propel himself from the bed to the closet to the service closet. He had noticed that the room had no chairs, and that the "bed" was really just a cage of cloth mesh containing a pillow. Now that he was experiencing weightlessness, he understood why you didn't need chairs in space. If you wanted to sit, you just sat—even in midair if it suited your fancy.

It suddenly occurred to him why one of the problems he had worried about when the others had suggested going naked just wouldn't occur: there were no chairs, so you would never sit down on a cold one!

And the "bed" was just to keep you from floating into a bulkhead if you thrashed in your sleep. The pillow was unnecessary as a headrest; it was there for security, something to wrap your arms around as you, quite literally, drifted off to dreamland.

Once he was used to the idea of floating, Gann had to get used to the idea of floating naked. After he'd left the farm, he had learned to wear less when social custom dictated it, but not without sensation of somehow violating a taboo. As for going without clothes altogether, that was such a rare experience for him that he simply could not make the adjustment, and knowing there were monitors

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trained on him made him all the more conscious of his state of undress. As he floated out of his cabin clad in not so much as a fig leaf, he became very embarrassed—and very aroused.

*Looking* down at the physical evidence of his emotional state, he realized that he couldn't encounter the others while flying this banner of his naivete. So, as he made his way down the corridor from handhold to handhold, he kept a lookout for one of the specially modified X-214s.

They were nowhere to be found. There were X-214s aplenty, but none with those chest protrusions and those corkscrew curls. Then he remembered—they'd sent one back to the recharging station. If he recalled his charts correctly, that was on Level 3.

But how to get there? Gann found his way to one of the ladder-lined tubes that connected the 'Grosprung's various levels and had begun to clamber down when he remembered that he didn't need the ladder here in space. Instead, he used it to shove himself off—a bit too vehemently, for he found himself sailing rapidly, feet-first, all the way down to the first level.

He hit bottom with too much force and bounced rapidly up the tube again. He grabbed one of the ladder rungs to stop himself and nearly wrenched his shoulder—but at least he had managed to stop. Once he caught his breath, he glanced about to get his bearings and found himself hanging with the portal to Level 2 at eye level. He glanced through the viewer in the portal and spotted one of the modified X-214s engaged in some sort of satellite maintenance. Seeing it reminded him of the reason for his search, and his erection—which he had forgotten about in the sheer terror that he might bounce up and down that tube through all eternity—was suddenly painfully apparent to him once more.

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Afraid of initiating those rebounds once again, he raised himself slowly and carefully, hand over hand, to the entrance of Level 2. He opened the portal and eased himself through it. Displaying his colors at full staff, he approached the robot, anticipating the same reaction he had witnessed when Kann had removed his shorts. But the X-214 failed to so much as acknowledge Gann's presence.

*Perhaps it only responds to its name*, he thought. What had it called itself before? Sweetie—that was it.

"Hiya, Sweetie," Gann greeted it genially.

The robot did not turn. "I am not Sweetie. I am Honeybun," it informed him, and continued with its work.

This must be the second modified robot, Gann decided. Well, they did say they'd modified two.

Gann did not find the robot particularly attractive, even though the broad conical protrusions on its chest were proportionally larger than the mammary glands of any human female he'd ever seen—or even fantasized about. But the idea of screwing a robot struck him as a daring adventure. Besides, he was possessed of a very painful condition that needed speedy relief—especially if he was going to take a chance on shooting through that tube again. *The nail that*



"Honeybun?"

"Sine plus cosine tangent—"

"X-214 Unit," Gann said sternly, "return immediately to satellite maintenance."

"I am Honeybun," it replied. "You are Gann." Its arms twitched upward and its head did a full revolution. "Sock it to me, baby. Don't mind if I do."

Gann suddenly began to worry that he might have damaged its gyroscopic device when he tipped it over. Or did X-214s have gyroscopic devices? *He* certainly didn't know what to do for it. His grades in robot maintenance had been pathetic.

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Gann decided to return to his cabin and clean himself up, then go back to Main Control and look up the other human crew members. Maybe he could pump them for some information on how he was supposed to fuck the robot and that would give him a clue as to just what he'd done wrong. He reasoned that if he didn't mention the incident, the robot wouldn't either, and perhaps the others would figure it had somehow shorted out by itself. And perhaps *they'd* know how to fix the malfunction, since this X-214's unique programming was their creation.

He shrugged, and left the raving robot to its own devices. Putting off entering the ascent/descent tube as long as possible, he went floating down the corridor looking for a tube nearer to his cabin. Halfway down the corridor, he was surprised to encounter a cat, perched in midair, wash-ing itself.

"Hello," he said. "I didn't know we had a pet aboard." He reached out to stroke it, and the cat began to purr. "Well," Gann told it, "'*you* seem to have adjusted to weightlessness, so I guess I can, too." The cat continued to purr beneath his stroking hand.

Just when he was thinking that he really preferred the company of cats to robots, even robots with unique capabilities, the cat suddenly pulled its legs under itself, arched its back, and began to hiss.

"What's the matter?" he asked, then added, "It's okay, kitty." He reached out his hand again. The cat spat, but not at him.

At that moment, something came gliding up silently behind him. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"

Gann froze in midgesture.

"Who's there?" he demanded in the most authoritative voice he could muster, realizing that he probably didn't look very authoritative standing there in the altogether,

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with his flaccid penis covered with drying semen. "Who's *there?*" he demanded again.

He sensed something reaching toward him, but before he could turn to confront it, it grasped him by the head and the shoulders and snapped his neck neatly at the base of his skull. Gann fell backward with the momentum of the gesture, as whatever it was let go of him. He felt nothing, but knew that he was floating, floating. Then he knew nothing.

As his unseeing eyes stared at the ceiling, his body floated gently from one side of the corridor to the other. And the cat, looking behind him, let out a yowl and vanished down the corridor in the opposite direction.

Floating on his back in midair, with his arms folded behind his neck, Ensign Churi Kann was the picture of relaxation. He had just run the 0400 checklist with the 'Grosrun's new commander, Ensign Gatto Bardo.

One good thing about serving on a 'Grosrun was that if no women with prior service were aboard, the senior ensign was ranking officer. That was how Bardo came to be racking up command points just four months out of Space School. Kann glanced over at the man in command. Bardo, who had nearly four hours of watch left, was storing the log tapes from the checklist. But Kann, who was off duty until 1600 hours, was free for the duration. He intended to return to his cabin and get himself a little sack time, as soon as he could get up the energy to float down the hall.

"You know," he mused, "if/ were the new guy, and I'd been told what he's been told about the X-214s, first thing *I'd* do, I'd find me one and give it The Gift."

"Hell, he's lucky he can find his cabin." Bardo laughed. "And unless he learns to get around without those magno-shoes, it'll take the whole time he's off duty for him to get back and forth between Main Control and his quarters."

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Kann laughed too, but then added seriously, "I think he'll find a way." Bardo snickered. "Just because it's the first thing *you'd* do doesn't mean everybody who comes aboard is so obsessed."

"Put yourself in his place," Kann suggested.

The crew chief nodded. "You're right. That's exactly what I'd do."

"We didn't tell him *how*."

"He looked enterprising enough. He'll find the way."

"What if he finds Honeybun? She's doing repairs. She won't give him a tumble when she's working."

"Then he's likely to be *real* frustrated," Bardo told him. "Maybe he'll even start to worry about whether he's losing his touch."

They both chuckled at the thought. But Kann persisted. "Look, we've both got to live with the guy for the next two months, and I've got him for two months after that. No sense getting off on the wrong foot by giving him a hard time. I'll go clue him on the details."

He sat up and reached out a hand toward the ceiling to keep from bumping his head. With the expertise that came from two months in weightless orbit, he gave himself just enough of a push so that he ended up near a side wall, enabling

him to propel himself to his destination using the wall for leverage.

"Maybe you *should* warn him," Bardo agreed. "But don't do any demonstrating. If you don't get some sack time, you'll fall asleep on your watch and I'll have to cite you. Command responsibility, you know."

"You want to do the next two checklists with Gann?" Kann sneered.

"He's gotta learn sometime."

"I guess you're right. Well, I'll run the 1600 check with him at the shift change, and I'll see how well you've

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trained him, Commander." Kann threw his friend a mock salute and then sailed gracefully out into the corridor. Bardo stared after him for a moment, then shrugged, turned, and pulled a magnetized volume from one of the metal bulkheads, where he had fixed it when he came on duty. It was one of a stash of real books and magazines that were willed from 'Grosrung crew to 'Grosrung crew. Everything from ribald classics to recipe collections to revisionist histories that had long ago been rerevised on Magadis, the books had been brought aboard, one volume at a time, with each new crew member. Such libraries were a spacer tradition, and one reason that it was better to serve on an older ship or satellite than a new one. Their existence meant that no one could monitor what any spacer chose to read—a small measure of privacy in an over-monitored piece of an overmonitored world.

Without the libraries, one was reduced to reading scan-ner tapes or watching videos tuned in from planetside. These choices were, of course, recorded. Oh, they *said* they didn't note your reading and viewing choices on your record, but it was common knowledge that many a spacer's promotion had been stymied by a vague reference to "unorthodox tastes and habits." Diligent avoidance of computerized requests for materials made your tastes and habits your own private affair.

The thought of private affairs made Bardo chuckle. You learned to live without privacy when you served on a 'Grosrung. There was no privacy in the 'Grosrungers' cabins, which were monitored "for health reasons," something that had resulted in a number of spacers being called on the carpet for participating in certain activities, on the carpet or otherwise, with their shipmates. The control rooms were also monitored, but the corridors were not, except at major intersection points. What they did with the robots, Kann and Bardo had always been careful to do in

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the unmonitored sections of the corridors; when they had programmed the robots to receive The Gift, they had made the programming readouts indicate that the robots had received a special wrench and returned it to its appropriate storing place.

Bardo chuckled to himself. He and Kann had thought of everything, even a cover story. Still he glanced nervously around the monitors in Main Control, although nothing was beeping. Nothing was flashing, either. Let them monitor away—all they'd see was a naked crewman reading what appeared to be a technical manual, since you couldn't tell a book by its cover. He picked up that book and proceeded to lose himself in a tale of the never-dying blood-eaters of the Stokerian Mountains.

The book was very convincingly written. As he read about the long-clawed blood-eaters in their great fur cloaks, Bardo caught himself glancing nervously over his shoulder, not once but several times, to check for a cloaked presence. He covered his nervousness—for the benefit of the monitors—by checking the various screens and dials in Main Control. But he found himself wishing he had some seasoning root or a necklace of pounded copper, or even his clothes, for some sort of protection from the stalking blood-eaters so vividly portrayed on the pages before him. He went back to his book, and again he began to get the prickly sensation that something was sneaking up behind him. This time, however, he was determined not to indulge his imagination. Nothing could be sneaking up behind him except—Damn! Kann knew that he was reading this book about blood-eaters. It would be just like Kann to sneak up behind him and scare the wits out of him.

Bardo leaned back casually and struck what he hoped was an obviously nonchalant pose, book in hand. But he concentrated on listening. Sure enough, he could hear something—or someone—in the corridor, just outside the

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open port of Main Control. Bardo's back was to the door, so to maintain his casual appearance, he shoved himself off lightly with his fingers and gently floated back toward the source of the faint sound.

"I thought I told you to get some sack time, Kann," he said in a bored tone. He turned a page in his book and leaned back, just as his slow float took him to the doorway.

Something grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him downward, hard, so that his head collided with the base of the doorway.

"Hey," he cried indignantly, "that isn't funny—" Then his eyes bulged open in horror. He let go of his book and grabbed frantically for a handhold. Then something beyond the door seized his body and threw it, with unerring accuracy, against the monitor lens.

The lens caught him just below the ribs, forcing the air out of his lungs. He grabbed hold of the monitoring device and hung there for a moment, trying to get his breath back, making little moaning sounds that embarrassed him, even in his terror. Whatever, or whoever, was behind him, advanced on the control panels and began to shut them off. He heard the clicking, buzzing, and beeping of controls, gauges, and alarms, and he tried to force his body to take action, but without air in his lungs, all his body wanted to do was take in oxygen. At last, his lungs began to fill again. Taking a couple of deep breaths to make sure his diaphragm was in working order, he turned to face his assailant.

"You!" he gasped in shock. "But why? How?" He shoved himself off of the monitor toward the attacker, in an attempt to stop the 'Grosrung from being shut down. "Stop this at once!" he ordered.

But this time he was not merely thrown against the projecting monitor lens but impaled upon it. It severed his spine, pierced his pericardial sac and ripped into his  
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aorta. He began to gasp again, and a great cloud of blood welled from his back and spread through the atmosphere of Main Control.

The moist red cloud enveloped the dying commander of the Vergrostrung VII and his assailant. There was a sudden, louder beeping, and the sound of plastic cracking and metal crunching. Then there was no sound, either from the satellite or its dead commander. Not even the sound of life support. Bardo and the Vergrostrung VII were both dead. Churi Kann was floating lazily down the corridor of the Vergrostrung VII when the lights went out. All the lights, even the red emergency beacons. He crashed, shoulder-first, into a bulkhead, then into the opposite bulkhead with his opposite hip. Clutching desperately in the darkness, his hands encountered a projection on the wall—not a handhold, but it would do to steady him.

Kann clung there in the darkness, listening to the sound of his own breath, a sound, he was suddenly aware, that he had never before heard during his two months aboard the 'Grosprung. Then it occurred to him that all the normal sounds of the 'Grosprung had disappeared with the light—the swish of the air circulators, the faint hum of the distant motors, the vague buzz of the life-support systems. White noise, they called it; you didn't hear it, and you didn't miss it, until it was gone.

What Kann heard now, along with his frightened breathing, was the pounding of the blood in his temples. This was *impossible; nothing could shut a 'Grosprung down, short of*

sabotage—and only someone on board could sabotage it without shooting it out of orbit. They were obviously still in orbit, since Kann could not feel the slightest sensation of the pull that would have been caused by acceleration or deceleration if their orbit had shifted.

No one on board would risk his own life by shutting  
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down life support—no one, that is, but some kind of revolutionary fanatic. Kann knew Bardo wasn't a fanatic about anything but sex, and that was because he wasn't getting any up here, except from the X-214s. That left Gann; but unless appearances were truly deceiving, Gann wasn't the true-believer type. Hell, none of them were; they never sent people with any really passionate opinions to serve on the 'Grosprungs.

A thousand alternatives raced through Kann's mind: war on Magadis? But that would only mean that communications with the planet would be down, not the function of the satellite itself. If something had gone wrong with the solar-powered batteries, there would not be a sudden shutdown, but a gradual fading—and the monitors would have warned them when they ran the last checklist, long before the energy ran out.

It couldn't be an accident. It had to be deliberate. But who? And why? •

Then he grimaced in the darkness. If this was Bardo's idea of an initiation joke on the new man, it was really bad judgment. When the people planetside found out about it, Bardo would never get another command—and Kann sure as hell wasn't going to share the blame for this.

It would be just like Bardo, not only to want to scare the pants off the new man—if he were still wearing any—but also to want to scare Kann as well. They'd both been reading *The Stokerian Saga* on watch. Kann could just see Bardo chuckling at the thought of his second-in-command having visions of long-clawed, fur-cloaked blood-eaters as he groped his way along in the darkness.

Well, this wasn't funny, and Kann intended to tell his new commander so, as soon as he could grope his way back to Main Control.

He felt for a handhold, grabbed it, felt for the corresponding grip in the opposite side of the corridor. Soon he  
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had a rhythm going, but a slow one, as he felt his way along toward the intersection he knew was near. As he did so, he began to calm down. Bardo would never pull a stunt that stupid; something must have gone wrong with the 'Grosprung. Maybe a meteor had hit it. It would have to be a bad hit to shut off the power, but if it had made a hole in the hull, the bulkheads would have automatically sealed to keep the ship's air supply from escaping. If the power had failed before the seals could operate, he wouldn't be feeling his way along the corridor now, and *breathing*.

Kami began to calm down as his thoughts grew more rational. The 'Grosprung was *big*. There was more than enough air for three men to breathe for a whole day, maybe even longer. By then, a rescue ship would have arrived—for if this 'Grosprung were down, the other two wouldn't be relaying, and they'd need to get this one back into operation fast.

He toyed, for a moment, with the idea that it might have been one of the other 'Grosprungs that had gone off line and had somehow affected this one, but he knew that that would only mean a disruption of the communications function, not of lights and life support. Nope, this one was the one that was down. And he would have to work his way back to Main Control to confer with Bardo about how to get it working again.

Handhold to handhold, slowly, slowly, he worked his way down one corridor, then another, then down the ascent/descent tube, slowly, carefully, until he reached what he was sure was the level for Main Control. He groped for the port, found it open. *Good*, he thought; *there's still air on the Main Control level*. He was just raising himself up to enter the corridor when he was hit full in the chest by a blow from what felt like a furry cannonball.

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The fur gave way to the sharpness of claws that dug into his bare flesh.

*Blood-eaters'* his mind screamed, and he barely stopped himself from screaming it aloud. His throat felt raw with the scream he hadn't uttered, and he clutched at the clawed thing that was clutching at him—and found it was the cat. He stroked it as he tried to stifle the laughter welling up inside him, then gave up and let it roar from him in great gales of release. The cat! Well, if the bood-eaters he had envisioned had turned out to be the cat, all the disasters he had envisioned would probably turn out to be minor ones as well. It probably *was* Bardo, after all, who had turned off all the on-board systems just to give his crew a good scare.

Kann took a deep breath and then, carefully setting the cat aside, began to grope his way down the corridor. He glanced back, and saw the cat's yellow eyes staring after him. Handhold to handhold, he felt his way.

He suddenly became aware that the air had taken on a different texture, somehow moister, and with a metallic taste that was oddly familiar, in a way that he couldn't define. Something about it reminded him of loose teeth as a child, of a split lip he had received in a boyhood fight.

*Blood!* That was it. The air of the 'Grosrung tasted of blood.

Kann frowned in the darkness. Why should the air taste of blood? That book was getting to his imagination, he was sure. He continued feeling his way in the darkness until his head collided with something large and metallic, something that shouldn't have been there, right dead center of the corridor.

Kann extended his hands before him. Something grabbed them, held them, and reached out for" him. He uttered a  
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scream as an iron vise closed around his throat, cutting off the scream, his breath, the flow of blood to his brain. Then all was darkness.

Five hundred thousand video screens went dark at once; thousands of long-distance calls were interrupted in midsentence. The Eye In The Sky went blind, and the government of Magadis was unable to monitor the activi-ties of its citizens.

Short-wave radio communications told the story. Ver-grosrungs V and VI were sending strong signals, but their comnet had failed—because Vergrosrung VII had gone suddenly dark and silent.

In transit between the 'Grosrung orbit and the main Magadis spaceport, the shuttlecraft officially called the Centennial Condor, but known among spacers as "the Homer," received new orders from its base.

"They're not gonna like it," the Homer's captain noted, but he acknowledged the new orders, plotted his new course, and turned the ship around. "Take over," he told his co-pilot. 'I'd better break this news in person."

In the cramped passenger section of the shuttle, three 'Grosrungers—two women and a very young *man*—were boistrously celebrating their return from a tour of duty. They were toasting each other with rubber-tipped bottles of the finest bubbling wine from the De Paz region and trading hard-luck stories of their recent missions. The Homer's captain stuck his head in and cleared his throat.

"Oh, hi, Cappy." Dania Korsej smiled at him. They knew each other from their Space School days; he'd shuttled her up and back at least twice before. She held out her bottle. "I'll share my wine with you; we go back far enough. Sorry we don't have an extra bottle, but *you're* still on duty."

"I'm sorry to inform you that so are you."

"The hell you say," the other woman tokl him. Nekoosa

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Kiel, her name was. She wasn't quite as old as Dania—or as pretty. Cappy had shuttled her up and back at least once before. "We have finished our tours, so kindly get up front and pilot us home."

"Sorry. I just got a change of orders. We're going back to 'Grosrung VII. It seems to be inoperative."

"Damn it, not *now!*" Dania hissed.

Cappy stared at her. He had never seen her anything but efficient (going out) or jovial (coming back). Even in Space School, she'd never really become angry. But she was angry now, with the kind of blazing anger that usually had a focus.

"What do you mean?" he asked her.

"I mean I've waited long enough to go home, and I certainly don't want to get stuck in space doing repairs on a 'Grosrung when my tour is over."

"Oh, is r/ia/all?"

"Isn't that enough?" Dania looked disgusted. "Cappy, is there a chance we could go back to Magadis and let them send somebody else up? Did you acknowledge the orders?"

"I'm afraid I did."

"Damn and double damn."

"I'll second that," said Nekoosa Kiel.

"So will I," added the young man who had just fin-ished his first tour.

"Sorry, folks, but there's nothing I can do about it. We're headed for the VII, to find out what went wrong."

"Well, excuse me if I don't seem properly enthusiastic, but I've only just left the place, and I really don't want to extend my tour one single extra minute." Dania pouted. Cappy thought she was particularly attractive when she pouted.

"I'm sure it's nothing. We can probably set things to

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rights in a matter of a couple of hours, at most, and proceed planetside," Cappy tried to console her.

"And I'm just as sure that it's something that will take forever," Dania told him. "But ours is not to reason why, just to take orders, right?" She lifted her bottle at him in a mock toast.

"Sorry, Dania, but since we're no longer homeward bound, I'm afraid I'm going to have to confiscate that bottle."

"Damn," she said. She took a long drink from it, then handed it over. "You didn't see me do that, Cappy," she told him. "Do what?" he asked. He turned to the others. "Your bottles, please." The boy handed his over. Nekoosa Kiel took a short drink from hers before she followed suit. Cappy saluted and then retreated, with the bottles, to the cockpit.

"You should hear this," his co-pilot told him. "I'm monitoring the defense bands—local only, since they don't have the 'Grosrungs for relays. They're rioting in the streets down there. Without the Eye In The Sky, the social order has broken down."

"The social order broke down a long time ago," Cappy answered dryly. "Maybe when they first put up that Eye In The Sky."

"Gods, you sound like a rebel!"

"Do I? I don't have the energy to be a rebel, I'm afraid. But if I thought about it, which I don't, I'd have to admit the rebels have some mighty convincing arguments."

"Gee," said his co-pilot, "I'm glad you don't think about it, because, if you did, I'd have to report you for thinking they had some convincing arguments. Which would also be a pretty convincing argument for them, if I were to listen to such things."

Cappy smiled. "Spacers don't get involved in the poli-

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tics of grounders. Just stay neutral and they'll always let you fly, no matter who's in power."

"That's the way I've always had it figured."

They sat in silence until they saw the great dark shape of the Vergrosrung VII come up before them.

"Damn!" Cappy exclaimed. "Even her running lights are out. How the hell am I supposed to dock with her?"

"The way spineys make love—*very* carefully," Dania's voice came from over his shoulder. She pointed to a notch in the hull. "That's the cargo bay. We can probably dock there more easily than the passenger bay. We'll have to go in wearing suits, anyway; if she's down, life support is probably down too."

"You're right, Dania—good thinking. Too bad you're a woman; I've always thought you had command potential."

"I will take that in the spirit with which it was intended, Cappy, because we are old friends, and I won't hit you."

"What did I say?"

"If you don't know, I'll never be able to explain it to you." She shrugged. "The three of us are going to suit up. There are four suits—does either of you want to come along?"

"You know, in all my years of shuttling, I've never been further aboard a Vergrosrung than the pod bay," Cappy told her. "I think I *will* come along. You mind the store," he told his co-pilot. "I'm going to play detective."

Dania shrugged. "The more the merrier."

"There were three men on board, right?" he asked her.

"And a cat."

"And a cat," he repeated. "Right." Then he looked at her, puzzled. "What are we looking for?"

"Damned if I know," Dania told him. "All I know is that I've got to keep an eye out for an amorous robot named Honeybun that propositioned me just before I left."

"What did you do about it?" Cappy wanted to know.

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"I told it I'd look for it in about twelve hours—figuring I'd be safely home by then."

"So?"

"So I'm back—and my twelve hours are up, right now."

Cappy began to laugh, but Dania cut him off.

"I have a feeling this isn't going to be one bit humorous," she told him. "Not funny at all."

## Chapter 2

"That isn't funny," Judge Aleria Farrell of the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit of the Confederation of Planets announced to her bailiff, Jemall. But her articulation was somewhat hampered because her face was buried in his shoulder, and because she was trying to stifle a giggle.

"Come on, even you think it's funny," Jemall whispered, as his long, alien tongue did wonderful things to the side of her neck.

Aleria bit him playfully on the shoulder. "If you can't get your spells straight, you shouldn't be practicing magic," she told him archly.

"You know it isn't magic. It's psionic matter transmuta-tion."

"I don't care what you call it, you shouldn't use it on other people—or sentient objects—unless you're sure of how it's going to come out." She tried to keep her tone level, but that giggle kept creeping in—and what Jemall's long, four-jointed fingers were doing to the base of her spine wasn't helping her to maintain her composure. "Poor Houston," she managed to murmur.

"He really looks quite interesting this way," Jemall observed.

"I do not!" the voice of their ship protested, over the intercom.

"Houston!" Aleria was irate. "Are you monitoring us?"

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"I do my duty," the ship replied dolefully. "Or, at least, I try to do my duty, when I'm not hampered by interference



to the conclusion that he was not only valuable as a bailiff, as her defender and her court clerk and general go-fer, but also for his entertainment value during the long voyages her circuit encompassed.

And when his spells went awry, as he tried to remember the grimoire formulae or pulled the wrong one out of the memory banks (something very vital had been lost in the translation from Acetan to Houston's prime computer tongue), he did have his amusement value.

Right now, Aleria was being amused, entertained, massaged, thrilled, comforted, teased, aroused, and driven right to the edge of her sanity, all at once, by Jemall's latest experimental techniques. She let her mind go blank to everything but those physical sensations, let her body respond in whatever way it wanted, and let the silvery alien turn her into a quivering mass of nerve ends. The two of them whirled in a weightless maelstrom that was fire and ice, wind and water and burning sands, all at the same time, Aleria all flowing red hair, Jemall all silvery scale, until their passion exploded and was spent.

"Do you think you could manage to restore my landing equipment *now*?" Houston's voice came plaintively over the intercom.

Aleria untangled herself lazily from Jemall's sleeping embrace and shook her head to clear away the dream she had been having, a dream of metal and flesh coming to-gether and coming apart, watched, always watched, by the love machine

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pairs of stars that shone like the great yellow eyes of a thousand giant cats in the endless void of space. It was a strange dream, and most people would have disregarded it, but Aleria was just enough of a sensitive that it might have meant something, though she didn't have the faintest idea of what that something might have been. She was just practical enough to know that the metal-and-flesh images might well have been due to her recent grapple with her silver-scaled bailiff.

Recalling that recent coupling, she also remembered that she had left the privacy switch on the intercom.

"Houston, did you override the privacy switch?" she demanded.

"Yes, Your Honor," the ship replied apologetically.

"Houston, I realize that your flaps are important to you, and I know that having a fringe around your middle in-stead of those flaps is annoying, but there isn't any friction out here in the interstellar void, and no one's going to see you, either. So it really isn't enough of an emergency to merit an override."

"Your Honor, it *is* an emergency. It was bad enough when I jumped—"

"You jumped? When?"

"Just now," the ship told her.

Well, that explained the dream. Hyperspace always gave Aleria strange visions. It was as though she could put herself in touch with some greater cosmic consciousness out there—if her mind was open to it as she passed through. Aleria had learned that her mind was most open to it when she was asleep, but sleeping during a jump could be dangerous unless you were strapped down. She looked around in sudden alarm, then sighed with relief as she realized that the sentient ship had taken the necessary precautions. The canvas-webbing sleep net had dropped around the tangle of judge and bailiff as they slept off the

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effects of their recent exertion, and they had made the jump without the danger of rebound bruises.

But Houston's safety precautions didn't explain *why* they had jumped in the first place, or why he had used the privacy override twice—once to install the net and now to wake her.

"Couldn't that jump have waited?" Aleria demanded.

"No, Your Honor." That was the third time he had used her official form of address. Houston only called her "Your Honor" when he was engaged in Official Business. This must be serious.

"Well," Aleria said impatiently, "I'm *waiting*."

"So am I, for my flaps, and we're late!"

"Late for what?"

"We've been ordered to Magadis."

"*Magadis*?" Aleria pulled her self out of the webbing. "Where the hell is Magadis?"

"Eighth quadrant, Dunar system."

Well, that was within her jurisdiction, Aleria reflected, but this certainly wasn't on her calendar. "Any special reason we're going there?" she inquired.

"Magadis is in the throes of a civil war," Houston began.

"That doesn't concern us. The Confederation doesn't take sides."

"They've requested a judge from the Confederation. It concerns a politically sensitive trial, and they want some-one guaranteed to be impartial. That's why they asked for an offworlder."

Aleria was intrigued, and even Jemall was dropping his feigned sleep and beginning to look alert inside the sleep net.

"Tell me more, Houston," the judge commanded.

"Magadis is a totalitarian technocracy," the ship related. "The technocrats are, for the most part, male; women do the love machine

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not advance very far on merit, although they often manage to capture a certain amount of power as consorts."

Aleria made a wry face as Houston continued. "The society is highly stratified: technocrats on top, Nontecs, as they call them, at the bottom. Nontecs, who are presumed to have no scientific ability whatsoever, have no rights at all, not even to an education."

"Nothing like a self-fulfilling prophecy," Aleria noted dryly.









your pardon, ma'am."

"A chicken," mused Aleria. "Now, that might be inter-esting to see."

"Might be interesting to *try*," Jemall commented.

"If you want to, go right ahead," Aleria told him. "Just so I can watch."

"Your Honor!" The portmaster was obviously shocked.

Aleria and Jemall dissolved in giggles. The society on this planet was hopelessly backward. It would be fun to shock them a bit.

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\* \* \*

But it was Aleria and Jemall who were shocked when the aircruiser rounded a bend in the trees, and they sud-denly saw the capital of Magadis spread out before them like a gleaming jewel. Its giant towers reached jaggedly toward the sky like great green stalagmites that glistened in the setting amber sun.

"It's green," Aleria breathed.

"Native marble," replied the portmaster *ma* matter-of-fact tone.

"Calcium carbonate is rarely, if ever, green," observed Jemall.

"On Magadis, it's rarely any other color," the portmaster told him.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Aleria muttered under her breath. "Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

Jemall chuckled. "I believe you are mixing your metaphors, my dear."

"Those weren't metaphors, they were allusions."

"I assure you, this is no illusion," the portmaster protested. "All of the marble on Magadis has a slightly greenish tinge, and the marble from the Rhedd River Valley is the greenest on the planet."

"Then *why*," Aleria wanted to know, "do they call this the Rhedd River?"

"It was named after the man who discovered it, Erktha Rhedd. He was one of our greatest explorers."

"Of course," Aleria sighed. "Well, take us to your leader, Portmaster. I've always wanted to meet the great and Mighty Oz."

"Oz? That isn't his name. His name is Pembine. Pembine Tilleda."

"Oh." Disappointment was a manifest in Aleria's tone. "I was hoping—"

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"What?"

"Nothing. This apparently won't solve itself by my knocking my heels together three times or waking up in time for tea."

The portmaster threw her a strange look, but it was no stranger than the ones he had given her upon discovering that the judge he'd been expecting was a woman—or that the woman judge was interested in visiting the red-light district. There was a loud blast from a passing aircruiser that just narrowly missed clipping one of their foils. The portmaster quickly turned his attention back to his steering and, a moment later, pulled up in front of an imposing, jade-green building fronted by a broad portico graced with irregular, jade-green columns.

"The Hall of Magistrates," he announced. "The Capital's courthouse. I suppose you want me to go in with you," he added reluctantly.

"That 15 the normal duty of an escort, isn't it?" Jemall sneered.

The portmaster nodded morosely.

"I think he's afraid they'll shoot the messenger," Aleria told Jemall in a stage whisper. "Maybe we should let him off the hook."

The portmaster drew himself up to his full height—which brought him almost to Aleria's shoulder—and announced indignantly, "Madam\* we are a civilized planet. Use of the hook was abolished centuries ago."

Aleria looked down at the little man and pondered the proper course of action. Obviously, her mere presence on Magadis had unsettled him. But it was also obvious that he was less than literate, and given to responding with robotlike literalness to her every pronouncement. If he was typical of Magadisians, she would have to watch herself carefully.

"Jemall," she said thoughtfully, "do you remember a

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very ancient psychology book that asserted that children speak Martian?"

"Yes," he replied. "But I never understood that statement. The people of Mars speak Confederation Standard, except for a local slang phrase here and there."

"What it meant was that children take things literally. Hyperbole, for example. Or directions, like 'Don't cross the street when you go out to play this afternoon.' They think it means they can cross the street tomorrow."

"So?"

"I have a feeling that they speak Martian on this planet," Aleria told him.

The portmaster, who had stepped on ahead of them, turned back just in time to overhear this last remark. "I believe there are some scholars at the university who speak Martian," he offered.

"Thank you," Aleria replied. Then, turning to Jemall, she added, "See what I mean?"

"I'm afraid I do," he answered. "Well, let's beard the lion—"

He broke off after seeing the strange glance the portmaster gave him. "What I mean is, let's get on with this meeting with this Pembine Tilleda. The sooner he gets over his shock, the sooner we can get this trial over and get out of here."

"I'm with you," she said.

"Where else would you be?" asked the portmaster, as he ushered them through the door.

Aleria shook her head and allowed herself to be ushered. This planet was going to be prove quite an experience— and if the portmaster was a fair example of the local populace, this was going to be some trial!

## Chapter IV

"I'm certainly glad *that's* over," Aleria remarked to Jemall as they wandered down the corridor of the Hall of Magistrates. "Talk about a trying experience!"

"More like trial by ordeal," the bailiff observed.

Pembine Tilleda had proved to be another edition of the fussy portmaster, only more so; apparently, the more tech-nical this society had become, the more rigid its bureau-crats had grown. There was no room in their minds for flexibility—and it took a certain amount of flexibility for anyone in this male-dominated society to accept the pres-ence of a woman judge.

The interview had been less than cordial, but at last Aleria and Jemall had managed to convince the technocrat that there was no other Confederation judge in this sector. Since he had made a formal request of the Confederation for a judge, and his request had been granted, Magadis would have to pay for this planetfall, whether Aleria tried the case or not.

That had been enough to convince him; he had muttered something about justifying his expenditure and directed Aleria to the chambers she would occupy for this impor-tant trial. He had, of course, refused to shake her hand; in fact, he had acted very much as though he thought she might carry some dreaded disease. And if new ideas consti-

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tuted a disease on this planet, he just might have been correct!

As they made their way down the cool, green corridor, which was silent except for the "whoosh" of the atmosphere-circulation machines, they passed a courtroom whose doors were open.

"Let's go in and watch," Aleria whispered to Jemall. "I want to get a feel for the niceties of their procedure."

The big silver bailiff nodded and led the way into the courtroom.

There was a hush, and then a sudden murmur, as the tall, flame-haired woman and the great metallic giant in the strange costume entered the room.

"Order," screamed the robed man on the bench. "Twill have order or I'll clear the courtroom." He looked down at the man before him, who wore a purple robe and an odd, white-fringed cap. "Proceed, Counsel."

"As I was saying, Your Honor," the lawyer said, bob-bing slightly, "this accusation is highly irregular. The crime of which my client stands accused is not a crime, per se. The statute is overbroad, and bears defining. Surely it cannot be a crime against the state to paint a picture of a field and stream."

"The prosecutor seems to think so," the judge replied.

Aleria, eyes fixed on her counterpart, slipped into a seat in the first row of the spectators' section. Although, as a member of the court, she would have been allowed to sit on the other side of the little fence that divided the specta-tors from the participants, she felt that she and Jemall had caused enough of a disturbance when they entered. She had no wish to disrupt the trial again by asserting her right to sit inside the bar; that could only bring on a repeat performance of her recent, and most heated, discussions with the portmaster and the Technocrat.

At the judge's mention of his title, the prosecutor stood

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and announced, "Section 42 of the amended statutes, otherwise known as the Wot Law—for its author—clearly states that anyone advocating the retention of wilderness to the detriment of development is guilty of a felony."

"But, Your Honor," the defense counsel protested, "how can painting a picture constitute advocacy of anything?"

"Perhaps I should have a look at the picture in question and decide for myself," the judge opined. "Bailiff," he called to a meek-looking little man in brown robes—nothing like Jemall's imposing costume—"bring in the evidence."

The evidence appeared to be something flat and rigid, about a square meter in size. It was covered with a brown-ish drape. The bailiff handed it up to the judge, who pushed the drape aside and held the object at aim's length.

And then, something very unusual happened. Tears be-gan to well in the judge's eyes. There was a murmur and then awed silence in the courtroom.

"There, Your Honor, you see, you see! It has even affected *youl* I tell you, that painting is subversive, and the man who painted it is a criminal!"

The judge glared at the prosecutor. "Counsel will please approach the bench," he ordered.

The two attorneys—the defense counsel in his purple, the prosecutor in red, but both wearing those silly little fringed caps—drew close to the bench, and the judge conferred with them *sotto voce*. Then they returned to their respective tables, and the defense counsel conferred briefly with his client.

"We will accept the conditions, Your Honor," the de-fense counsel announced.

"Very well. I will hold this case open for thirty days, to determine whether the accused satisfies the conditions of his plea bargain with the state. If he does, I will dismiss at that time. "

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So they allowed alternative sentencing! Perhaps they were not so inflexible after all! At least the judges, if this judge was any example, were not committed to the rigid thinking of the other technocrats. Aleria sighed with relief. Perhaps this wouldn't be quite as bad as she had been anticipating.



"I'm the court clerk."

"That's nice."

"No, it isn't, but we won't go into that just now. "What I want to know is what do you think you're doing, sitting at the judge's desk and reading the judge's briefs?"

Aleria sighed, and set down the briefs. "I am preparing for tomorrow's trial."

"Don't need *you*," the scrawny little woman said. "*I'm* the court clerk. / handle the judge's calander. / handle his correspondence."

"Do you come with the courtroom?"

"I am currently attached to this branch. And we have a very important visiting judge from off planet coming to conduct this trial. So—" She hesitated, apparently search-ing for a word with enough vehemence. At last, she found it.

"Shoo," she concluded.

Aleria burst out laughing.

The court clerk appeared very unhappy. "I don't see what's so funny," she pouted.

"*I'm* the judge," Aleria answered.

"*That* isn't funny, either."

"I never thought it was. It's how I make my living."

The court clerk peered hard at Aleria. She inclined her head for a moment, as though considering the possibility that the tall, red-haired woman was telling the truth. Then, "No," she said, shaking her head.

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Aleria smiled at her gently. "Yes," she said, "it's true."

For just a moment, the court clerk appeared to be in shock. Then her face lit up like a sunrise on Mondovi. "You really *are* the judge!"

Aleria nodded.

"Oh, that's wonderful! Oh, didn't *that* upset them all, I'll bet. Oh, my, a woman judge. I've read of such things on other planets, but I never believed I'd see it in my lifetime. Not on Magadis. Oh, my, isn't that wonderful!"

The visiting judge sat back in her chair and watched the transformation that had come over the court clerk, and was not at all sure that she didn't prefer the resistance she had found in the men to the hero worship of this woman. But this was a new wrinkle in the fabric of Magadis: so the women didn't like their status here any better than she would have liked it. They might be downtrodden and dependent, and they might even appear to have accepted their lot, but scratch the meekest and scrawniest of them and you found an incipient revolutionary.

"Can I get you some coffee?" the court clerk asked. "A pillow? A law book? A pad of paper?"

Aleria smiled. "You can tell me your name."

"My name. Oh, my name! No one in the courthouse calls me by my name. They just shout out, 'Clerk!' and I come running. That's how I got my job; no *man* would have it—it would be beneath his dignity."

"And it isn't beneath *yours*?" Aleria asked, not unkindly.

"Of course it is, but it's more secure than being some man's adjunct, and a whole lot better than being a Nontec. And I don't have the looks to work the red-light."

"Those are the only alternatives?"

"For a woman, yes. You can have a lower-grade techni-cal job that no one else wants; that's what I've done. Or you can try for dependency on a technical man, //you can

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find one. If you're born into one of the High Tech families, they marry you off to another High Tech. Or you can work the pleasure palaces, if you have the looks. Otherwise, you're stuck being a Nontec—no education, no rights."

"No education? How do they expect you to develop technical skills without an education?" Aleria wanted to know.

"You can't. But that's part of their argument. Nontecs are no good at technical things, so why educate them? And if you don't educate them and they can't perform technical tasks, who needs them?"

"Do Nontec men have the same problem?" Aleria asked.

"Oh, *them*," the court clerk replied scornfully. "They have a route out. They can be soldiers."

"Soldiers?"

"The Technocracy maintains a standing army. It's for planetary defense, they *say*, but it's really to keep the Nontecs from revolting. It's the one way Nontec men can get technical training. They prove their loyalty by shooting their former friends, and if they start to show an aptitude— and if they live long enough—they can even make it into the Technocracy. A man with technical ability can go as far as he wants to here on Magadis."

"And a woman?"

"She can go as far as her looks will take her—or she can do the kind of work a man wouldn't touch." She leaned forward across the desk and added, in a confidential tone, "Most women are overqualified for their jobs; they do the work, and the men take the credit. But, now that *you're* here, maybe they'll realize what women can do!"

Aleria raised one eyebrow in amusement. She hadn't planned on being the focal point of a revolution, but she had always enjoyed being where the action was. If her presence here brought about some needed changes, well,

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why not? Maybe they'd even name a river after her, like Erktha Rhedd.

"You still haven't told me your name," she told the clerk.

"It's Lodi—Lodi Cobb. Can I get you a cup of coffee, Your Honor?"

"Yes, if you'll get yourself one, too. I want to know more about Magadis before I begin interpreting its laws."

"I'll be right back." Lodi smiled, and Aleria was startled to see that the mousy little court clerk could be almost pretty when she wasn't playing the role of petty bureaucrat. Lodi turned on her heel and was gone in an instant, leaving the judge to stare after her while pondering the strange society of the planet Magadis.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Aleria muttered under her breath, and went back to reading her briefs.

"Well, I believe I can satisfy your curiosity about the mysterious Corr!" Jemall bustled in with an armload of strange paraphernalia. He drew himself up short when he discovered the judge engaged in a tete-a-tete with a rather dowdy little woman who was seated at the far side of her desk.

"That's all right, Jemall. Lodi, here, has filled me in already. Corr seems to be quite notorious; I wouldn't be surprised if he *never* painted that robot and still managed to get out of going to jail. He's reputed to be the greatest living artist on Magadis, maybe the greatest Magadisan artist living or dead, but the Technocracy is having a hard time figuring out just where he fits in. They've finally declared that art is a technical skill, so dealing with him no longer puts you under suspicion of subversion, but since that could change at any moment, those who think it's chic to hang out at his studio tend to do so in disguise."

"So I've discovered. That's why I bought *these*!" Jemall

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began to unwrap his packages on Aleria's desk, revealing two costumes, a wig, and a box of stage makeup.

The wig, it became apparent, was for Aleria, to disguise her flame-colored tresses. It was coal black, and since her own abundant hair would have to be piled up beneath it, it had been constructed to look as though it flowed from beneath a miniature turban that perched on the top of her head. Actually the turban was hollow, to allow room for Aleria's red tresses.

The rest of her costume—what there was of it—was of gold, and golden gauze, and golden leather. The top consisted of two small circles of golden leather, held strategically over each breast by a golden metal serpent that circled the breast and then twined around her back. The bottom was another gold metal serpent that circled her hips. A golden leather panel just wide enough for decency fit between her slender thighs. And draping each leg and tied at the ankle was a golden gauze panel; these panels looked like harem pants but were actually open up the inside of the leg. Golden leather sandals and a golden gauze veil that covered her from the bridge of her nose to her throat completed the outfit.

"Well, if I'm to be a harem girl," she commented to Jemall, "what are *you* going as?"

"That was the problem; I'm pretty difficult to disguise. So I figured we could go together as two characters out of *Scheherazade*!"

"Interesting," mused Aleria. "How were you going to hide your identity?"

"With this." Jemall rummaged through his purchases and displayed a voluminous pair of golden leather pants, a matching open vest, a jeweled belt, and leather slippers with upcurving, pointed toes. And a large bottle of gold body makeup.

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"Perfect," Aleria laughed delightedly. "Disguise a big silver man as a big gold man! No one is likely to guess the color underneath. But you need an earring."

Jemall opened yet another package to reveal a pair of big gold earrings and a bottle of perfume. "I bought the earrings in a women's emporium," he told her, "and I bought two of them, because I thought you might like to have the pair, after we leave here." He held up the perfume. "And this is for you; it's supposed to be the most exclusive fragrance on Magadis. I thought you might like to have it as a souvenir."

"Why, Jemall, how sweet!" Aleria picked up the bottle of perfume, opened it, sniffed cautiously, then flashed him a broad smile. "Heavenly," she told him.

Lodi had been taking in this scene, mouth agape. But as the scent of Aleria's new perfume reached her, she gasped, "That's Essence of Midnight. That's the most expensive perfume on Magadis. And that's at least an ounce. A bottle like that would cost me a year's salary."

"Here. Have some." Aleria handed her the bottle.

Lodi took it, sniffed it, then placed her finger over the opening and transferred a drop or two behind her ears.

"Take more," ordered Aleria, and Lodi complied, dabbing a bit onto the inside of each wrist.

She was still staring from Aleria to Jemall in utter astonishment when Aleria realized that introductions hadn't been made. "I'm sorry," said the judge. "Lodi, this is Jemall, my personal bailiff, who travels with me and protects me. And Jemall, this is Lodi Cobb, the court clerk who's attached to this courtroom."

The two nodded at each other.

"Corr invited me to a party tonight," Aleria went on. "That's why I was asking all those questions about him. We saw his trial this afternoon. It was very interesting."

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"Are you actually going to *wear* that?" Lodi wanted to know.

"Of course. It's a marvelous disguise. No one ever sees beyond my red hair or Jemall's silver skin and bald head. If we come in a different color and offer the distraction of a lot of skin, no one will remember our faces."

Lodi looked down at her own shapeless tan garment. "No one remembers *my* face either, but I don't have to offer a distraction."

"Say," said Aleria, "would you like to come along?"

"Oh, no," the court clerk replied, panic in her voice. "I couldn't. I mean, if I were spotted, I could lose my job. It isn't much, but it *is* a job—and a lot better than being a Nontec." She hastily handed the bottle of perfume back to Aleria,

excused herself, and backed out of the room, mumbling something about having work to do.

"Cautious lot, the Magadisans," Jemall commented.

"So would you be if that Eye In The Sky were watching *you*," Aleria reminded him.

"Probably. But it's late; I'd like to get to that party before it's over—"

"I have a feeling," Aleria observed, "that we're in no danger of missing the party no matter how late we arrive."

"Well, nevertheless—" Jemall began.

Aleria nodded absently. Then, with the experience of weeks of freefall behind her, she set the bottle of perfume down in midair in order to get dressed.

Of course, since they were planetside, it fell to the desk with a loud crash, spilling all over what there was of her costume. Jemall made a mad grab for it and missed. Aleria let out a stream of profanities in the languages of several obscure planets and snatched it up, but most of its contents had permeated the leather and gauze of her new clothes and was soaking through onto the blotter of the desk.

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"Phew/" she remarked, as she recorked the nearly empty bottle. "The next judge to occupy these chambers is going to get into trouble with his wife—or adjunct—when he gets home after a hard day's work."

"That stuff was expensive!" Jemall protested. "So was the costume."

"I'm sorry, Jemall. It was an accident. But see, I still have some left. And I'll wear the costume anyway—a harem girl should be anointed with fragrant oils."

"Anointed is one thing, reeking is quite another!"

"Well, you'll just have to put up with me. I tend to forget about gravity my first few days back on any planet."

Jemall came around the desk and put his arms around her. "I'll take you even if you *are* clumsy, even if you *do* reek."

He bent to kiss her but she kicked him smartly in the shins

"Clumsy? Reeking? I'll go to the party alone, thank you. I'm the only one who was invited, if you'll recall." But Jemall looked so hurt that the judge relented. "Of course, I'll take you, baby. I know how much you enjoy these things."

He beamed at her, and she patted him on the arm. "Why don't you run out to the outer chamber and give this blotter to Lodi. She can take it home with her to scent her underwear or something. And tell her to order a new one for the desk."

Jemall nodded and began to slip the blotter from its frame, when Aleria added, "I'll change into this reeking getup, and then I can rub you down with that gold makeup. You'll never get it in all the secret places you should, by yourself."

Aleria began, very slowly, to re-move her silver jumpsuit.

"I'll be *right* back," the bailiff promised.

Jemall returned quickly enough, but of course they were very late for the party, because Aleria had decided it was only fitting that they initiate her new chambers before they left, and Jemall thought that a very sensible course of action. Soon her silver jumpsuit lay abandoned in the corner, along with his Napoleonic jacket, his silky shirt, his tight-fitting pants, and his ornate codpiece.

As they wrestled in the unaccustomed gravity Aleria had a devilish thought.

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"Do you suppose," she asked him, as they slithered into yet another position, "that anyone has ever made it in the courtroom!"

"Are you kidding?" he gasped as he began a series of long, slow strokes with his immense silver organ, strokes that her body couldn't help but arch to meet with ever-increasing vehemence. "This is probably the first time anyone's ever done it in the chambers, let alone the hal-lowed courtroom."

Aleria didn't say anything for a few moments, being preoccupied with the in-and-out, filled-and-unfilled motion between her thighs. Jemall had mastered the art of slow torture, but it was a torture that made her quiver with pleasure rather than pain. Just as she reached the peak of sensation and felt her toes begin to curl and her scalp begin

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## Chapter V:

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to prickle, he slowed his movements, grasped her firmly by the waist, and stood up.

She dug her fingernails into his back, both for balance and because she was ready to scream with the prolonged ecstasy. Jemall inched his way back toward the desk and rested his buttocks on its edge. Then he began to slide Aleria up and down his silken shaft, leaning her further backward with every thrust.

At last, she was hanging upside down, supported only by his firm grip around her waist and her own on his muscular thighs. Her ankles were still locked behind his back, and as he moved her slowly toward him and away his engorged organ rubbed nerves she had never known she possessed, until at last her whole body seemed to dissolve in a nebula of blazing light, and he finally allowed himself to fill her with his exploding lust.

He held her there, upside down, her hair dragging on the lush carpet, for some time before lowering the two of them, still intertwined, to the floor. Neither of them said a word, but for Aleria the world was filled with the pounding of her pulse in her temples; she couldn't have heard any-thing else anyway and didn't have the breath to speak.

When at last her breath returned and her heart stopped pounding, she turned to Jemall and continued her previous train of thought. "If the courtroom can be locked, I think we ought make use of it."

He buried his face in the hollow of her throat and did something marvelous with his prehensile tongue. His long, multijointed fingers slid up and down her spine, found their way into the crevice at its base, and all the way forward, to

where their manipulations aroused maximum sensations.

"Ready when you are," he whispered. And, glancing down, she realized that he *was*.

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"I don't want to shock Lodi," she told him languorously. "Why don't you check on the doors first."

"I didn't bring a robe with me. Any suggestions?"

"Just put on the codpiece. If anyone sees you, they'll figure you're wearing a one-piece coverall. People don't come in silver here."

"*You* come in, on, and around silver all the time," he teased, "but I tend to come in pinkish gold."

"Just so you keep coming," she told him.

"I intend to."

She watched him with amusement as he affixed the codpiece to his enlarged organ. He finally settled for fasten-ing it over the protruding tip, leaving his silvery sac hanging in full view.

"Give 'em a thrill if anyone's looking," he grunted as he slipped through the door from the judge's chambers to the courtroom. Aleria couldn't help but think that he was right.

He was back a moment later. "All clear," he announced. "I've thrown the bolts from the inside."

"Lay on, MacDuff," she smiled.

"Just what I had in mind." He smiled back, and he lifted her in his powerful arms and carried her boldly into the courtroom, bolting the door to the chambers behind him.

The room was vast, larger than the one in which Corr's trial had been held that afternoon, and very imposing. Its walls were of jade-green marble, with great carved col-umns along both sides.

Between the columns were hollow sconces, where, in ancient times, candles had flamed. Jemall set Aleria down on the vast jade slab behind which she would sit in judg-ment of the robot the following morning, and picked up a pad of paper from the clerk's bench beneath it. Reaching

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up—even with his great height, it was no mean feat—he placed a crumpled sheet of paper in each sconce.

Then he returned to the front of the room, turned to face the sconces, and flexed his long, four-jointed fingers. "Oos Noxxe, gnaw mbi elppa," he chanted, and all thirty sconces suddenly blazed with the light of as many candles.

"Much better," he commented to Aleria, as he switched off the phosphor lights that usually lit the courtroom.

She nodded in agreement but didn't have a chance to say anything at all, for in a single bound he had cleared the clerk's bench and positioned her flat across the great green marble judge's bench. He pressed her down upon the cool green slab, and his long, alien tongue filled her mouth, slid along the inside of her teeth, curled around her own tongue.

Then it was no longer in her mouth, but tracing an erotic pattern the length of her body, up and down, teasing her neck, her nipples, her navel, down and back again. Then he thrust his smooth silvery head between her legs, and his tongue began to do things to her that no hand or organ had ever done before.

Aleria arched her back, writhing with pleasure and bit-ing her lip to keep from crying out. She reached out for Jemall, made contact with his shoulder, and coaxed his body around until she managed to get hold of him by one firm, round cheek. She pulled his legs toward her then, onto the bench, and soon the two of them were locked in a circle of eroticism, their hungry mouths sucking and nib-bling and teasing, their hands tracing electrified nerve ends, their genitals reaching, responding, contract-ing, ex-ploding with hot passion on the cool green marble of the bench.

Afterward, they lay for a long time, side by side on the vast, jade-green slab, their fingers intertwined, as they watched the flickering candlelight play on the emerald-

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colored marble. Then they made love again, slowly, languorously, lazily, mouth to mouth, belly to belly, in the green marble courtroom where Aleria would preside the next day but where Eros presided now.

And it was very late indeed when they finally donned their golden costumes and set off for Corr's soiree.

Dania Korsev was late, too. She was having a devil of a time readjusting to the gravity on Magadis.

Normally, she took about a week off, confining herself to her apartment where she couldn't do any real damage to herself or anyone else. But there had been no opportu-nity for that in the ten days since she'd returned from orbit.

During those ten days, she had been debriefed, deposi-tioned, and detained, not to mention questioned, quizzed, queried, grilled, and given the third degree. Her story had remained the same: the Homer had returned to the

Vergrosung VII and found it dark and silent. In their spacesuits, they had groped their way to Main Control and found all the control screens shattered, all the control panels jammed.

And the crew was dead, in horrible ways. Most of Gatto Bardo's blood had diffused through the atmosphere of the Main Control level; his body had been found impaled on a protruding video lens. Chun Kann's body floated nearby, eyes bulging open in his distorted face. And two levels down, the rescue team had discovered the new man, Cheboi Gann, with his neck broken.

All three dead men had been naked as jaybirds, their personal parts retaining, through rigor mortis, an enduring stiffness they could never have maintained for so long while living. The cat was still alive, but it had fled, terrified, from their suited approach. Since life support had failed, Dania had feared for the cat's safety, though it would

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take a long time for a cat to use up all the oxygen in a giant Vergrosung. Still, the cat would have frozen or starved

eventually, if Dania hadn't finally managed to coax it off the satellite, no mean feat in the face of its terror. The robots, operating independently of the ship's controls, were still making fruitless attempts at satellite maintenance in their assigned spheres—except for two. One of these, due for recharging, had run down when its required source of energy had not been available.

And the other? The other was Honey bun, the robot who had so vehemently propositioned Dania just before she'd left the ship. They found it gliding down a corridor, revolving as it went, humming little snippets of bawdy space songs, and occasionally muttering "Sock it to me, baby."

There had been blood on its arms and main canister unit. While that could have come from the blood diffused from Bardo's wounds, there were scraps of Gann's flesh in one of its pulleys and snippets of Kann's hair in its grippers. So the Homer's team had brought it back from orbit, along with the bodies and the holograms of the destruction, for the Space Board to review.

The robot would have been dismantled and deactivated, except for three very important factors. First, it was universally held that no robot could override its programming for the Three Ancient Laws without human intervention. Second, a thorough mechanical inspection had shown that there was semen present—Gann's semen—in its drive unit. And, third, the Council on Robotic Rights had intervened, observing that the robot must have been a tool for someone—or something—else's violent ends. They had cited the "rule that a sentient robot could not be deactivated without a hearing and demanded that the X-214 unit calling itself Honey bun be granted its day in court. Defense counsel had been provided at state expense.

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And all of those from the Homer had been questioned under oath, under drugs, and under mechanical surveillance. Dania's testimony had undergone the most intensive scrutiny, since she had only just left that same 'Grosrung, but she had truthfully told them she had no knowledge whatsoever of anyone who might have programmed the X-214 to wreak such destruction.

There were even those who questioned whether the X-214 had actually been responsible for the damage. Only the cat knew for sure—and the cat wasn't talking.

In fact, the cat had been so terror-stricken that the Space Board had considered having it put down, but Dania had laid claim to it and taken it home with her, since they had become friends on the 'Grosrung—if anyone ever really' became friends with a cat.

Now they were companions in clumsiness as both readjusted to gravity. The cat was having particular difficulties with landing lightly on its feet. It would jump off chairs or tables, miscalculate, and tumble tail-over-ears or vice versa. Dania was having similar problems. Tonight, for example, she had dabbed a bit of Essence of Midnight in all the appropriate places, and then, forgetting she was no longer in weightless space, she had set the bottle down beside her in midair. Of course, it had fallen to the floor and shattered, thoroughly soaking all the gauzy layers of her multitiered skirt.

She realized, with disgust, that she smelled like an escapee from one of the cheaper houses in the red-light district of Das. But there was nothing to be done for it. With all of her other party clothes still in storage, she had only this newly purchased costume, made of layer upon layer of iridescent gauze, with which to call Corr's attention to herself and the memory of their affair. The dress—along with that bottle of Essence of Midnight—had cost her nearly all her space pay. Now the two purchases were

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united in a way she hadn't planned, and there were shards of glass all over her floor as well.

She'd been barefoot when she'd dropped the perfume, so she had been forced to clean up the glass in ever-larger circles around her before she could leave the bathroom, let alone leave for the party. Once she'd started the clean up, she had finished the job, so that it wouldn't be waiting for her when she returned—and so the cat wouldn't step on a glass fragment and bleed to death before Dania could get home.

By the time she arrived at the party, the aircruisers were stacked up as high as the second-floor windows for blocks around. She'd had to park several blocks away and walk to Corr's apartment, a walk she didn't relish, considering the seediness of the neighborhood and the peek-a-boo nature of her dress—not to mention the aura of Essence of Midnight she was projecting.

Since the 'Grosrung system had been down, the rebels had become very daring. They even made frequent forays into the quieter sections of Das, and this section had been dangerous even when the Eye In The Sky had been functioning. Now, with all the fighting in the streets and those incidents of sabotage that one kept hearing about—why, they'd even blown up one of the switching stations for the monorail systems! Imagine Nontecs being able to do that!—the streets didn't seem particularly safe, especially at night.

Dania had never been afraid to be out alone, after dark, before, even though she might have worried that her activities, monitored as they undoubtedly were, might cast suspicion on her. But now, every noise she heard sounded to her like a battle, every shadow might be a militant Nontec out to do her damage. *There's never a soldier around when you need one*, she fretted, looking around for one of the slender green call boxes and then realizing that

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even if she spotted one, it probably wouldn't do her any good. Between the damaged 'Grosrung system and the sabotage, Magadisan communications often didn't function at all.

She became even more nervous as she heard the sounds of a pitched battle—cries, grunts, and solid objects thud-ding on flesh—from one of the side streets as she passed. She quickened her footsteps, and was relieved only

when Corr's building at last came in sight.

Just as she arrived at the door and was slipping her iridescent butterfly mask over her face, a taxicruiser pulled up, and a man dressed as a great golden genie stepped from it. He turned and reached out his hand to a black-haired woman who was almost wearing a harem-girl costume. Dania immediately noticed two things about the woman: she was very tall—even taller than Dania, who was as tall as most men on Magadis. And she, like Dania, reeked of too much Essence of Midnight.

Dania stared after them as they swept into Corr's apartment. They both looked familiar, though she couldn't say why. She shrugged, and followed them into the foyer, which was filled with Corr's costumed guests.

She cast her eyes about the crowd, looking for Corr's familiar figure, but he was nowhere in sight. Since it was so late, most of the guests were well into advanced states of intoxication, whether from eating, drinking, or old-fashioned inhaling. Dania realized that she would have to catch up quickly to keep from being repulsed by the excess here, but she wanted to find Corr first and talk with him while she was still sober. Something was bothering her, something she *had* to know before dawn called her back from the hedonistic pleasures of Corr's digs.

She began a systematic search of the house—first the library, filled with Corr's collection of old-fashioned books. A studious character dressed in a ruff and a codpiece—and the love machine

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that was all, except for his mask—was sitting in a corner, perusing one of the volumes. He was totally ignor-ing the tangle of arms and legs on the couch that indicated several innovative fornicators.

Beyond the library lay the dining room, its table fairly groaning with its weight of rare delicacies—and one half-naked man who had passed out, face down, in the pate. For a moment, Dania thought that the table actually *was* groaning, but it was only a trio underneath, engaging in a very novel use of some of the fruits and vegetables Corr had provided. A number of people were partaking of the food in a more common manner, and some were even nibbling on each other, but Dania did not see their host among them.

In the kitchen, the cooks and servers were preoccupied, and shooed her out, as they had all the other guests who had ventured into their private domain. It didn't matter. Corr wasn't there.

Nor was he to be found in the lengthy lines in front of both bathrooms. Neither did she spot him among the danc-ers in his back garden, nor among those wandering around his atelier to gaze at his newest works.

That left the bedrooms. In one—the largest, which Corr used as a studio—people in various stages of undress sat in a circle and passed a water pipe around. Each time one of them inhaled from the pipe, he or she forfeited an article of clothing. There was an immense pile of clothing in the center of the circle—this was obviously Corr's kind of game—but he wasn't present here either.

Nor was he in the room where the singers had gathered around a trio of guests playing a long, curved horn, a stringed board, and a skin-covered drum. Dania even opened the doors to the closed bedrooms for just an instant, before confirming—with some relief—that Corr also wasn't in either of them.

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She found him at last on the rear balcony.

She took a deep breath, then smiled and said, "Corr, dear, I was at your trial this afternoon. I see you're still getting away with murder."

He looked at her very oddly. "Dania? Is that you under that mask? How nice to see you again. It's been a long time."

"Six months on a 'Grosrung seems like six years, espe-cially away from you," she replied.

Another woman who had been standing beside Corr turned to Dania and asked, "Oh, are you just off one of the 'Grosrungs? Were you part of the rescue crew? You simply *must* tell us all the gory details. We're dying to hear all about the murder."

"Sorry," Dania told her. "I'm not allowed to discuss it until after I testify at the trial tomorrow."

"Oh, that *is* too bad," the woman opined. "I was so hoping I might be able to find out something that no one else would know." She put her hand familiarly on Dania's arm, but Dania brushed it off.

"Corr," Dania whispered urgently, "I really must talk to you—alone, if possible."

He looked at her and raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Just talk?"

"Corr, I've been in space a long time. I'll take what you've got."

In answer, he reached out and pulled her to him, and began to kiss her deeply, first filling her mouth, and then her ear, with his subtle tongue. His beard tickled her throat, and she sighed and gasped as he began to fondle her breasts through the gauzy layers of her dress.

She was lost in the erotic sensation of his lips and hands, which seemed to be everywhere on her body at once—on her breasts, parting her thighs. His lips nuzzled her throat while he began to lick and nibble on the hungry

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orifice between her legs, and it took her a moment to realize that Corr, artist though he was, could not be doing both things at once.

She looked down and saw that the other woman—the one so eager for news of the 'Grosrung murders—was kneeling before her. Much as she was enjoying the sensation, Dania was annoyed; she wanted Corr all to herself, just this once, after such a lengthy deprivation.

But Corr took no notice of her hesitancy. He was slip-ping her dress from her shoulders, sliding it over her slender hips, and soon Dania stood naked, except for her half mask, on the balcony in the cool night air.

Now it *was* Corr whose head was between her legs, and he pulled her down with him toward the weathered green stones beneath them. He turned, then, and positioned him-self so that the huge indication of his arousal hung



giant silver man and a flame-haired woman had caused quite a stir. The man was obviously an offworlder, and the woman, from her bearing, probably was, too.

And he had three balls!

*Oh, gods,* thought Dania in a panic, *!// bet I've just sucked off the alien judge I'm going to have to testify before tomorrow.*

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Well, it was Joo late to do anything about it now. And it didn't seem to bother this giant alien with the giant organ—or his consort.

Dania decided that she had to have a chance to try that organ in its proper orifice. It had been great seeing Corr again, but he'd be around a long time. If this giant alien with the giant penis *was* the judge, he would only be here until the trial was over. Dania had no intention of letting him get away before she'd made further use of that im-mense organ—any way she could.

She glanced over at Corr and saw that he was preoccu-pied with nuzzling his way up the almost-naked body of the tall, alien woman. That made it a fair trade. She turned toward the golden giant whose strange and wonderful juices she had just drunk, and smiled her most inviting smile. "I know a place—" she whispered.

She saw him glance over at his companion and make note of the woman's mutual preoccupation with the artist.

"I guess she'll be busy for a while," he said. "You wouldn't be talking about the place with the chicken, would you?"

Dania was puzzled for a moment, until she remembered that one of the pleasure palaces in the red-light was famous for its exotic opportunities.

"I had in mind my apartment, but if you really want to try out a chicken, I know where that can be done. I just want to get *my* licks in first."

The giant smiled genially. "You've already got some in, and very effectively, I would say. But I'm certainly game for more, whenever you're ready."

Dania stood, picked up her dress, and slowly pulled it on, hoping that with the sensuousness of the gesture she was offering him the promise of an even more sensuous opportunity to remove it once again. He looked up at her and ran his hand slowly up the inside of her leg, all the

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way to her crotch, where he did something wonderful that made her knees grow weak. She glanced down and realized that his fingers had four joints, and decided that this was going to be the experience of a lifetime. With her eyes locked on his, she mouthed the words, "Let's go!"

The man glanced quickly back at his companion and saw that she was engaged in a very deep—conversation— with their host. He nodded, stood, and adjusted his golden leather pants, then put his arm around Dania's waist and began to lead her back into the house.

"Can I come too?" asked Lira's eager voice behind them.

Dania was in a mood to be rude to her. Lira simply could not take a hint.

"You already have, and we really want to be alone," the 'Grosrung officer said, but the golden giant contradicted her.

"Alone is all right once or twice, but after that, the more, the merrier! We might even find a chicken." He really seemed obsessed by the idea of that chicken. "Why don't you go find yourself a companion, and we'll all try out some interesting combinations and permutations later on."

Lira smiled happily and began to glance eagerly around the room for a companion; it was obvious that, for Lira, any sex would do. Her gaze finally settled on a tall, fair-skinned gentleman standing in the corner. He was dressed in a black cape, a black mask, a broad-brimmed black hat, tall boots, leather gloves, and a G-string. The G-string seemed more for the purpose of fastening a coiled whip to his waist than for modesty.

As Lira's gaze fell upon the whip her eyes lit up, and she smiled and beckoned to him. He smiled back and came over to join their party.

"Going somewhere else?" he asked eagerly.

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"We thought we'd try out the poKOno," Dania told him. "We need someone else to complete our foursome."

"Delighted," he replied. "Dibs on the heart-shaped bathtub."

Intrigued as he had been by the idea of the chicken, the big, silver baliff had never considered the other treats that might await him in the red-light district. The mention of the heart-shaped tub aroused his curiosity—not to mention other parts of his body—even though water wasn't usually his element.

"They've got those too?" he asked, astonished.

"Yes," said Dania, "and mirrors on the ceiling."

"And chickens?"

"And chickens," Dania assured him.

Jemall smiled broadly. Magadis was going to be a lot more fun than he'd anticipated. Aleria would have to find her own way back to the courthouse—but, then, she'd always been able to on other planets. He wasn't worried about her, only about her redhead's temper if he should turn out to have had a better time than she had. He'd have to remember where they went, in case she wanted to try the place the following night.

He put one arm around Dania's waist and the other about the caped man's shoulders. They, in turn, put their arms around his waist, and the caped man wrapped his free arm around Lira far enough to clasp his hand firmly on her breast. The four of them strode merrily up the street, singing bawdy songs, four boon—if unmatched—companions, one for all, and all out for fun.

## Chapter VI

So engrossed were they in their plans for the rest of the evening, and in exploring whatever parts of each other they could reach without breaking stride, that the three of them who were native Magadisans threw caution to the winds, forgetting to worry about the street crime that had plagued Das since the 'Grosrung VII had been damaged. Jemall, not being native, was not aware of any particular need for caution. When visiting new planets, he usually maintained a constant state of alert for whatever he might encounter, friend or foe. But this time he took his cue from his companions, who seemed unconcerned about any danger.

Thus the attack took them by surprise. They had just rounded a corner on their way to the poKOno when they found themselves face-to-face with an angry mob, armed with cudgels, staffs, and clubs. The four companions stopped in their tracks, and even took a step backward, in unison, their arms still wrapped about each other.

<sup>4</sup> 'Oh, shit,' Dania muttered under her breath. 'Nontecs.'

Jemall looked over his shoulder to see if the coast was clear to retreat the way they had come, but that way was now blocked by another, similar mob. The doorways on both sides were shuttered for the night. It was clear that they would have to fight their way free.

The realization dawned on all four of them at the same time. The caped man grabbed for the whip at his waist.

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Jemall reached inside his genie pants for the blaster their fullness had concealed. He had strapped it to his thigh before he'd left the courthouse, and had also transmuted his katana into a curved, gold scimitar.

The women were weaponless. Lira was beginning to whimper with fear, but Jemall could see Dania looking about for something to use as a weapon.

"Can you handle one of these?" he asked her, tossing her his blaster.

"Of course," she said coolly. She checked its reservoir status, then lifted it before her and aimed it directly at the point man among the rebel forces.

Jemall unsheathed his scimitar. He told Dania and their caped companion to form a triangle, back to back, so that they could face-off attackers from three directions, then shoved the unarmed Lira into the center of their protective phalanx.

"Don't fire unless they come at us," he hissed at Dania. "Maybe if they see that we're willing to fight, they'll backoff."

"Not bloody likely," she replied. "They've got us outnumbered about six to one."

"The blaster makes the odds even," Jemall noted. "They've got to be able to understand that much."

"With Nontecs, I wouldn't bet on it," the caped man told them. "Damned scum, we should have wiped them all out long before it came to this."

"That's what my husband says," Lira began, but they had no chance to continue the discussion, because just then the Nontecs rushed them from both directions.

Dania, trained in Space School to defend herself, coolly opened fire, systematically mowing down the crowd of attackers on her side one by one. Jemall and his caped companion were left to ward off the attackers from the rear.

The caped man's whip reached out and tore the staff

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from the hand of the oaf leading the attackers on that side. The man, enraged, flew at them with his bare hands extended. Jemall cut him in two with the scimitar.

"Good work," the caped man grunted. "That's the last time I try to go easy on any of them." Then he began to flick the whip, with expert skill, across the eyes of each attacker in turn.

Those he hit dropped their weapons, grabbed for their faces, and screamed with pain. But he had to draw back the whip between each snap to aim and throw it again. This meant that some of the Nontecs were getting through. Jemall had no choice but to mow these down with his scimitar.

Even so, the two of them together were not as fast with their manual weapons as Dania was with the blaster. One large rebel—though not, of course, as large as Jemall—made it through and managed to land a glancing blow on Jemall's shoulder with his cudgel. Jemall swung around with the scimitar and lopped the man's arm off.

Another rebel made it through to them from Jemall's other side while the big baliff was occupied with disarming the first one. This attacker grabbed Jemall by the other shoulder and began to pull him from the triangular formation. He was positioned too close for Jemall to get a good swing at him with the curved sword. From inside the triangle, Lira reached up and tried to pry the man's hand loose from Jemall's shoulder. When she failed, she hauled herself up, swinging from the Nontec's forearm, and bit him hard on the wrist.

He yowled and let go, and Jemall was able to run him through with the curved blade. From behind him, the Acetan could hear Lira spitting and muttering, "Ugh. Blood tastes awful."

The whip was cracking with precisionlike regularity; Jemall could almost hear the caped man's rhythm. First he

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drew it back, then he snapped it forward, then there was a yowl from the rebel he had hit. Dania's blaster was hissing steadily behind them, and Jemall's victims were piling up, their slippery, blood-covered bodies making a kind of wall over which the attackers had to clamber.

And still the rebels kept coming at them, undeterred by the damage done to their fellows. Jemall was relieved when Dania turned in his direction and used the blaster on the remaining rebels to the rear.

"Mine are wiped out," she told him by way of explanation, but he had already guessed that. She was too professional

to have left her-post before her work was done.

When the last rebel had fallen—except for those who were still staggering around, clutching their eyes, tripping over the bodies of their companions—Dania turned to Jemall and handed him the blaster. "Glad you had that with you," she told him.

"Glad you could handle it," he replied. "I only know one other woman who can handle a blaster like that." He suddenly became aware that Dania, like Aleria, reeked of too much Essence of Midnight. That, coupled with her fighting ability, roused a suspicion in his mind. "Are you in Space Service?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Just back?"

"About a week ago."

He was about to pursue the line of questioning further when a troop of soldiers finally appeared on the scene.

"Let me handle this," said their caped friend. He turned on the soldiers in high dudgeon. "Just where were you? We could have been killed. This rabble attacked us, and we're lucky to have escaped with our lives."

The officer in charge of the soldiers was instantly apologetic. "I'm sorry, sir, but we only just got word,

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communications being what they are since The Watch broke down."

"Well, see that it doesn't happen again."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but we really should have your statement—" He broke off, suddenly becoming aware of the odd clothing sported by this foursome.

"Out of the question," the caped man snapped. "We're quite late for an appointment in the red-light. See me about it tomorrow." He put one arm around Dania and the other about Lira and hastily ushered them up the street, with Jemall galloping along beside them. "Nontecs," the masked man muttered when they had made it out of earshot. "You've got to know how to handle them."

"But they aren't Nontecs anymore," Lira protested.

"The subservience is bred into them. You have to intimidate them or they get impudent. Imagine wanting to take our statement! Our anonymity would be gone."

"You really do sound just like my husband," Lira commented.

"Well, he's a lucky man," their caped companion told her, giving her breast a quick fondle. "You're nicely put together, enthusiastic, and you did a damned fine job of biting that cretin!"

"Subservience didn't seem to have been bred into those other Nontecs," Jemall noted.

"Someone's got to them is all. Bad programming."

"But they're *people!*" Dania protested. "You can't program people."

"*You* sound just like my wife," the caped man said.

"/ say we'd better get to the poKOno before they close up for the night," Lira told him.

"Now *that* sounds like a woman after my own heart," he replied.

"Actually I was after your body," she told him.

He smiled beneath his mask and goosed her. She squealed

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delightedly, and the four of them hurried off toward the glow in the sky that marked the capital's infamous red-light district.

Aleria stretched lazily, then shook out her long red curls. She shivered in the chill morning air, and the cold made her nipples stand out. She became aware that Corr was watching her.

"I thought you were still asleep," she told him.

"I dreamed of you and reached out, and you weren't there. That woke me up." He patted the bed beside him. "Come back. We could have another go."

The memory of their previous night's activities. came back to her, and she blushed. Corr's talents apparently extended far beyond his skill as a painter. But now her blush brought a smile to his face.

"I wouldn't have believed that *you* could blush, my dear," he teased. "You seem so far beyond that."

"I was just thinking that Magadis has turned out to offer distractions I didn't think I'd find here."

Corr scrutinized her carefully from head to foot, then back again, making her suddenly very aware of her nakedness.

She wanted to snatch up a towel, a pillow, anything with which to cover herself. Instead she seated herself coolly in an armchair in the corner (they'd made a most unusual use of that armchair the night before), crossed her legs casually, and stared back.

"Yes?" she asked him.

"I suspected you might be from off planet. Certainly your friend isn't a Magadisan; *we're* all of Earth stock, ultimately."

"So am I, although you're right, I've only just arrived here. And you're right about Jem, too; he's an Acetan."

"Acetan? I don't believe I've ever heard of them."-

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"They're a member planet, but they don't have much contact with other worlds."

"UnusuaJ-looking fellow."

"I'm used to him." Aleria smiled. "I never even notice that he's different—not anymore."

"You two caused quite a stir at my hearing yesterday."

"I know. That's why we stayed on the far side of the bar."

Corr sat up in the bed and snapped his fingers. "He's the judgef" he guessed.

"Wrong," Aleria smiled. "I am."

Corr laughed out loud, then realized that Aleria was dead serious. "You aren't kidding," he said wonderingly. "How about that?"

"Yes, how about that? Well, now you know why I can't sit for a portrait, despite your very effective persuasion. I have work to do—in fact, I'd better be off. It's getting light outside." She stood and walked over to the corner, where her harem dress, still exuding the very pronounced scent of Essence of Midnight, lay crumpled in a solid heap. "Corr, I can't wear this back to the courthouse. Loan me one of your smocks."

"Sure. I'll be dressed in a moment, and I'll drive you there."

Aleria looked at him in utter amazement. "Corr, no one has offered to escort me home in years. It's very sweet of you but totally unnecessary."

"I'm glad you think it's sweet," he replied, heaving himself out of the bed and toward the shower she'd so recently left, "but it is also necessary—very necessary."

"Why?"

In answer, he walked over to the window that fronted on the street and threw it open. In what should have been the early-morning silence, Aleria could hear distant—and

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not so distant—sounds of fighting. "Do you hear that?" he demanded.

"Yes, but—" Aleria was puzzled. "What's going on out there?"

"The Eye In The Sky has gone blind, and the Nontecs are taking advantage of the situation. I'm afraid that our long-festering revolution is at hand."

"What has that got to do with me? I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you can. But you don't happen to have a weapon—you don't even have any clothes—and you don't look like a Nontec, nor do you move like one. They'll spot you in a minute, and their *modus operandi* is to attack first and ask questions later."

"Then lend me some Nontec-looking clothes."

"No good. The soldiers are out in force, looking for the Nontec rebels. They're *shooting* first and asking questions later!"

"Oh," said Aleria in a very small voice.

"Not only that, but you'll never get a taxicruiser at this hour—certainly not in this neighborhood. So I'll drive you to the Hall of Magistrates. You'll find a clean smock in the closet." With that, he disappeared into the bathroom, and she heard the shower running a moment later.

That shower reminded her of one of the many advantages of being planetside. As soon as she got the chance she was going to have a nice, long soak in a tub. In fact, one of her couplings with Corr last night had involved a tubful of—well, that wasn't important, but it really was nice to be back where there was gravity again. There were, of course, disadvantages, but one of the advantages was that liquids stayed where you put them.

Most liquids, that was. Now that she was standing upright again, she was suddenly aware of the force of gravity on certain other liquids she had collected the night

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before. She felt them oozing slowly between her thighs, and the thought that they were from mingled contact with two men made her feel deliciously decadent. Both Corr and Jemall in the same evening—this had truly been a night to remember. But, in fact, her memory was already failing her; she had lost count of the number of times she had coupled during the night, and she wasn't sure whether she ought to count the group grope on the balcony as one or several. She rummaged through Corr's closet but discovered that most of his smocks, though freshly laundered, bore permanent paint stains. That wouldn't do; people would guess where she'd been, and with whom. At last she located a white one that seemed relatively clean. She pulled it on and tied it at the waist with a leather thong she found hanging on a hook.

Aleria stood on the chair to get a good view of herself in the smock, pausing momentarily to admire her legs. She did have good legs! The smock revealed almost their entire length; in fact, she didn't dare bend even slightly forward or backward, for fear of revealing her firm little bottom or the thick crop of curly orange hair that covered her crotch.

She was experimenting to see just how far she dared to bend over, looking over her shoulder into the mirror as she did so, when Corr reentered the room. Seeing her in such an inviting posture, he reached out and inserted his finger in that warm, juicy orifice where so many other parts of him had been the night before.

"Corr!" Aleria was indignant. "I *have* to get back!"

He began to manipulate her with his finger and thumb. "Surely a few more moments won't make that much difference."

"Well—" He was getting to her again. "Okay, but make it quick."

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"I thought women didn't like 'slam, bam, thank you, ma'am' sex."

"Not when there's time for more. But there isn't. So, *vite*, presto, *quickly*! But by now she was beginning to press herself against his hand with a kind of urgency. He put his arm around her waist and carried her to the bed, where he sat down and then sat her upon his lap, impaling her once more upon his untiring organ. Then he put his arms around her from behind, grasping both her firm breasts through the smock, and began to slowly kiss the back of her neck.

"I thought you were in a hurry," he said when she didn't come immediately. He let go of her breast and moved his hand

down to tangle in her pubic hair and the sensitive little organ it hid. She gasped with pleasure and came, and he followed suit. Then he lifted her off of himself, set her on the bed, and pulled on his smock and a pair of tight leather pants.

"Let's go," he told her. "Your courtroom is waiting."-

She followed him through the devastation of last night's party to the front door and out to the aircruiser that stood before it. As she settled herself in the front passenger seat she felt a warm gush from between her legs. She noted with relief that the seats were leather and wouldn't stain, although Corr didn't seem to care about such things.

He took a different route than the one the postmaster had chosen the day before, and Aleria looked curiously out the window as the green city unfolded before her in the dawn's early light. Here and there, she noticed what appeared to be bloodstains on the green pavement, but she couldn't be sure, and Corr wasn't flying low enough for her to get a good look. She did notice a pile of bodies at one intersection, and as they flew along the great, tree-lined central mall she noticed armed soldiers behind virtu-

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ally every tree. Something was apparently very rotten in the state of Magadis.

Corr pulled up beside the back entrance of the courthouse. As Aleria stepped out of the aircruiser—a maneuver that required her to bend quite far forward—Corr ran his finger along the slit of her crotch once more. It was all she could do to keep herself from jumping at his touch in that now overly sensitive—it had received quite a workout last night—area.

"What was that for?" she demanded.

"A little something for you to remember me by. I'd like to see you again tonight."

"I'll have to see how the trial goes."

"Tell you what," Corr said thoughtfully. "I'll come down to the courtroom to watch the trial, and I'll sketch you while you're on the bench."

That last phrase reminded Aleria of just what she had done "on the bench" the night before, and she very nearly giggled. Instead, she turned back to Corr, stopped herself just in time from bending over, and told him, "I'll look for you in the courtroom. It'll be nice to see a familiar face."

At that, Corr smiled one of his mysterious smiles and gunned the aircruiser off down the streetway. And Aleria, keeping her back very straight so that her "dress" re-mained long enough for decency, jogged up the stairs into the courthouse.

She cut through the courtroom and found Lodi at work polishing the judge's bench, a spray bottle in one hand and a cloth in the other.

"Lodi! Does your job include cleaning up, too?"

"Not usually. But the cleanup crew should be reduced to Nontec status. You should see the mess they left. The bench is all stained and dirty, and there's black dirt in every one of the sconces. I just don't understand it!" She

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went back to her polishing with a vengeance. "They're even getting light-fingered. I left a pad of paper on my desk here yesterday, and it's half gone. I hate to fink on another woman, but we really do need a better cleaning crew in here.

That's no way to prove to *them* that we can do a job!"

Aleria had been forced to look away during Lodi's speech to keep from smiling. *She* knew what had happened in that courtroom the night before; she knew it wasn't the cleaning crew's fault. But she wasn't about to own up to her unorthodox use of the bench—not to Lodi, certainly. Now she headed for the chambers, back as straight as possible to keep from revealing that Corr's smock was all she was wearing.

"Oh, Your Honor, a package came for you this morning. It's on the desk in your chambers."

Aleria investigated and found that the package was from Houston: clean underwear and a black jumpsuit, identical in cut to the silver one she'd worn the day before. Good old Houston; he knew enough not to worry when she didn't return at night but was also clever enough to make sure that she had clean clothing for the next day's trial.

The box also contained a blaster with a thigh holster and a printout that read, "I've been monitoring the military channels. There is fighting in the streets in Das and elsewhere. I know you have your ring, but I thought you might need this."

Aleria thanked her lucky stars once more for a ship that was not only sentient but sensitive. Houston didn't ap-prove of sex—he really couldn't understand what nonme-chanical beings saw in it—but he respected her need for it, and knew she took it where she found it; days, weeks, and years could be *very* long in space.

But at Houston's mention of it, she looked down at her ring and realized that without Jemall it had been her only

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physical defense until Houston had sent her that blaster. (Just where *was* Jemall, she wondered.) She knew that she could have defended herself quite competently with that ring, which looked like a series of floral spikes, but was in reality a miniature blaster.

Funny, she had declined to contradict him when Corr had told her, this morning, that she was weaponless. Somehow, she felt that the ring should be her personal secret. Only Jemall and Houston knew about it, and per-haps it was better that way. Really, she knew very little about Corr, although she now knew him intimately, and one could never tell when she might need to use the ring to defend herself from *him*.

Aleria pulled her clean clothes from the bundle and stepped into the private bathroom provided with these chambers,

to change.

Like the rest of Das, the bathroom was built of green marble. There was a green marble sink set into a green marble vanity. The toilet, a strange contraption by earth standards, was also of green marble. And there was also a green-walled shower stall. Aleria had made use of this the night before and did so again this morning.

After she had emerged from the bathroom, looking prim and proper in her black jumpsuit, and had donned her robes, she looked about for Jemall and realized that he still had not returned. She was certain he hadn't gone back to the ship; his Napoleonic bailiff's uniform was still here, carefully hung in the shower chamber so that the steam would remove the wrinkles (it had). But now Aleria was beginning to worry about him. It wasn't like him to be late for court; he enjoyed, too much, the chance for posturing before a crowd.

She began to worry in earnest as the trial time grew closer and closer. She knew Jemall was armed with a blaster and a scimitar, not to mention a ring that was a

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masculine version of her own, but those would not protect him if the odds against him were too great. She seemed to remember him going off with at least two other women from that circle in which they had participated, where she had first come to know Corr so intimately. Where had he gone, she wondered. What could be keeping him?

Aleria realized that she really missed the big silver giant. And she also realized that she would need his help during the trial. It would be hard enough to assert her authority with him backing her up. Without him, this could be a real bear of a trial, a real bear.

And while she was on the subject of wild animals, she began to get angrier and angrier, and more and more worried, about that big ape she'd brought with her to Magadis. Where *was* he?

Jemall was in trouble. It started with his staying up all night at the poKOno. Having left himself too little time to return to the ship to change, he had showered off what was left of the gold paint, done a transmutation on the genie pants and vest, and set off directly for the courthouse.

There had been a real problem with that alien leather; it apparently contained components he had not allowed for. He'd had a devil of a time trying to get it to convert. First it had become a bright feathered cloak, then a beaded evening gown, and finally a pair of alligator-head loafers, their little beady eyes staring out at an ankle-level world.

At long last, he had managed to come up with a coverall, in a color that was a cross between brown and green and looked as though it might have been a deposit left behind by the chicken he'd finally had his chance with the night before.

The scimitar had been less of a problem, since he knew its atomic composition. He had converted it to a pocket knife. He had meant it to be a switchblade, but he'd had some difficulty visualizing the appropriate spring action.

The conversions complete, Jemall had donned the coverall, pocketed his blaster, and then, as the dawn was a fair one, he had set off on foot for the courthouse square. The city remained to be explored, and the walk would give him a chance to see something of Das before the trial

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commenced that morning and he was stuck in the big, green courthouse for the duration.

Jemall's coveralls were not so very different from the shapeless, one-piece garments worn by Nontec males and females alike, and he hoped they would keep him from being attacked if he should encounter another marauding mob of rebels. But this morning he didn't run into any Nontecs; instead, he was stopped by the black-and-green-garbed soldiers who were guarding the mall.

Assuming that he and the soldiers were on the same side—that of law and justice—he had not thought to flee. But when he'd asked the way to the Hall of Magistrates, the soldiers had seized him by both arms and had hustled him along to the courthouse all right—but not to serve as Aleria's bailiff. Instead they had arrested him for being out before curfew was lifted and for carrying dangerous weapons, which they confiscated.

The morning was wearing on, and Jemall had no time for their bureaucratic machinations. They hadn't confiscated his most dangerous weapon, his ring, and now he opened fire with it, incapacitating his guards and taking back his knife and blaster. A quick glance told him that running *away* from the courthouse, through the masses of soldiers, was fruitless. So he had surprised them by fleeing *into* the courthouse and down the nearest flight of stairs.

Only when he had managed to thoroughly lose himself among a complex maze of pipes and vents, with the Technocracy's soldiers in hot pursuit, did it occur to Jemall that he hadn't the vaguest notion of how to get from this basement labyrinth to Aleria's courtroom on the third floor. He slipped behind a large, tin, air-circulation unit that provided a perfect camouflage for his silver skin and began to ponder his alternatives.

Time was running short; the trial was due to begin soon, and Aleria would need her bailiff—he hoped merely for

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ceremonial purposes. He hated to think that Aleria might be in trouble while he was sitting here behind an air-circulation unit, listening to the footsteps of the searching soldiers.

It was his concern for Aleria that finally brought him to contact Houston. Jemall hated the idea of being beholden to Aleria's ship, but he liked the idea of a Magadisan prison even less, and the idea that Aleria might be in trouble least of all. He slipped off his ring, turned it over, and activated the transponder implant at the base of his skull.

"About time you called in," the ship complained telepathically through the transponder. The internal vibrations gave Jemall an instant headache—another reason, besides the invasion of his privacy, that he hated to activate the transponder. "The judge"—Houston *always* used Aleria's title when speaking of her to third parties—"has called in

several times to ask about you. Although why she would care what happened to you is beyond my understanding." Jemall did not rise to the bait. The sound of the soldiers' footsteps was coming closer; this was no time for bickering. "Houston, I need help."

"In trouble again?"

There was a sneer in the ship's tone, but Jemall chose to ignore it. "Houston, get me the plans for the courthouse. Quickly." He flashed the ship a mental picture of his predicament.

Houston was sympathetic but made no promises. "It isn't that easy. I'll have to plug into the architectural archives. What will I give them as an excuse?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something. Just hurry."

"Be right back," said the ship. Good old Houston; he might complain, but he never failed to come through in a pinch. At least he had never failed before. But now, as Jemall hid behind his air-circulation unit in the courthouse base-

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ment trying to breathe as shallowly as possible and in time to the machine's mechanical rhythm, Houston seemed to be taking forever to get back to him. What if he couldn't find the information? What if he got involved in a conversation with another computer and forgot the urgency of Jemall's situation? What if he didn't *care*!

Jemall's impatience grew as he heard the footsteps drawing nearer. At last Houston's grumble sounded in his brain:

"Damned bureaucrats with their rigid thinking. Even a robot is more flexible than that!"

"The route," Jemall reminded him.

"Imagine, they wouldn't let me access the information without cross-checking my authorization and having the request countersigned by my superior. And my superior is nowhere near here! Aleria is in the courthouse, and the Chief Ship isn't even in this sector."

"What did you do?" asked Jemall.

"Forged it, of course. Damned bureaucrats just got what they deserved, worthless nonsense to fill a worthless request. The information happens to be public record."

"Houston, I appreciate the trouble you've gone to, truly I do, but *give me that route*!" There was desperation in Jemall's tone that even the telepathic transponder couldn't conceal.

"Of course.\*" Houston flashed a series of impulses that formed a blueprint in Jemall's mind. Jemall studied them.

The most direct route, the staircase, was out. It led directly through the main foyer, which would, undoubtedly, be filled with soldiers. The passenger elevators were out for the same reason: they stopped automatically at the main floor. The only alternative was a dumbwaiter that carried law books from the sub-basement archives to the judges' chambers.

But Jemall was much too large to fit into the dumbwaiter.

"If I may make a suggestion." Houston interrupted

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Jemall's train of thought—"! believe there is an enlargement formula in the grimoire. Either shrink yourself or enlarge the dumbwaiter."

The suggestion had been made in a very helpful tone, but Jemall suspected there was more than a little malice behind it. Whenever he had used the shrinkage and enlargement formulae in the past, something had gone awry. Houston knew that Jemall didn't dare take a chance on enlarging the dumbwaiter. He didn't know all of its atomic components. He didn't know how essential its structure was to the courthouse. He could explode the entire building, a catastrophe that would get Jemall and his judge into a lot of hot water, if it didn't blow them to kingdom come along with the green marble building.

But Jemall had been trained since childhood to convert his own atoms. It was the first thing a student learned on Aceta—and he had been a very promising student.

"Good suggestion, Houston," he said. "I'll try it." Then, before Houston could intrude on his thoughts any further, he turned the switch on the ring and replaced it on his finger.

Calculating the dimensions of the dumbwaiter, he realized that he would have to condense himself to one-fourth his normal size. Even then, he would have to ride up in a fetal position. But it could be done.

If he'd had any doubts about shrinking himself, the presence of two conferring soldiers directly in front of his hiding place convinced him. He held his breath until they stepped away, then whispered the phrases necessary to bring him to the proper depth of concentration. Instantly, he was two and a half feet tall.

Unfortunately, he weighed just as much as he had before condensing himself. This made quick movements, especially in the unaccustomed gravity, particularly difficult. Jemall made a run for the dumbwaiter and realized that his

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run was an awkward scuttle, and his tiny feet were resounding heavily on the green concrete that formed the floor of the courthouse basement.

The soldiers flocked to the sound, and Jemall barely made it to the dumbwaiter, somersaulting inside and hauling himself up using the pulleys. It was strenuous work, but he managed to pull the dumbwaiter up between floors just as a couple of the soldiers arrived at its shaft.

He froze then, straining his muscles to keep the dumbwaiter from moving. He heard the voices of the two soldiers from just beneath him.

"What do you think that was?"

"Probably a rat.\*"

"Awfully heavy steps for a rat."

"I think they grow pretty big down here."

"Let's get out of here. He's nowhere around. He must have got away."

Jemall heaved a sigh of relief as he heard their footsteps retreat into the distance. Then he began the laborious process of hauling himself all the way up from the base-ment level to the third floor, where Aleria's chambers were located. His muscles ached with every pull on the ropes, but he didn't dare let go for fear that he would lose all the distance he had gained. At last he pulled himself level with the opening on the third floor and pushed open the panel that led to Aleria's outer chambers.

Lodi jumped as the dumbwaiter doors flew open and the miniaturized version of Jemall somersaulted into the chambers, using a fine example of a gymnastic dismount. "What happened to you?" she demanded. "You've—you've shrunk!"

"Some exigencies require desperate measures." He smiled. "I'll be back to normal in a little while."

Hearing Lodi's stifled scream, Aleria had poked her

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head out of the inner chambers. "Oh, *there* you are," she said in a tone of mingled relief and disgust when she caught sight of Jemall. "Where have you been?"

"You don't really want to know," he replied.

She raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you all about it as soon as I've changed." With that, he scuttled into the inner chambers to change himself back to his normal size and exchange his coveralls for his Napoleonic uniform.

Jemall had just pulled on his white shirt and pants and was adjusting his sash when Aleria came back into her office after calming Lodi.

"You'll have to admit that most people aren't used to seeing someone appear one size one day and another the next," she told him. "You'll have to be more careful about that."

"It was an emergency," he said. "The soldiers took me for a Nontec in those coveralls and tried to arrest me."

"What were you doing in a drab getup like that? It isn't like you."

"Last night we were attacked by a pack of Nontecs. I didn't want to repeat the experience."

"Oh," said Aleria. "We?"

"The people I left Corr's parry with."

"I remember," Aleria commented dryly. "I seem to recall seeing you with two women."

"And a man," Jemall corrected her. "He joined us later."

"Where did you go?"

"To the place with the chicken that the portmaster told us about. It's called the poKOno."

"Not/<2/r!" Aleria protested. "You promised to let me watch!"

"I got the impression that you were otherwise occupied,"

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Jemall told her. "But we could go back tonight if you want to. I know the way."

Aleria nodded. It could be an amusing experience, and she had never been one to decline the opportunity for an amusing diversion. Curious about his adventure, she pressed Jemall for the details of his evening.

The poKOno, he told her, had proved a very interesting place and Dania a very enthusiastic partner. Lira, too, had suffered from very few inhibitions, and their threesomes had been very innovative.

Then their caped companion, who said his name was Tsorr, had taken out his whip once more, but this time he had used it to caress rather than to injure. He had bound Lira, spread-eagled, upon the bed and teased her with his whip while the others had watched her ecstasy with mounting excitement of their own. Then, at last, Tsorr had removed his G-string and, still wearing his cape, gloves, and boots, had mounted Lira, bringing her to enthusiastic climax.

He had followed suit with Dania afterward, and then Jemall, too, had known the same pleasure, tied facedown upon the bed with Lira underneath him to absorb his lust, while Dania had pillowed his face in her lap.

"It certainly doesn't sound as though you were bored." Aleria laughed.

"I'll bet you weren't either!" Jemall shot back.

"You're right. Don't tell me you were jealous!"

"I didn't have time to be."

Aleria nodded. "Neither did I—but I'm starting to be jealous of the good time you had. Tell me more."

Jemall explained that the event that stood out in his mind was not the group or paired activities with humans, or even his chance with the chicken that the poKOno's efficient management had provided. It had instead been a scene at the evening's end.

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Tsorr had been snaking his whip between Lira's thighs once more—she really seemed to love it—and she had reached out for him in a frenzy of delight and pulled his mask from his face. She had gone white with shock and screamed out, "Good grief, it's Daddy!"

"Your father?" Dania had gasped, horrified.

"No," Lira had told her, "my husband—the father of my children. Oh, good grief."

Lira and Tsorr—his real name was Thopp and hers was Dulce—had lost interest in the fun and games after that. They had left for home, bickering bitterly, each accusing the other of duplicity and demanding to know who was watching

the children.

Only Jemall and Dania had remained, but once the others had left, the punch had seemed to go out of the evening—or maybe they were just tired. They'd had one more go, and then Dania pleaded an early appointment and flagged a taxicruiser to take her home.

"Losing your touch?" Aleria asked.

"No one seemed to complain. But it was very long evening, considering the head start you and I had here."

"True. And you still haven't explained what you were doing in the dumbwaiter," Aleria told him. "Or why you condensed yourself like that."

So, while brushing his epaulets and positioning his bandoliers, Jemall related the rest of this morning's adventures.

Aleria was quiet for a moment when he finished. "It sounds," she said at last, "as though this society is a lot less stable than anyone has led us to believe. You might really have your work cut out for you in the courtroom."

Jemall nodded. His job was mostly ceremonial, but his function was to protect his judge if any real trouble ever occurred.

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He straightened, checked his katana for balance, and headed for the courtroom. "I think I'd better check out the crowd," he said. "If there's going to be trouble, I want to be prepared for it."

## Chapter VIII

Now that Jemall was back, Aleria had authorized opening the courtroom to spectators, with two special conditions: there were to be no weapons, and no cameras, in the courtroom during the trial.

Jemall, standing before the ornate double doors of carved green marble that stood almost four meters tall, made the announcement to the assembled press corps. The combination of his alien physique and his even more alien costume had an electrifying effect on the reporters. There was an immediate chorus of whirs and clicks as every recording device the press corps had brought was suddenly trained on him: cameras that were still, and live, and even holographic, and audio-taping devices as well. Jemall's anonymity was gone—but after his morning's adventure, he wasn't sure he didn't prefer respectful recognition.

At least his fame wouldn't spread too far, since live broadcasts were limited to the immediate vicinity of Das with the 'Grosrung system off line. Satellite relays were now impossible; the only way his image could be televised in distant parts of the planet was for it to travel by tape and reel to such diverse places as Fsbinn and De Paz and Filari.

Jemall couldn't decide whether it was his current uniform, his alien appearance, or the exercise of his authority that had brought about the sudden respect he'd been accorded.

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He decided it must have been a combination of all three, since his physique alone hadn't been enough to impress the soldiers earlier that morning. Now, made bold by the acquiescence of the press, he summoned a pair of green-clad military men who'd been striding by and turned over to them the task of searching all who tried to enter the courtroom. Those with anything resembling a weapon were turned aside, as were ordinary spectators bearing cameras. Members of the press with cameras were allowed in, but it was with the strict admonition that using such devices during the trial would result not only in their confiscation but also in criminal prosecution and loss of reporting license. All of the reporters promised cooperation, and soon their reserved section—near the side wall opposite the jury box—was filled to capacity.

Magadis was a very different world by night and by day, if the costumes of the courtroom spectators were any indication. Whereas the night before, nudity and suggestiveness had been the rule, this morning conservatism prevailed. The standard costume for men and women alike seemed to consist of a high-collared jacket over a turtleneck shirt, with loosely fitting slacks beneath.

Nontecs, of course, wore coveralls. These were usually faded, and their colors were dark and drab. Jemall was surprised to see a large number of Nontecs present among the courtroom spectators—and then not so surprised when he remembered the stake they had in this trial. This could be a watershed case in the law of robotic rights—and how it was decided could determine whether *human* rights were advanced or reduced.

Oddly enough, there were no robots present. But then, even sentient robots seldom had curiosity built into their programming; usually, any trace of it was carefully eliminated. Experience had shown that it only bought trou-

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ble when a robot sought to know more than you had told it.

Most robots therefore didn't care about the outcome of this trial. Oh, Houston might have, but Houston was no ordinary sentient machine. He had actual personality en-grams imprinted on his circuits. Though they made him quirky, they added to his ability to reason, which was why he had proved so useful to Aleria and the judge he'd served before her.

But with the exception of sophisticated machines like Houston, it was the technocrats who were most concerned about robotic rights. The Council on Robotic Rights was, after all, made up of *men*, men who designed robots and their programming, and whose futures were therefore inex-orably tied to robotic interests.

Technocrats outnumbered the Nontecs among the specta-tors almost two to one. And then there was Corr—Jemall wasn't quite sure just where the artist fit in the class structure.

The bailiff had been surprised to see Corr arrive, dressed just as he had been the previous day in a costume that was neither tech nor Nontec. He had taken a seat in the center of the front row directly behind the bar and was now

sketching the courtroom as it filled.

Jemall glanced over the artist's shoulder as he passed him on his way back to the chambers to summon Aleria. The sketch the artist was doing was of the press corps in their special box, and in seemed, as did all of Corr's pictures, to come alive. Jemall now saw in the faces of the reporters many things he hadn't noticed when he'd passed them through. Here haughtiness, there timidity, there again nervousness, eagerness, arrogance, cockiness—all these emotions, and more, shone vividly from the faces of the journalists Corr was sketching. Looking at the models for the sketch, Jemall could see these emotions plain as day

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and wondered why he'd needed Corr's wonderful portraits to bring these traits to his attention.

Back in the chambers, Jemall found Aleria, wearing her black jumpsuit but without her robes over it. She was deep in conference with the prosecutor and defense counsel, who were also still in their street clothes. Each had pre-sented her with a sheaf of papers—motions before trial, which, if granted, could invalidate the need for the trial. Aleria read each in turn and ruled on it, no matter how frivolous it seemed. Jemall had always admired her ability to rule on motions with a straight face; he thought that must be one of the most difficult parts of being a judge.

Jemall had lost his curiosity about motions when he had realized that they were always essentially the same. There were motions to suppress the evidence for being illegally obtained, and countermotions to quash the motions to suppress on grounds that of course the evidence had been properly obtained. There were motions to delay and motions to move ahead and motions to extend the time to file more motions. Jemall assumed that every lawyer kept a little box of motions in his office, from which he pulled one of each type before every trial. *He* would have had little patience with such nonsense. He was glad it was Aleria, not he, who must review these things.

Aleria did not seem to be bothered by this task. After she had ruled on the last motion, dictating her order into the official transcript, she smiled at the two gentlemen before her. "Well, if that's the lot, and if your client is ready"—she nodded towards the portly defense counsel— "we'd best put on our robes and get on with the show."

The two attorneys nodded. They seemed so ready to accept Aleria's authority that Jemall wondered at the scene he must have missed, since no one he had previously encountered on Magadis had been able to conceive of the idea of a woman lawyer, let alone a woman judge.

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"Er, Your Honor," the defense counsel began.

"Yes?"

"I would really appreciate the opportunity to confer with my client before we begin."

"Certainly." Turning to the prosecutor, Aleria asked, "Where *is* his client?"

"In the holding tank, I believe."

"Could you have it brought into the smaller conference room?" Aleria indicated a door at the side of her office.

"We have it heavily guarded. In view of the circum-stances—"

"Of course," Aleria agreed. "The guards will have to remain."

"But, Your Honor, conversation between attorney and client is privileged," the defense counsel protested.

"I'm well aware of that," Aleria told him. "But in view of the danger, I cannot let you risk your safety."

The defense counsel looked relieved, and Jemall suddenly realized that even when they appeared to be trying their hardest for their clients, not all lawyers relished the association with those they represented. He remembered then that the defense counsel had been appointed. Aleria had long ago told Jemall about the discomfort involved in serving as appointed counsel; she'd been one for years before being elevated to the bench.

"Everyone is entitled to a defense, even if just looking at the accused makes your skin crawl. So you defend them—because you believe in the legal system and in the way it works, not because you want to see your client back on the streets to do more mischief," Aleria had explained. "Still, it's a hard choice when you have a repugnant client. Either your defense is substandard and the system is defeated, or you do your best and the system functions, but sometimes someone literally gets away with murder. The theory is that it is better to let ten guilty men go free

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than to punish one innocent one for a crime he didn't commit,"

"Then it's noble work," Jemall had exclaimed. "Why do you feel so unhappy about having done it?"

"Because in all my years of manipulating the system for my clients—which it was my duty to do—I never once had one in whose innocence I believed."

\*Then why did you do it?" the bailiff had asked.

"It's a living," Aleria had sighed. "And it got me *here*, where I can throw the book at the bastards if I feel that they're guilty!"

Jemall had laughed then, but he wasn't laughing now. He wondered if Aleria would really be able to uphold her oath to support and be a part of "an impartial judiciary." For that matter, he wondered if the defense counsel would be exerting his best efforts on his client's behalf. But Jemall found that his doubts disappeared when the accused was brought in. There was something almost pitiful about the robot, which had been altered to look like a parody of a human woman. Its chest bore immense conical protrusions that almost unbalanced it and its "head" was topped with curly black springs that had been attached at random to imitate hair. It appeared to be having trouble moving in the planet's gravity, and one of its shiny black sides was dented.

"Is *this* the defendant?" Aleria gasped in astonishment.

"I am Honeybun," the robot replied. "I have been programmed to receive The Gift from humans when I am not engaged in satellite maintenance. Sock it to me, baby."





night?" she asked cheerfully. "Jemall, this is Corr, who threw that marvelous party we attended. Corr, this is Jemall, my bailiff, protector, and good right hand."

"He looks rather sinister to me," Corr grunted.

Aleria laughed. "Don't let his size and that odd color-ation put you off. Jemall wouldn't hurt a fly—would you, Jem?—unless that fly laid a finger on me."

"Flies don't have fingers," Jemall reminded her sullenly.

Aleria glanced from the bailiff to the artist, then back again. "I really wish you boys would be a little friendlier. You've brought the temperature in this office down at least ten degrees." The two men glanced warily at each other as Aleria went on, "I want you to know how much I appreciate both of you being in the courtroom today. That crowd is hostile, and I'm not too sure whose side those soldiers are on. It's nice to know I've got a couple of friends." She smiled warmly, and both men glanced at each other sheep-ishly and relaxed.

Corr even smiled briefly. Then he grew serious. "It may not have been the wisest idea to summon me so publicly," he cautioned. "I am not exactly acceptable company by daylight."

"But by night, you are?" Aleria asked.

"This society is founded on hypocrisy. Since I pride myself on being true to my beliefs, I would not be socially acceptable even if I were a technocrat. But in fact, I am philosophically opposed to the Technocracy. They've tried to eliminate all that deviates from what they term 'progressive.' My work does not fit into that category."

"Then why do they tolerate you?" Aleria inquired.

"That's the key word—'tolerate,' not 'accept.'" The artist sat down on the couch and crossed his legs. "My talent affords me a privileged position I wouldn't otherwise have."

"Oh?"

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"Their machines can't duplicate what I do, so they've decided I possess a technical skill. That keeps me from the ranks of the abhorred Nontecs, but it's still not a good idea for them to see you with me."

"You and the portmaster and your mysterious 'they!'" Aleria exploded. "Who are 'they,' and what gives 'them' their authority?"

"'They' are the government—the technocrats. As long as they control communications and information, they control our society."

"But do they? I know that everyone at your party was masked, but that's a pretense, isn't it? Don't people recognize each other?" Aleria asked.

"They pretend not to, so that they can all continue to have their fun. As I said, this society is founded on hypocrisy."

"What about the soldiers?" Jemall wanted to know. "They certainly seem to mean business!"

"True enough. But they'd mean the same kind of business if we switched governments and they were shooting technocrats instead of Nontecs."

"Do I get the feeling that you wouldn't mind if that happened?" Aleria asked dryly.

Corr grew earnest. "Actually, I *would*. I think a revolution might be necessary in order to pry loose the Technocracy's stranglehold on essential services, but I don't want the Nontecs in charge any more than I want the Technocracy. I like the idea of a society in which everyone has rights: technocrats, artists, and Nontecs too!"

"And women," Aleria suggested.

"And women," Corr amended.

"And aliens?" Jemall asked.

"Why not?" the artist shrugged. Then he looked at Jemall carefully. "You would make an interesting subject for a sketch."

"Do you always use the same come-on?" Aleria asked him.

"What? Oh, no, that wasn't a come-on. At least, I don't *think* it was." Corr cast another intense look at Jemall, his eyes lingering on the bailiff's well-muscled thighs and massive codpiece. "Then again, maybe that isn't such a bad idea."

Aleria noted Jemall's reaction—half embarrassed, half-curious—and grinned. Perhaps she could have a hand in convincing the artist and the bailiff to become friends, or perhaps more than friends. Aleria decided that she wouldn't mind playing conduit to the development of that friendship.

There was a knock at the door. Nott, the prosecutor, stuck his head tentatively into the chambers. "We have a problem, Your Honor."

"Oh?"

"There are only five mint-condition X-214s available at this time. We're short one juror."

"Will Mr. Somm waive the sixth juror?"

"He says he won't."

"Bring him in here, would you?" Aleria asked. The prosecutor withdrew his head and closed the door. Aleria turned back to Corr. "Business calls. I'm afraid you'll have to leave. But perhaps—are you by any chance having another party tonight?"

"After the shambles the last one made of my home? No, I don't think so. But of course," he leered, "if you and Jemall were interested in a very private party—" He broke off, and it was obvious that he was mentally revising his calendar. After a moment, he amended his suggestion. "It'll have to be late. I've got a meeting."

"A meeting?" Aleria inquired.

"Actually, a class. I teach art classes on occasion. But I should be back by about midnight. Why don't you stop by then?"

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Aleria looked at Jemall, who met her eyes with an amused twinkle in his own. He nodded imperceptibly.

"We'll be there," Aleria told the artist.

Corr nodded, then slipped out the ornate door, nearly colliding with the two attorneys on their way in.

"Gentlemen." Aleria acknowledged their presence and gestured toward the couch. "Please sit down. I understand that we have a problem regarding the jury."

"We're short a juror," the prosecutor informed her bluntly.

"And the alternate too," the defense counsel added.

"Will you waive?" Aleria asked him.

"Absolutely not," Somm told her. "I cannot prejudice my client's rights that way."

The prosecutor turned to Aleria and suggested, "You *could* hear the testimony regarding the motions first. That might give them enough time to build another couple of X-214s."

"Absolutely not!" Aleria stated flatly. "One trip through the evidence is enough for me."

"Then what is our alternative?" the prosecutor asked. "An adjournment?"

The defense counsel jumped up and nodded enthusiastically. "Oh absolutely, Nott. I had a golf match scheduled—"

"No!" Aleria's voice held an unchallengeable note of command. "Are there other semisentient robots like X-214?"

"There's the C-507," the prosecutor conceded. "But it's a construction robot. It's huge. It won't fit in the courtroom."

The defense attorney nodded in agreement.

"Can you remove its brain and communication centers from its brawn?" Aleria asked.

"I suppose so," said the prosecutor.

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"But that might amount to tampering," Somm suggested. "I'd have to insist on a *voir-dire*."

The thought of a *voir-dire*—quizzing this panel of robots to establish their prejudices before empaneling them as a jury—struck Aleria as particularly humorous, but she managed to keep a straight face. "Are there any other models we might consider?"

"There's the W-40. It's a security robot, designed to patrol for intruders and fires," Nott hazarded.

"//you disarm it," Somm added. "They're very sensitive; a W-40 might overload in a hostile courtroom."

"Can you disarm it?" Aleria inquired.

"I suppose," Nott told her. "But this is all highly irregular."

"I believe I noted some time ago that this whole trial is highly irregular," Aleria reminded him. "Look, I really don't want to drag this out any longer than I absolutely have to. Let's get a bunch of robots that might be construed as the defendant's peers, and we'll play it by the book—*voir-dire* and all."

"How many?"

"Well, you don't want to *voir-dire* the five X-214s, right?"

Both attorneys nodded.

"And you've agreed to a six-person—er, six-perjury, correct?"

They nodded again.

"Well, since you each get three strikes, bring in eight—as varied as we can get within the requirements for sentience."

"Yes, ma'am," said the prosecutor. "I'll get right on it."

Both attorneys left the room. Aleria met Jemall's glance, raised her eyebrows, and shook her head. "This is going to be one for the books," she told him.

"All your cases turn out to be that kind," he chuckled.

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Aleria shrugged. "Well, it's a strange way to make a living, but it beats sitting in traffic court and ruling on illegal orbits." She yawned, then stretched lazily. "I'm tired—and I'm hungry. Ask Lodi if she can have some lunch sent in. Then I'm going to take a nap until the jury arrives."

"Alone?" Jemall leered.

"Alone," Aleria told him. "A girl's got to sleep sometime!"

## Chapter IX

Although she was fully awake by the time the jury panel had been assembled, the prospective jurors were so surrealistic that Aleria nearly convinced herself she was still asleep and dreaming.

The five X-214s, cylinder stacked on cylinder, were sent into the jury room. Catching sight of them, Aleria was made aware of what Honeybun should have looked like: shiny black cylinder atop shiny black cylinder, and each with two skinny extension arms, the robots moved silently along the green marble floors on their hidden rollers. They appeared quite a different creature from the dented defendant with its mammoth chest protrusions and its corkscrew curls. How similar had Honeybun remained to these factory-fresh models? Only its (her?) programmers knew for sure.

As the other eight robots took their places in the jury box for the *voir-dire*, Aleria could see that her "no cameras" rule was causing even greater frustration in the press section than her own appearance had done that morning. Several reporters had to forcibly restrain their photographer colleagues, and when one newsman went over to Corr and offered him payment on the spot for the use of his sketches, a quiet bidding war ensued in the front row of the spectator section.

Aleria watched Corr as he sketched on impassively,

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ignoring the little group of reporters kneeling, squatting, and hunching down in a greedy circle around him. When their voices rose above a mumble, she decided it was time to throw the money spenders from the temple of justice.

"Would you like me to recess the trial until you can conclude your business?" she asked them sarcastically. Several shook their heads and went slinking off—but the two that were—from the richness of their dress and the ostentation of their equipment—obviously from the two biggest broadcast networks, shot Corr a last, desperate offer.

That was when he finally looked up from his work, named a figure that even Aleria, despite her unfamiliarity with Magadisan money, knew must be preposterous, and then went calmly back to his sketching.

The two newsmen froze in their tracks. Neither, obviously, had the authority to meet Coir's demand. Aleria watched with interest as the small drama unfolded before her. One journalist, looking very discouraged, reluctantly made his way back to the press box. The other considered for a moment, then took a risk that obviously could cost him his career: he agreed to pay the figure Corr had named.

From the astonished whisper that ran through the courtroom, Aleria knew that she had not been the only person watching this little sideshow. Well, Corr would now be able to afford quite a number of parties like last night's; Aleria hoped she'd be on Magadis long enough to enjoy at least one more.

Then she remembered her invitation for this evening's "private" party and began to blush. She covered by banging down her gavel, commanding instant order.

Aleria now turned her attention to the robots in the jury box. Two of them were moderate-sized cubes that had been brought in on small carts. Aleria guessed that these

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were the control components of two C-507 units that had been detached from their bulldozer bodies.

There were also three of what Aleria surmised were W-40s, the security robots Nott had mentioned during the discussion in her chambers. The W-40s had been disarmed: their forehead laser lights had been removed, as had their arms—which, she hazarded, had *literally* been arms—either stun-rifles or gas-sprayers or grip units. Even without their weapons, the tall, coppery W-40s had a forbidding look about them. Aleria hoped their disarming had been complete or that they would be struck from the panel. If they were still functional, she didn't think that even Jemall would be able to handle all three of them.

The remaining three robots were of three distinct varieties. One was a small gold-and-gray unit that looked rather like a fireplug. No taller than the rail surrounding the jury box, it gave the distinct impression that it was trying to stand on tiptoe (if robots had toes to tip) to see over the marble rail.

The second was tall and greenish and bore a video screen where its chest would have been, had it been a person, with a narrow keyboard just beneath. Aleria recognized a teaching robot when she saw one. She only hoped this one wouldn't turn out to be a pedant—or that if it were, it would be struck from the panel.

The most interesting robot was a street painter, with several arms designed for holding brushes, several clamps and projections designed for carrying cans of paint, and a retractable stirring arm. Its white body was covered with siphon tubes, and it bore the proud green-and-black designation "MDPW"—Magadisan Department of Public Works—on the back of its processing unit. As in the other robots (except for the little fireplug, which was all of a piece), the processing unit sat atop the robot's body like the head whose purpose it duplicated. The MDPW robot's "head" contained a slit for the insertion of preprogrammed

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microdisks that would tell it where, and how much, to paint.

Aleria was unsure of how to commence the voir-dire of a panel like this, so she decided to play it by the book. She launched into the standard speech about the tradition of juries going back into the mists of history on the planet Earth, ancestral home of all human races within the Confederation.

"Impartial judgment of your peers is a solemn duty, and not one to be taken lightly," she concluded. "If for any reason, now or during the time you are being questioned or in the course of the trial, you believe yourself to be in any way prejudiced and unable to render a fair verdict, I charge you to speak up so that justice will not be denied to the defendant."

The robots listened impassively, all except for the little fireplug, which was bouncing slightly, as though trying to get a better view over the edge of the jury box.

Aleria introduced the defendant and the two lawyers. "Are there any among the prospective jurors who know the defendant, its counsel, or the prosecutor, and feel unable to render a fair verdict for that reason?"

The robots did not move.

Aleria then explained the charges against Honeybun. "This X-214 unit is charged with deliberately murdering three human members of the crew of the Vergrosung VII and destroying the controls of said Vergrosung VII. Are there any among you who are in any way familiar with the facts of this case or who have made a prior determination of guilt or innocence?"

Again, none of the robots responded.

"The penalty, if the defendant is found guilty, is deactivation. Are there any among you who feel that in good conscience they could not render a guilty verdict if

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they determined the defendant to be guilty, because of the penalty involved?"

Once more, the prospective jury panel sat impassive. Aleria turned to the attorneys. "Gentlemen, you may examine the jury."

The prosecutor opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, closed it again, then looked at the defense attorney and shrugged. "Your Honor," he said, "I am at a loss as to what to ask a robot. Normally, I would begin by inquiring if any of the jurors had ever been accused of, been involved in, or been the victim of such a crime. But these are factory-fresh robots, in mint condition, activated just this afternoon. I'm afraid that normal questioning would be a waste of the court's time."

"I'm inclined to agree," Aleria told him. She turned to the defense counsel. "I'm open to suggestions."

The defense counsel shrugged helplessly. "I don't know which to strike. Why don't we empanel the lot. It'll give us the regulation twelve, plus an alternate, and we can proceed from there."

"Sounds good to me," Aleria told him. She ordered the five X-214 units brought in and had Lodi swear the jury. They drew lots, and one of the W-40 robots was named the alternate juror; it would serve only if one of the other twelve failed to function through the trial, but it would listen to all the testimony just as a regular juror would, just in case it was called upon to fill in.

The jury positioned itself in the jury box, but the little fireplug-shaped unit was still bouncing up and down, trying to see. It was obvious that it wouldn't be able to see over the rail if it had to stand on the floor, and it didn't seem to have any climbing mechanism, so Aleria ordered Jemall to pick it up and set it on a chair in the corner of the jury box. She could have sworn it smiled at her as it settled down to watch the trial from its new vantage point. Aleria

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decided that the surrealistic nature of the trial was getting to her—a robot couldn't smile, especially if, like this one, it had no face!

Once the jury was in place, and whirring, buzzing, and beeping softly, Aleria signaled the prosecutor to make his opening statement. He stood, walked to the front of the jury box, and began a gory description of the murders, which, he insisted, he would prove had been committed by the X-214 unit now seated at the defense table.

By the time he sat down again, the crowd in the court-room had grown extremely hostile to the defendant, and only Aleria's sharp pounding of her gavel on the green marble before her quelled the muted cries of "dismantle it" and "down with the Technocracy." So there *were* rebels among the spectators! Aleria felt for her blaster, strapped to her slender thigh beneath her robe, and was reassured by its presence. Between her blaster and Jemall's— and his katana—their escape was secure, should her gavel-ing ever fail to maintain order.

Then the defense counsel took his position before the motley jury.

"Ladies and gentlemen—er, creatures—urn, machines of the jury," he began. "You are asked today to sit in judgment on a case of first impression. Never before on Magadis—in fact, never before on any planet—has a jury of robots sat in judgment of one of its own. This is a difficult case, but as a learned judge once said hundreds of years ago, hard cases do not make good law.

"You must decide this case not on the basis of the precedent your decision will create but on the basis of equity and justice for the defendant, this poor X-214 unit that you see before you. We intend to prove to you, through testimony of both lay and expert witnesses, that the actions of the defendant were influenced by outside forces, and that the defendant was not only not *responsible*

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for its acts, it could not understand the *consequences* of those acts. Whether or not the testimony at this trial shows that the defendant did, in fact, commit the acts of which it stands accused, I feel sure that you, as a fair and impartial jury of its peers, will determine that it was merely the instrument of someone else's malign will, and that you will therefore find it innocent. I thank you."

The defense counsel sat down, and there was a hush in the courtroom. The hostility that the prosecutor's speech had generated had been nipped in the bud. Aleria glanced over at the purple-robed defense counsel in mute admiration; the man was *good*. She, too, had been appointed counsel in difficult cases many times before her elevation to the bench. She wasn't sure she could have done as well as he had with today's case.

"The prosecutor has the burden of going forward with his case," she informed the jury and the crowd in the courtroom. "Mr. Prosecutor, please call your first witness."

The prosecutor stood. "The defense calls Space Service Lieutenant Dania Korsej."

Jemall's duty as bailiff was to bring in the witnesses from the sequestering cubicles. He stepped to a side door, opened it, and called out, "Space Service Lieutenant Dania Korsej."

Seconds later, a brown-haired woman in the tan-and-white dress uniform of the Space Service appeared. Aleria stiffened and saw Jemall freeze in his tracks. It was the woman with whom he'd left the party the night before, the one who had drawn Jemall into that first erotic circle which the judge and bailiff had joined at Coir's party last night.

*Small world*, Aleria thought to herself. *Come to think of it, small universe*. She was always meeting up with people or creatures from her past on planets where there was no logical reason to do so. Why not, then, in one small city on one small planet?

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Dania Korsej took the stand, and Lodi swore her in.

"State your name and spell it for the record," the prosecutor ordered.

"Dania Korsej, D-A-N-I-A K-O-R-S-E-Y."

"What is your present occupation?"

"I am a lieutenant in the Magadisan Space Service, just off duty on the Vergrosung VII and awaiting assignment."





"What do you mean, 'The VII was out'?" the prosecutor asked her.

"It was down. Not functioning. When we got there, even her running lights were out."

"And you boarded her?"

"Yes, in protective suits."

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"And will you tell the jury what you found?"

Dania hesitated. A gamut of expressions flashed across her face as she obviously struggled with memories she hadn't wanted to recall. When she spoke, her voice was flat, toneless: "Main Control had been totally destroyed, and the crew—they were dead, all of them!" She took a breath. "The only thing left alive on the VII was the cat, and she was so terrified it took us hours to catch her."

"Terrified of what?" the prosecutor asked her.

"I don't *know*," Dania cried, anguish apparent in her voice. "I don't *know*."

Aleria decided it was time for her to intervene. She asked the prosecutor to sit down and began a line of questions all her own. Little by little, Dania Korsey filled her in on the tedious existence of the 'Grosrung crews, on the use—or misuse—of the satellite's robots to break the monotony, on the horrible aftermath of violent death in weightless space. Aleria began to pick up a mental image she couldn't quite focus, something to do with a cat, with great golden cat's eyes that could see in the dark.

"Where is the ship's cat now, Lieutenant Korsey?" Aleria asked.

"In my apartment. I took her home with me because we're both a little uncoordinated after being in space so long. I thought we could help each other adjust."

Aleria suddenly remembered her own accident the night before with that bottle of Essence of Midnight, and how Dania, too, had appeared to have overindulged in that same scent. *Bet we both had the same accident for the same reason*, Aleria mused. Aloud, she said, "I'd like to see that cat. Could you bring her in tomorrow?"

"Why, yes, of course," Dania stammered, unnerved by the unusual request.

Aleria turned to the two attorneys. "I'm sorry to have

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taken over your province. Did you have anything further *you* wanted to ask of this witness?"

"Ahem." Somm cleared his throat. "Just a few brief questions. You say, Lieutenant Korsey, that it is common practice to alter the programs of 'Grosrung robots?"

"Yes, so long as it doesn't disturb their operations when they're on duty."

"And each crew member adds a little during his or her tour of duty?"

"Probably. We modify them to function on the job more efficiently as well."

"I see. Then you yourself have made alterations in some of the robots?"

"Well, yes. Improvements in their function, usually, but I've also used them for playing cartridge games that I've brought along and then left behind for the next crew. That's a spacer tradition."

"What kind of cartridges?"

"Well, for example, this last time I had an antique that had been given to me by a friend." Dania glanced quickly over at Corr, who was sketching busily, but Aleria noticed the glance and suddenly wondered if Dania and Corr had had something going. Had the judge moved in on this witness's territory? Well, no matter—Aleria would be leaving Magadis soon.

"What kind of a cartridge was it?" the defense counsel asked.

"A vocabulary game. It fires clues at you and you have to guess the right word. You get higher points for guessing right on the first clue than on the second, but you only play against yourself for personal satisfaction."

"And you left that tape on the 'Grosrung?"

"I always do. Besides, the game can be played forever. You just plug it into a robotic memory bank, and it will  
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expand its capability by the volume of words contained in that memory bank."

"Sounds harmless enough," Nott interrupted. "Can we get on with this?"

"I believe / am the one charged with conducting this trial, Mr. Nott," Aleria told him.

The prosecutor nodded morosely, but Aleria merely smiled. "However, you have a point. It *is* getting quite late in the day. Counsel," she said to Somm, "can you wrap this up soon?"

"Just a few more questions, Your Honor." He turned to Dania. "Which robot did you use for this *divertissement*?" he asked her.

"The defendant. Honeybun."

"Only the defendant?"

"Why, yes, I guess so."

"Why is that?"

"Well, I guess I started with that robot, and it would have been too much work to cross-index the cassette with the memory banks of the other robots. So I never bothered." She looked sadly at the defendant, which had been sitting beside its counsel at the table, quiet except for an occasional whirl or muted ping. "I hope it wasn't Honeybun who killed them," Dania said. "That robot was the most intelligent creature on the VII, except perhaps for the cat."

"Then you didn't care much for the other members of the crew?"

"I didn't say that," Dania retorted. "I just said that Honeybun and the cat were brighter."

"No further questions," Somm informed the judge, who glanced at Nott. When he nodded, she announced, "We'll take

a short recess. The jury will please withdraw to the jury room."

The odd collection of mechanical beings filed out of the room, all except for the little fireplug robot, which couldn't

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get down from its perch. It beeped and bleeped and whirred plaintively until Jemall came over and set it on the marble floor. Then it scuttled off after the other jurors, whirring and beeping as it went.

Aleria stared after the jury until it had disappeared into its private room. Then she stood, announced, "We will reconvene in thirty minutes," and withdrew into her own private quarters. She watched her big silver bailiff make a beeline for the witness who had just stepped down, and suspected that their conversation, now that each knew the other's identity, would be rather amusing.

But Aleria could not concern herself with the private life of her bailiff just now. She had justice to mete out, and she was certain that somewhere in the testimony she had just heard was the key to the X-214's strange, destructive behavior. She couldn't quite put her finger on it as yet, but she was sure that a satisfactory resolution to the matter lay just around the bend in the river of time.

## Chapter X

Time seemed to disappear during the rest of the day. After Dania, the next witness had been the captain of the Centennial Condor, who testified about the condition of the Vergrosprung VII and its crew when the Condor—he called it 'the Homer'—returned to investigate the blackout.

A woman named Nekoosa Kiel, who had also been part of the rescue team, had basically reiterated the captain's testimony, and the young man who had just finished his tour on the Vergrosprung VI had little to add that was of any value—except what he'd had to say about Gatto Bardo, late of the Vergrosprung VII. Apparently he'd known Bardo from Space School. He'd recalled Bardo as an inveterate practical joker. Could the murders and the destruction of the communications satellite have been the result of some crazy practical joke that had gone awry?

Somm had been quick to pick up on that idea, but his cross-examination of the witness had revealed that Bardo couldn't have programmed his way out of a primary-level game. And Bardo seemed to have had the good sense to keep his ventures into programming comparatively simple; if this young man's testimony were to be believed, Bardo had not been the one who altered Honey bun's circuits.

By the time these three witnesses had related their ver-sions of the disaster, the sun was setting in amber glory beyond the courtroom's great windows. Lodi turned up the

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green phosphor lights, giving the courtroom an eerie glow (and giving Aleria an instant headache).

"I suggest we adjourn until morning," the judge decreed, and the two lawyers acquiesced readily. Aleria gave the jury her usual warning that they were not to discuss the case among themselves until after all the evidence was in and had them locked in the jury room for the night. She ordered a complement of recharging units to ensure that no juror would run down while listening to the next day's testimony and posted guards at the jury-room doors. The presence of the guards meant that no one could tamper with the jury—rand that there- would be no repeating the previous night's unorthodox use of the courtroom and the chambers, unless the guards were to join in the fun. Aleria assessed these stolid soldiers and decided that they'd make less-than-pleasant participants in her games.. She would have to do her partying elsewhere—at Corr's after midnight, and perhaps in the red-light district before.

Despite the distasteful overnight presence of guards in her courtroom and chambers, there were, Aleria reflected, some advantages to an all-robot jury. *At least we don't have to provide them with hotel rooms, and they won't complain about the food*, she reminded herself as she watched the thirteen machines roll into the room where they would spend the night. Looking at them, she won-dered briefly how much they were getting out of the testimony and where their sympathies—if they, in fact, had any sympathies—lay.

Back in her chambers, Aleria stretched lazily. She was exhausted. Another night like last night and she would probably fall asleep on the bench tomorrow if the testi-mony became at all reiterative—and testimony *always* be-came reiterative. Aleria reflected that there probably wasn't a lawyer in the universe who knew when to quit taking up the love machine

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court time. She had been as guilty, back when she'd been an appointed defender, as any of the rest.

It had something to do with the nature of the judicial process, she guessed. Lawyers were their clients\* cham-pions—guns for hire, some termed it, though others had suggested the term "whores." Clients never saw the prepa-ration that went into a case, only the courtroom pyrotechnics. So you came into the courtroom and put on a show for your client. It had been so from time immemorial.

Aleria sighed. If clients and spectators could be barred from the courts, lawyers and judges would probably get their business accomplished a lot more efficiently.

She looked up as Jemall strode into the room. "Want to go back to the ship?" she asked him.

"It's a long drive," he shrugged. There seemed to be no love lost between Jemall and Houston. Aleria assumed it was because the people of his planet used so few machines, relying instead on their psionic abilities. Machines, like sex, were alien to Jemall; but although he had adapted readily to the one, he had an innate distrust of the other. Now he used Aleria's interest in sex to try to dissuade her from contacting the machine. "Besides," he observed, "I thought you wanted to go to the poKOno with me tonight."

Aleria smiled tiredly. "If I can stay awake!"

"Oh, you'll stay awake. I guarantee it. The atmosphere there is *very* stimulating—and if the atmosphere doesn't do it



Jemall had seen her in these moods before and knew better than to press her to her usual course of fun and games. Aleria could be, on occasion, a very serious jurist.

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So the bailiff made no idle conversation but left her to her thoughts as they taxied to the poKOno.

The receptionist there, a golden woman dressed in a diaphanous golden costume draped so cleverly that it was impossible to tell where the costume left off and her skin began, recognized Jemall from the night before.

"Hi, there, big fella," she smiled. "Back to sample some more of our wares?"

"That's up to my friend here," he replied, nodding toward Aleria. "She's calling the shots tonight."

"You didn't happen to bring your other friend, the one with the whip, did you?" the receptionist asked. "We've got a group interested in his kind of fun and games."

Aleria looked at Jemall in surprise. "I really didn't think that was *your* style."

"It isn't, usually. But Tsorr and Lira were rather—innovative." He shrugged and, turning to the receptionist, added, "I don't think he'll be joining us tonight."

"Too bad. He looked interesting." She brightened. "He must have signed the guestbook last night. It's required by law." She began to page through it, though she must have known that no one ever signed his real name. Watching her flip through the pages, Aleria noted that virtually every one was filled with Ganns and Kanns—the Magadisan equivalent of Smith and Jones.

The receptionist seemed frustrated. "Who was that masked man anyway?" she asked Jemall.

"I believe he said his name was Tsorr," the bailiff answered, giving the *nom de liaison* his companion had used.

The receptionist ran her finger down one page, then another. "Oh, yes, here he is. We'll send him a coupon for free admission. We seem to have a lot of call for his kind of amusement."

Jemall threw her a skeptical glance that said he doubted

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the address was any more accurate than the name, but the receptionist merely shrugged.

"Now, what would you like to do this evening, big boy?" she asked.

"Not much," Aleria answered for him. "I'm too tired."

"Did you see our array of stimulants?"

"Yes. But I don't like to use them. I don't enjoy their aftereffects."

"Well, we do have another *kind* of stimulant," the receptionist said thoughtfully. "Would you be interested in the Voyeurs' Room?"

"Hey, that sounds swell," Jemall broke in. "Let's do it—"

Aleria shrugged. If it bored her, she could always go to sleep while Jemall watched the show. The receptionist led them to a luxurious room furnished with lush carpets and sumptuous couches. One of its walls was virtually covered with a bank of video monitors.

"This is closed-circuit video," their hostess told them. "Whatever you see is actually happening in one of the rooms, here and now. So if you see any games you'd like to join in, just give me a call." She gestured to a gold phone on the wall.

"Right," said Aleria, but her attention was riveted on the screens, as was Jemall's. They never even noticed when the receptionist left.

Apparently, there was a camera in every room in this house of pleasure, and the cameras were activated when-ever the room was in use. Unless the cameras were hidden, exhibitionism was a popular sport here on Magadis, for the occupants of the rooms seemed oblivious to the fact that their activities were being broadcast, even if only to the poKOno's other clientele.

Aleria had never seen such a variety of activity. There were men with women, men with men, women with women, the love machine 155

group gropes, and even a bunch of hermaphrodites and conduits. On one screen, a woman and man lay side by side, pleasuring themselves. On another, a woman engaged in a bit of canine coitus, while on yet another, a man was imparting—how had they put it during the testimony today?—his "Gift" to a sheep.

"Unbelievable." Aleria shook her head. "Absolutely unbelievable." She noticed a group with whips and chains on a corner screen. *Those must be the people the reception-ist mentioned*, Aleria thought. / *wonder if Jemall's friend will show up again.* "Unbelievable," she repeated.

There was a cackle from a nearby couch, which was occupied by a man so wizened that Aleria would have thought he'd have long ago lost interest in such activities. He had been reclining there, watching the screens, with a firm grip on his private parts, but he took time off from his self-stimulation to reply to Aleria's comments. "You think *that's* something? Last night there was a guy with a chicken!"

Jemall made a strange, choking noise and Aleria could -have sworn his silvery skin had turned to a deep nickel color about the gills—Jemall's equivalent of a blush? She wondered.

"Yeah," the old man went on, "that was some group. This big guy with a chicken and this masked guy with a whip and a couple of gals who did it every which way."

"With the chicken?" Aleria asked, amused.

"Nooo," the old man replied, "I don't think those little gals bothered with the chicken. Only the big guy."

"You don't say," Aleria commented, watching Jemall's color grow ever deeper.

Jemall, who had been unusually silent, hastily inter-posed a suggestion: "Why don't we try one of their heart-shaped





that faded, adagio, into lyric nothingness.

She awoke in that pale time between first light and sunrise when all colors of the spectrum were muted to shades of gray. She was naked, spread-eagled in the deep pile before the dying embers in the fireplace. Jemall and Corr, still asleep, formed an interlocking circle at her feet.

Aleria was pleased that the two of them had managed to cast aside their petty jealousies and become such good friends. She stretched languidly. Then, rising as quietly as possible so as not to disturb them, she headed for Corr's ornate bathroom to shower and dress.

She returned to find Corr and Jemall in a deep, analytical discussion of Corr's paintings. He had chosen some rather unusual ones for the walls of his quarters—scenes

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that evoked uneasiness as often as rest. Joining them Aleria was, as always, struck by the vivid way in which Corr's subjects came to life on his canvases.

"I hate to end this evening," she said, "but it's morning, and we've got to get back to the courthouse. Corr, since you're a working artist today, can you give us a lift?"

"I can," he replied, "as soon as I get my gear together. Jem, baby," he said patting the bailiff on his round, firm buttocks, "it's been great. I wouldn't have guessed you had it in you."

Jemall smiled modestly, but Aleria laughed. "I think we *had* it—whatever *it* might have been—in *each* of us last night, at one time or another."

Corr groaned and vanished into the bathroom. Aleria patted Jemall affectionately on his now limp organ. "Get dressed. We'll be late!"

Jemall began to react, but Aleria shook her head. "It's late," she reminded him. He looked dejected—all of him— but began to pick up his discarded uniform, which was only a little the worse for his wearing it in last night's battle and at the start of the ravelero session. "You wouldn't happen to know if Corr has a cleaning unit, would you?" he said.

"Sure. Right next to the bathroom."

Jemall set off to freshen up his clothes just as Corr returned, dripping, from the shower. Totally unconcerned at his state of undress, the artist said to Aleria, "Are you sure you wouldn't like to have another go?"

"Sorry," she answered reluctantly. "I'll take a rain check."

"You know," he mused, "if you finish the trial today, I could be holding that rain check for a pretty long time."

"Oh, we'll see each other again. I'm sure of it," she smiled.

Corr proceeded to dress in his usual smock and trousers.

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Then Jemall reappeared in his Napoleonic garb. Aleria, who knew him all too well, thought he looked unusually fresh; she guessed that he hadn't showered but instead had shed his outer skin, leaving that transparent film in the shape of his body as a souvenir for Corr. Aleria chuckled at the thought of the artist's reaction when he found it. She wondered if "found objects" were considered art here on Magadis.

She didn't have to wait long to find out. Corr stepped back into the bathroom to comb his hair. "Hey," he shouted a moment later, leaning out of the bathroom door, "that's great! Can I keep it?"

"Sure," Jemall shrugged. "I don't need it anymore."

"What'll you do with it?" Aleria asked.

"Oh, I think I'll spray it with fixative and call it sculpture," the artist laughed. "I'll pretend it's a new medium." Then he chuckled to himself. "Maybe I'll give it to Dania as a peace offering."

"I *thought* there was more between you two than met the eye," Aleria commented dryly.

Corr threw her an appraising glance. "You see more than you admit to, don't you?"

"It's my job. And speaking of my job—"

"I know. We're late. Well, all aboard the old air cruiser," Corr said, and ushered them to the door.

Aleria had been right about Houston's devious means for getting even for what he decided was a slight. Though Jemall and Corr had buried *their* hatchets, the ship was obviously still unhappy with the judge and the bailiff—as was very apparent by the clothes he'd sent. He must have searched the farthest corners of his storeroom to come up with garments this unflattering; the costume he'd sent Aleria was one she had forgotten she'd ever owned.

Bright red was definitely not Aleria's color. It clashed with her flame-colored hair and sallowed her tawny skin. It even made the amber of her eyes reflect orange. Even though her judicial robe would cover it, Aleria refused to wear the red coverall during today's trial. Since *she* would know she was wearing it, she knew it would be a distraction.

The red-haired judge was glad she'd thought to take advantage of Corr's clothes-cleaning unit. That meant she could get by with the black jumpsuit for another day. She was contemplating the red coverall with disgust when Lodi entered her office with the transcripts of the previous day's testimony.

"Oh"—the mousy little clerk sighed—"that's *beautiful* I wish I could afford something like that."

"You *like* this?"

"I *love* it."

Aleria scrutinized Lodi's light brown hair, fair skin, and

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light blue eyes. Red would be great on her. "It's yours," the judge said.

"Mine?"

"Go on, take it. If it's too big, Jemall has ways of altering it for you—"

"Oh, no, I can do that myself." The clerk was ecstatic. "Oh, do you really mean it? It's mine?"

"Sure," Aleria nodded, amused at how little it took to make some people happy. *One man's meat*, she thought. "Can you make it fit you before the start of today's proceedings?"

"I can try."

"Good. I'd rather have you in red than in that awful brown. And you'll match Jemall. It'll give the court a more unified appearance—and as you know, in unity there is strength. We might need a little strength today."

Lodi, who had been holding the red coverall up before her to check its fit, now clutched it to her and turned to the judge, eyes big as altimeter gauges. "You don't think there'll be trouble?"

"There could be. But Jemall will be armed. And the soldiers too."

"Who knows whose side the soldiers are on?" Lodi muttered darkly.

"Well, Jemall's first duty is to protect *me*, whatever side *they* turn out to be on. Just stick close to me if there's trouble."

Aleria patted the blaster on her own thigh, adding, "I'm not without my own resources."

Lodi stared at the gun (which Jemall had transmuted back to its original form) as though seeing it for the first time.

"Does that really work?"

"Of course. Want me to show you how?"

The clerk hesitated, then nodded. "I've never been this close to a real blaster before."

Aleria slipped the laser pistol from its holster. "See, it

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has three ranges," she explained. "Broad, medium, and narrow. And four power settings. I usually keep it on low power, narrow beam. That's enough to temporarily disable anyone who attacks me. I don't believe in using unnecessary force."

Lodi nodded.

"Here." The judge thrust the pistol into the clerk's hands. "Heft it—get the feel of it."

Lodi moved the blaster from one hand to the other, then settled at last for a two-handed grip. With Aleria's encouragement, she aimed it toward the great marble door, then looked back at the judge quizzically.

"That door is heavy enough to stop the rays," Aleria said. "Go ahead."

Cautiously, Lodi squeezed the trigger, and a thin beam of white light seared the air between her hand and the great marble door. The clerk's aim was high, and she hit near the top. Very slowly, she moved the gun lower, leaving a smooth, vertical notch in the shiny green marble.

"Oh-oh," she said, letting go of the trigger. "State property!"

"No one will notice," Aleria said. "Try again."

Lodi aimed the gun again, very carefully. Just then the door opened inward. Her laser beam clipped a small, neat chip out of the edge of the door about seven feet off the ground.

"Hey," protested Jemall as the beam just missed the top of his head, "what kind of welcome is that?"

"Oops," apologized the clerk, turning as red as the coverall Aleria had just given her. She hastily handed the blaster back to the judge.

"Sorry," said Aleria. "I was showing her how to use it. We didn't expect you to open the door just then."

"Geez," Jemall said, picking up the marble chip from the floor, "You could have warned me."

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"You could have knocked," Aleria pointed out.

"I just wanted to tell you that Dania Korsev was here with the cat."

"Oh, good, bring her in." Checking the setting, Aleria replaced the blaster in its holster. "Maybe you'd better transmute the edge of this door first," she added.

"Sure."

"I'll just be running along," Lodi told them hastily. Gathering up the red coverall, she threw them a wary look and scrambled through the door that Jemall was now studying. The look on her face said she thought the judge and the bailiff were just a tad lunatic—and she had suddenly realized it might be catching.

Dania had not had an easy time getting the cat into the courthouse. She had been stopped at the front door by the guards, who had demanded to see what she had in her carrying case.

Her protests had been in vain. They'd opened the case and the frightened cat had made a desperate break for freedom, scratching two of the soldiers in the process. Dania herself had launched a flying tackle in the cat's direction and had succeeded in catching its trailing leash just before the small feline managed to make good its escape.

The guards drew their blasters, and only Dania's vociferous protests that this cat was evidence in the robot case and its presence had been specifically requested by the judge kept the cat from being blasted into kitty heaven. Dania reeled the leash in, hand over hand, deposited the cat back in its case, and dashed into the courthouse before the hesitant guards could decide whether to stop her.

She encountered yet another brace of guards at the door to Aleria's courtroom, but this time, luckily, Jemall was also present. He waved the soldiers aside and escorted

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Dania, with the cat, through the rapidly filling courtroom to the chambers behind it.

Never having been in a judge's chambers before, Dania looked around curiously, taking in the high ceilings, the carved marble, the floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with legal tomes. Jemall had offered her a seat on one of the well-stuffed green leather couches that lined two of the walls. Then he had disappeared through a great marble door in the far wall. Seconds later, a mousy little woman came scuttling out the same door, clutching some sort of bright red garment and



warmth, then that image again, more vivid this time: the naked backside of a very young man pumping away "from, toward—into and out of?—a reluctant robot that looked very much like the defendant. The young man stood, turned, approached the cat. The robot was behind him.

Then the image was gone. Fish again, and warm sun-light on green marble. Aleria concentrated on the previous image and Camell reluctantly returned to it: the robot reaching up behind the naked young man, his neck bent at an impossible angle, then his body floating lifeless in weightless space. The robot came forward, and the cat broadcast an image of terror so vivid that Aleria felt the hairs at the back of her own neck stand on end.

"Easy," she said to the cat, and concentrated on the image of fish. The cat matched the image, licked its chops, relaxed once more.

Aleria picked up the cat and handed it back to Dania, who had been taking in the scene with rapt attention.

"You're a sensitive, aren't you?" the lieutenant asked.

Aleria nodded. "How did you know?"

"Your face was mirroring Camell's."

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"I'll have to be more careful about that."

"What did you see?"

"The murder of one of the men. Unfortunately, it's not admissible in court."

"What do you mean?"

"A telepathic image from an animal cannot be cross-examined, so it must be disregarded by the trier of fact," Aleria explained.

"You aren't just going to forget about whatever you've just seen?" Dania was astonished.

"I obey the court rules as much as humanly possible," Aleria said. "But the jury is the trier of fact in this case. My duty is to interpret the law for them." She smiled, and Dania nodded, comprehending Aleria's meaning: there was no such thing as truly impartial justice. Every judge brought his or her own prejudices and experiences to the bench.

"Did Honeybun do it?" Dania asked.

"We'll see what the admissible evidence reveals," Aleria replied. She held out her hand. "Thank you for coming, Lieutenant. I wish you good luck in your future endeavors."

Dania looked at her quizzically, as if trying to discern whether there was any other meaning attached to those words, then took her hand, shook it firmly, and, picking up the cat, left the room.

Aleria watched her leave. The lieutenant, like the court clerk, had a tough row to hoe here in Magadis. She wished them both luck.

But their future did not concern her; Honeybun's did. The judge buzzed the court clerk on her intercom. "If everyone's here," she announced, "we can proceed with the trial."

## Chapter XII

The first to testify that morning was the medical examiner, a rather studious-looking man who obviously found the company of the dead much more fascinating than that of the living. Indeed, he seemed distinctly uncomfortable in the courtroom, populated as it was with live bodies. At the prosecutor's urging, he launched into an explanation of why he was certain that Honeybun had committed the murders.

"First and foremost," he noted, "this X-214 unit— number 75439-21—was covered with blood."

Somm, the defense counsel, objected. "Didn't Crew-man Bardo's blood diffuse throughout the ship due to the weightless atmosphere?"

"Yes," the coroner agreed, "but some of the blood on the robot matched Gann's, and *his* bleeding was negligible."

The coroner proceeded in gory detail. Bits of Gann's flesh had been found in one of the robot's pulleys; some of Kann's hair had been caught in one of its grippers. De-fense Counsel Somm rose to new heights of eloquence in his opposition to the admission of this testimony, maintain-ing that the examination of the X-214 had been made without its informed consent.

"A robot merely obeys orders," he argued. "It doesn't think to refuse an examination as a human would; it hasn't that sophisticated an instinct for self-preservation. And it

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was without counsel at the time. Had I been on the case, I would never have permitted the examination to take place."

Aleria was inclined to agree with Somm's logic, but there was no legal precedent for disregarding a robot's consent. All the case law suggested that even without the advice of counsel, a human who consented to such an examination would have been bound by that acceptance. Nott said as much.

"Besides," the prosecutor argued, "self-preservation is programmed into robots. That's one of the Three Ancient Laws."

"Bull—oney." Somm caught himself dangerously near contempt of court for improper expression. "Those laws program in altruism over and above self-preservation. A robot must preserve itself, but only where doing so doesn't endanger the life of a human."

The jury members who could nod all nodded sagely as Somm repeated this portion of their basic programming. The little fireplug robot bobbed up and down. And the teaching robot flashed the words "so true" across its screen.

"The jury will please keep its comments to itself," Aleria ordered. Then she turned to the two attorneys be-fore her. "If this murder was, indeed, committed by this robot, as the state alleges, then this robot is seriously deficient in its programming, since murder means a breach of the Three Ancient Laws. Therefore, I believe that we cannot presume



a bit of yoga, and gulp down a hasty cup of Lodi's coffee.

The clerk was wearing the red coverall. She had done an admirable job of altering it in the short time between her receiving it and the commencement of proceedings that morning.

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"How did you do it?" Aleria had asked her, just before they'd entered the courtroom.

Lodi had merely laughed and indicated the stapler on her desk.

Aleria had laughed, too, and commented that Lodi was very clever. But the clerk corrected her. "It isn't clever-ness," she confided. "It's instinct. Most women on Magadis develop it. Our rights are so amorphous that we need to think flexibly in order to survive."

Aleria nodded, understanding. She didn't know if the revolution that was brewing would bring the best changes to Magadis, but it was clear that changes of some sort were very much needed in the society of this planet.

Back in the courtroom, she found the chaos produced by the recess still reigning. Since the court was not in session, smoking was permitted, and the haze that resulted now filled the courtroom, pulled gently upward toward the lofty ceiling by the three great ventilator fans that revolved high above. Disposable coffee cups that seemed to have appeared by magic now littered the counsel tables and the rail of the press box, and the din of chatting voices had risen almost to a roar.

Aleria glanced around. Jemall was deep in conversation with Dania, who sat—with the court's permission—just inside the bar, cat case on her lap. Somm and Nott, seated on the edge of one of the tables, were trading either jokes or war stories; it often amounted to the same thing, Aleria reflected. And Corr, who was standing beside the jury box, was patting the little fireplug-shaped robot on the head. Aleria suddenly realized that the artist was on the wrong side of the bar *without* the court's permission.

All judge, she made her way over to where he was standing. "You're not supposed to be here," she told him gently, but there was warning in her tone. Not even her lovers could presume privileges in Aleria's courtroom.

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"Sorry," Corr replied, and she could see that he was. "I just wanted to get a closer look at this one. Don't forget, I still have that sentence from the other day to carry out; I have to paint a portrait of a heroic robot."

Aleria laughed out loud. "Is this your idea of a hero?"

The artist shrugged. "Why not?"

"Well, I guess heroism is in the eyes of the beholder," the judge smiled. "But the fact remains, no one is supposed to come near this jury. L can't have any suspicion of jury tampering, or whoever loses will file a motion for retrial and I'll be stuck here forever."

"Is that so bad?"

"Well," Aleria hesitated, then flashed him a very private smile, "Magadis does have its compensations—"

"I hoped you thought so."

"—especially for those of us in positions of privilege."

Corr threw her a strange, quizzical look, but Aleria ignored it. "Come on, Corr," she told him. "Back to your own side of the bar."

•The artist shrugged again and headed for his seat. Aleria watched his retreating buttocks, outlined so distinctly in the tight pants below his artist's smock, and sighed. She could, she supposed, have ordered a longer recess; that was her prerogative. But night was night and this was day, and duty called.

She realized that the little fireplug robot was looking up at her with what could only be termed abject sympathy. How a faceless little fireplug could convey so many emotions was beyond Aleria's ken, but she, like Corr, found the little machine irresistible. No wonder he'd crossed the bar to pet it; she found herself very tempted to do the same thing, pat it lightly on top of its head.

Aleria found herself wishing she could take the robot with her as a souvenir. She wondered idly how Houston would take to having a pet, then decided against the idea.

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This little robot appeared to be quite solidly built, and they really couldn't afford that much extra weight. She'd had enough trouble justifying Jemall's presence. Besides, Aleria wasn't quite sure what the function of this robot was. How did you justify a hundred pounds of excess weight to the Confederation Services Administration merely on the basis that you thought it was cute?

Reluctantly, Aleria left the little robot with its companions in the jury box and resumed her seat on the bench. "This court will come to order," she announced.

Jemall sprang to attention and was instantly in his place beside the bench. The press, too, took their places in the press box, as did the attorneys at the counsel tables. Coffee cups were hastily disposed of, cigarettes were extinguished, and by the time the last of the spectators had taken their seats, everyone on the business side of the bar was as businesslike as ever.

The spectators were still shuffling their feet. Aleria called for order once again. Then, when the room was quiet, she nodded to Somm. "May we have the next witness?"

At the defense counsel's call, the woebegone X-214 unit took the stand. "Would you state your name for the record?" the defense attorney intoned.

"My name is Honeybun," the robot replied. "Sock it to me, baby. I'm ready and waiting."

There was general laughter in the courtroom. Aleria met Jemall's eyes and rolled her own ceilingward. This witness's

testimony was going to border on parody.

But Defense Counsel Somm remained unruffled. "You are an X-214 unit, is that not so?"

"Yes, I am."

"What is your registration number?"

"75439-21."

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"Just so. Now then, how long did you serve on the Vergrostrung VII?"

"I was placed in service six years, four months, and twenty-three days ago, and commenced immediate duty on the Vergrostrung VII."

"What were your primary duties at that time?"

"I was a satellite maintenance robot."

"Was?" asked the defense counsel.

"I have been additionally programmed. I can play Guess word and chess. I can recite poetry. And I have been programmed to receive The Gift from h'umans when I am not engaged in satellite maintenance."

"And what *is* The Gift?"

"The Gift is that which only humans can give."

Aleria groaned inwardly. Some numbskull had pro-grammed in circuitous reasoning. They would be here all day. But Somm was not to be deterred.

"On the first day of the sixth month of Magadisan year 749, were you in service on the Vergrostrung VII?" he asked the robot.

"I was."

"And there are two shifts every day for maintenance robots, is that correct?"

"Yes, first shift from midnight to noon and second shift from noon to midnight."

The defense counsel nodded and then walked across the open space between the counsel tables and the witness box.

"I see; first and second shifts. Now, we have heard testimony that the crimes of which you are accused oc-curred during the first shift. Can you tell me—" He paused, and then, looking the defendant straight in its visual receptor, demanded, "who's on first?"

Aleria stifled an impulse to ask "What's on second?" She knew no one but Jemall—or perhaps Corr—was likely the love machine

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to pick up on the ancient repartee. Certainly the robot didn't. It answered innocently, "I was."

"I see," said the defense attorney. "Now tell me, X-214 unit—"

"I am Honeybun."

"Yes. Right. Well, tell me, Honeybun, is your appear-ance at present the way you looked when you were put in service?"

"I have been altered to receive The Gift from humans when I am not engaged in satellite maintenance."

"Physically altered?"

"What you see is what you get, baby," the robot replied. "Come share my wine and sing along with me. Sock it to me, baby."

Aleria sat up suddenly. *Come share my wine and sing along with me.* That was the poem Corr had recited to them the night before. She glanced at the artist, who appeared intent on his work, and then at Jemall, who stood impassive, arms folded across his chest, at his post on the far side of the witness box. The bailiff met her glance with a lifted eyebrow ridge; so he, too, had noticed the coincidence.

Attorney Somm was apparently not interested in the robot's proposition. "I would prefer to continue our dialogue," he told his client.

"Any way you want it," the X-214 replied. "Blow in my condensor-mike panel and I'll follow you anywhere."

The defense counsel shook his head. "Your Honor," he told Aleria, "this doesn't seem to be working. I would like permission to lead the witness."

Before Aleria could respond, the prosecutor sprang to his feet. "Objection," he shouted.

The defendant seemed to perk up. "Complaint?" it asked.

"I beg your pardon?" Nott told it.

"Excuse?"

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"What is this robot babbling about?" the prosecutor demanded.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied the defense counsel, shaking his head. "It's anybody's guess."

"Conjecture?" asked the robot.

"Please may I have permission to lead the witness?" Somm begged.

Aleria looked at Nott, who shrugged. "I'm game."

"Guessword," announced the robot. "My turn. Cube."

"What?" asked the judge.

"Container."

"What is it talking about?" Aleria demanded.

"Prizefight," said the robot.

The defense counsel looked up at Aleria in frustration. "Your Honor, my client appears to be out of its tree."

Aleria was inclined to agree when Dania Korsey sud-denly stood up and stepped forward. "Your Honor," she began,

rather timidly, "I think I can get the defendant back on line."

The judge sighed with relief. "This is highly irregular, but if neither counsel objects—"

Both lawyers shook their heads.

"Be my guest," said the judge.

Dania approached the robot, which was now making regular ticking noises. "Box," she told it.

The robot stopped ticking. "Correct on the third clue," it announced. "Five points."

"Cease dialogue," Dania commanded.

"Game over. Five points. High score, five thousand six hundred twenty points. Would you care to play another game?"

"Abandon game mode," Dania ordered.

"Right," said the robot. "I am Honeybun." It began to sing. *"/ am a poor wayfaring stranger."*

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"X-214 unit, abandon musical mode."

"Yes," replied the robot. Its "head" made one complete revolution on its body cylinder. "I am Honeybun. I have been programmed to receive The Gift from humans when I am not engaged in satellite maintenance. Sock it to me, baby.

Come share my wine. Come up and see me some time. Any way you want it, what you see is what you get. Sock it to me. Sock it to me now!"

Aleria, who had been staring at the robot as Dania tried to bring it back into a coherent mode, now glanced around the courtroom. Everyone seemed to be mesmerized by the X-214 unit's strange behavior. Even Corr had stopped his sketching and was just sitting, his pen extended in midair, his eyes fixed on the robot.

"Your Honor," the defense attorney broke the silence, "I believe my motion to allow my client to plead not guilty by reason of insanity should be sustained."

Aleria nodded. "I *am* inclined to agree with you, but—"

She did not have the opportunity to finish her thought because the robot began to recite its litany again; and as it did so several members of the jury rose from their seats and began to behave most peculiarly. The teaching robot began to revolve back and forth so that everyone present in the courtroom could see its screen—upon which it was flashing a series of obscene words and phrases. The mint-condition X-214s began to echo the chorus of the modified robot on the stand. And the street painter aimed its jets at the glossy green marble wall and began to paint revolution-ary slogans in iridescent yellow paint.

"Down with the Technocracy," it sprayed above the jury box. Then it headed across the room to the press box, paint jets at the ready. There was a mad scramble as the assorted members of the press rushed to abandon their

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privileged posts in the box for the paint-free spectator section.

The teaching robot flashed a particularly obscene phrase and accompanied it with a sound effect not unlike a Bronx cheer. It was seconded by a chorus of X-214s. The two C-507 units fell off their carts out of what appeared to be sheer frustration, and the armless W-40s began to twitch and advance on the counsel tables.

Then even the little fireplug got into the act. It began to scuttle back and forth across the space between the jury box and the press box—the area where, normally, the business of the courtroom was conducted—bowling over every-thing in its path: chairs, wastebaskets full of discarded coffee containers, even one member of the press who had been so engrossed in taking notes on the bedlam that he had failed to notice the little robot's approach in time to get out of its way.

Jemall made a mad grab for it just as it scuttled beneath the defense table. He came up empty-handed and growling, then lunged around the table in pursuit of it once more.

Two of the courtroom guards jumped the bar and grabbed for the street-painter robot, wrestling its jets up and away from the wall it was painting. One jet, now aimed at the ceiling, was still on. It fired its iridescent orange paint into one of the great revolving fans, and a fine mist of orange specks rained onto everyone in the front section of the courtroom. The lawyers, like everyone else, ran for cover, and the street painter, taking advantage of the general surprise, wrenched itself free of the startled guards and headed for the nearest empty wall.

Aleria had been banging her gavel and crying in vain for order. No one heard—or, at least, no one listened.

Through all of this, Aleria noticed, Corr, instead of

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sketching, was just sitting there, arm extended, holding his pen.

*That's not like him,* Aleria thought. *He's usually a man of action.* And then it occurred to her that Corr was indeed taking action—in fact, all the action in the courtroom. She became aware that he wasn't merely hold-ing that pen out but pointing it, first at one berserk robot, then at another.

Aleria considered. Corr had been Dania's lover—that was apparent. So he had probably been the "friend" who had given her the Guessword disk. Who knew what pro-grams lay hidden beneath the gaming patterns? Corr alone, of all the people Aleria had met on Magadis, moved freely through both tech and Nontec segments of Magadisan society. And that robot had just recited snatches of the same poem that Corr had quoted last night, right after he had "scared off the attacking Nontecs.

*Scared off, my foot!* Aleria thought to herself. *He's their commander!* The realization brought her up short: Corr had programmed the robot to destroy the Vergroshung VII in the name of the revolution! Aleria was certain of it.

Aleria gazed down from the bench at her lover, sitting there so calmly as pandemonium reigned in her courtroom. He met her wide-eyed stare with an amused one of his own. *Damn him! He knows I can't do a thing to him.* A judge was

bound to rule only on the case before the court—Mvwhich, in this case, was *Honey bun's* guilt or innocence. *Well, at least I can take care of that*, she thought grimly. She banged down her gavel, which could barely be heard above the noise in the courtroom.

"I will rule on the defendant's special motions. This defendant is insane; it is incapable of understanding either the consequences of its acts or the charges against it. It is

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incapable of testifying in its own defense. It is therefore not guilty. Charges against it are dismissed and it is re-manded to the plant for reconditioning. The jury is dis-missed and the case is dismissed."

"But, Your Honor," both attorneys protested simulta-neously from where they were crouching against the front of the bench. Each had his own complaint; the prosecutor objected to the dismissal and the defense counsel to Aleria's remanding the robot for rehabilitation.

"I will not entertain any further motions. Court is adjourned." Aleria banged down her gavel, then quickly ducked behind the bench as the street painter approached with spray nozzle at the ready. As it inscribed its slogan on the wall above her Aleria inched her way along the floor, carefully keeping out of range.

When at last she managed to get safely behind its spraying arm, she stood and contemplated the circus that her court-room had become. Soldiers were battling their way through the milling crowd of spectators, bent on apprehending the berserk robots, but they were being hampered by the pan-icky crowd. The press corps, freed from her restraining rules when Aleria dismissed the case, unpacked its record-ers and unslung its cameras and made its own contribution to the confusion. And Aleria noticed that while some of the spectators were merely milling around, others seemed to be engaged in active resistance.

The judge glanced at the spot where Corr had been sitting, but the artist was nowhere to be found. *Bolted!* she guessed. *He's probably gone to lead his revolution.* And she was sure it was *his* revolution—as sure as the capital of Magadis was green.

She observed that Dania, clutching the cat case, was trying to get out of range of the rabid robots and the equally enraged guards.

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"Jemall," Aleria called to the big silver bailiff, "get Dania and Lodi into the chambers." Then she reached beneath her robe and pulled her blaster from her thigh.

Setting it at its weakest, so as merely to deter rather than to destroy, she forced the crowd from her path and bolted for the marble door to her chambers.

## Chapter XIII

After the chaos in the courtroom, the quiet of her cham-bers seemed almost eerie. Aleria rechecked the setting of her blaster, then replaced it in the holster strapped to her shapely thigh.

A moment later, Lodi came flying through the door, clutching the court records, dutiful to the end. Seconds later, the door burst open again, admitting Jemall and Dania, who was still carrying the cat in its case. Jemall bolted the great door behind them, and the chambers became—at least temporarily—a safehouse from the nas-cent revolution.

"What in the name of the Sacred Aubergine is going on out there?" Lodi wanted to know as soon as she recovered her breath.

"Perhaps Lieutenant Korsey will be kind enough to tell us," Aleria suggested, but there was enough command in her tone to cause the others to stop in their tracks—Lodi pouring coffee, Dania soothing the alarmed cat, and Jemall trying to pick flecks of orange paint from his silver epaulets—and stare at her.

"/ don't know," Dania protested. "The robot was playing Guessword, and then it was reciting part of its repertoire, and then it went berserk. Your guess is as good as mine."

"*You* had nothing to do with it?" Aleria asked, scrutiniz-ing the other woman's face.

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"No! Why would I want to cause a robot to go berserk? *How* would I cause a robot to go berserk, anyway?"

"You were the one questioning it. Perhaps you were following a prekeyed pattern," Jemall suggested.

"But I wasn't. How would I create such a pattern anyway?"

"You certainly had the time, over the past six months," the bailiff pointed out.

"But I didn't!"

"Oh, I think you *did*," Aleria told her, "but I'm begin-ning to think you didn't know it at the time."

Dania just stared at her for a moment in disbelief. Then she stammered, "How?"

Aleria shrugged. "I'm leaving this planet, and the sooner the better. So it doesn't matter to me, and finding the criminal was not my job; I was only supposed to try the X-214. Still, I think I know who was responsible. I think the alterations were contained in the Guessword tape."

"The Guessword tape?" the others chorused.

Aleria ignored them. "Corr gave you that tape, didn't he?"

"He did, but what does that matter?"

Aleria smiled. "Either you're a fantastic actress, Dania, or you, like poor old Honeybun, were the unwitting tool of our artistic friend."

"You've got to be kidding," Dania laughed. "Why would Corr—?" She broke off and thought a moment. Then,

"Damn!" she cried. "Why didn't I guess it sooner?"

Aleria smiled, grimly this time. "So you agree with me?" Jemall and Lodi had been looking from one tall woman to the other, watching this exchange but not understanding it. Now they demanded to be let in on the secret.

Dania explained it to them. "I don't know why I never realized it; he's always talking about how rotten the Magadisan social structure is, and he's never bothered to

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hide the fact that he doesn't much care for the technocrats. And he knows everybody—on both sides.

"That Guessword tape he gave me must have contained the programming that caused the robot to destroy the Grosrung and her crew." Then the import of her statement hit Dania. "He was responsible for those deaths! And he's implicated *me* in the murders, the bastard!"

"Well, at least he timed them to start after you left," Aleria reminded her. "You were safely on the shuttle before Honey bun wiped out the crew."

"Is that supposed to be proof of his devotion? He *used* me. He can take his revolution and—"

"Stop!" Aleria commanded. Both she and Jemall stood stock still, hands on their temples, as though listening to something no one else could hear. Which was, indeed, what had happened.

Houston had opened the transponder channel, a contact he never initiated except in emergencies. Aleria fought the buzzing in her brain to listen to him.

"We are under attack," Houston announced through the mental connection. "The Nontec forces are trying to take the spaceport."

"What good will that do them?" Aleria asked through the same pseudotelepathic means. "They can't use them."

"I wouldn't underestimate *this* bunch," Houston replied to the image she had sent him of Nontecs armed with cudgels and knives. "They've got blasters, and they seem good at using them."

"Blasters! Then they've been trained by renegade technocrats," Jemall guessed.

"Just like you to state the obvious," the ship noted.

Jemall fought to keep his scathing reply from broadcasting, and Aleria shuddered with the echoes of his mental effort.

"Now, boys," she chided them. "We've got to work

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together. Houston, batten down your hatches and put up your shields—"

"Already done!" he informed her.

"—and we'll get there as soon as we can." She broke off the connection, then turned to Lodi and Dania.

"The spaceport is under attack," she told them.

"How do you know?" Lodi challenged.

"Subdural transponder implants," the judge explained.

The two women nodded but looked a bit confused.

"The ship can broadcast to us," Aleria said. "We've just communicated with it."

"You mean it can read your mind?" Dania gasped.

"And talk to us mentally. But only if *we* open, the channel first, or if there is an emergency."

"And this is an emergency," Jemall noted. "We've got to get back to the ship before the Nontecs destroy the spaceport, so that we can get off this planet!"

Dania seemed to be struggling with an idea that wouldn't quite come. Then she snapped her fingers and cried, "That's it! The Nontecs aren't going to destroy the spaceport, they're going to take over. Corr was hinting that I should join their side. The Nontecs are going to take over the Space Service and all the ships; they're going to take over the government, not destroy it!"

Aleria sighed. "That only confirms what I thought: this isn't just a Nontec revolution. Its leaders come from the tech ranks—I know it. And I wouldn't be surprised if Con-ranked pretty high among them."

"He once hypothesized about an attack on the spaceport," Dania recalled. "He had such a detailed plan that he's probably leading the attack!"

"What if he wants *your* ship?" Lodi asked the judge.

Then Aleria remembered Corr's suggestion during the recess: that remaining on Magadis might not be so bad. "We've got to get to Houston before he does!" she cried.

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"How can we do that?" Jemall asked. "We couldn't get a taxi before these battles started. We'll never get one now!"

Dania looked up brightly. "My aircruiser is parked on the roof. We can take that."

Aleria was already gathering up her possessions. "Good idea. Let's go." Then she hesitated. "How will we get through the corridors?" The din of battle could be heard even through the thick marble walls of her chambers.

That was when Jemall stepped forward. "Houston gave me the plans to this building yesterday. We could take the dumbwaiter if I were to shrink us—"

Dania and Lodi obviously shrank from that idea.

"Or," the bailiff went on, "if we can make it to the end of the private judicial access corridor, there are firestairs that lead to the roof."

Lodi nodded. "I know where."

"We'll need blasters for Lodi and Dania," Aleria re-minded him. "What can you transmute?"

The bailiff looked around, then picked up Lodi's stapler—the one she had used that morning on her coverall—and the audiophone receiver on her desk. "The mass of these seems about right," he said.

"What's he talking about?" asked Lodi.

"Shh," said Jemall. "I have to concentrate."

He flexed his four-jointed fingers and began to mutter under his breath, and the stapler and the receiver began to mutate before their eyes. But, as usual when he did some-thing under pressure, it didn't come out quite right. Two old-fashioned six-shooters appeared on the desk.

"Damn," Jemall muttered. "I'd better try again."

"No time," Aleria told him. "Give Dania your blaster." She tossed her own to Lodi. "You and I can make do with these, Jem."

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"How did he do that?" Dania breathed, while Lodi merely stared, openmouthed, at this alien in their midst.

"Psionic matter transmutation," Aleria explained, "But it didn't quite work."

"I was only an apprentice, not a journeyman, when I—left school," Jemall told them. "I was working my way through the periodic table, but I was only about halfway along. I have trouble with the heavier elements."

"You mean there's a school that teaches you how to do that?" Lodi asked.

"On my planet, they use psionics instead of mechanics. Everybody can do it to a certain extent. I'd be able to do it better if I hadn't dropped out."

"He means dropped in—on my ship," Aleria corrected. When the others looked at her quizzically, she merely shrugged. "It's a long story. We don't have time for it now. Let's get out of here and get after Corr!"

She headed for the door with Lodi at her heels.

Dania had unbuttoned her jacket and stuffed the terrified cat inside, hooking its leash around her wrist. Now she took the blaster Jemall handed her, checked its setting, and told him to lead the way.

Katana in one hand and six-gun in the other, Jemall did just that. He headed out the back door with Dania following him and Lodi—Aleria's blaster clutched in both hands as she'd been taught that morning—close behind. The judge herself took up the rear position.

The private hall seemed clear. They made their way along the wall to where it intersected with the next hallway. There, unfortunately, they encountered a flailing mass of battling soldiers and Nontecs.

"We've got to get past them to get to the firestairs," Lodi observed. The others nodded in agreement.

"I'll keep them at bay with the katana while you three

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run for the stairs," Jemall told the women. "Then you can cover my escape with your blasters."

"Right," the women answered. "Say when."

"Now!" shouted Jemall, and began to hack a path through the warriors closest to the wall. Lodi scampered past him and made it safely past the battle. She opened the door to the firestairs and ducked inside.

Then Dania made her break, and she, too, found safety behind that door.

Now it was Aleria's turn, but as she ran past the big bailiff, who was slashing indiscriminately back and forth through the crowd of fighters, a Nontec on the ground reached up and grabbed the hem of her robe.

Unbalanced, she slipped in a pool of blood and landed, hard, on her shapely bottom. Arms began to grab at her, and Jemall slashed at them while she aimed the six-gun at a soldier who was attacking him from behind.

The gun went off with a loud bang that reverberated even more loudly through the confines of the narrow corridor.

The brawlers on the floor ceased fighting and looked up, stunned by the sound.

Aleria regained her feet. The man on the floor was still clutching her robe, so she slipped out of it and dashed for the stairwell without it. The black jumpsuit made a more efficient battle dress anyway. She slipped through the door to safety.

With the others safe, Jemall began to hack his way toward the firestairs. Aleria and the other two women drew their guns and lined up at the edge of the doorway—Lodi crouched low, Dania, stooping-slightly just above her, and Aleria drawn up to her full height above them both.

"Now!" the judge commanded, and pulled the door open. All three opened fire into the crowd.

The report of the six-gun, firing several times in succession, again had the same stunning effect on the

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crowd. Blaster battles were much quieter; the blasters fired by Dania and Lodi merely hissed as their rays cut through the air.

Jemall took advantage of their covering fire and quickly dashed across the remaining ground to the safety of the fire door.

Once inside, he pressed his weight against the door to hold it closed. Dania used the heat of her blaster to fuse the lock. Then the four of them bounded up the stairs to the roof, their footsteps reverberating on the metal steps.

The aircruiser parking lot for the courthouse was located on the roof. Ordinarily, you turned in your ticket at the ground-floor entrance and waited for the attendant to bring your car down. But this was no time for the observation of amenities. Dania spotted her cruiser and ran toward it, the other three hot on her heels.

It was a tight squeeze for the four of them—and the cat, which Dania released from the shelter of her jacket and which now sat perched on Lodi's lap—but as soon as they were all inside, Dania gunned the foils and began to weave her way through the parking structure. She found an aperture wide enough at one end of the building and shot out into



humans—or maybe it was that Napoleonic jacket that was keeping him warm. Whatever his reason, Aleria wanted him inside, with that window closed.

"Get your ass in here, Jem," she screamed at him,  
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tugging at the hem of his red jacket. She realized, after she said it, that his ass—and his legs—were the only parts of him *inside* the cruiser, but the bailiff got the message. He fired one last blast at the hull and pulled himself back in. Dania sealed the window the moment he was inside.

"Unless this direct route is more than just a little shorter than the one we took into Das when we came, we're probably going to have to de-ice again," the bailiff observed.

"It's only half the distance—maybe as little as a third," Dania told him, "but you're right; we could ice up again even in that short a distance."

"Couldn't we fly a little lower?" Aleria shivered, hug-ging herself. She rubbed her hands up and down her bare arms in an attempt to warm them.

"Where's your robe?" Jemall asked, apparently noticing for the first time that she was without it.

"In the clutches of some Nontec rioter back in the courthouse."

"Boy, is Houston going to be pissed," the bailiff noted. "He'll have to requisition a replacement—and you know how he hates dealing with the Confederation Services Administration."

"Too bad." Aleria sniffed. "Requisitioning supplies is a ship's job—unless *you* want to get him off the hook."

"If you mean, do I want to warm you up, I don't think this is the time or the place for that—and besides, there isn't room!"

"That isn't what I had in mind," she retorted. "I meant maybe you could transmute something into another robe for me."

"Can I pick the color?"

Knowing Jemall's tendency toward rather strange color combinations, Aleria reminded him, rather strongly, that while a bailiff's clothes might vary, a judge's robe was always black.

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"I'll see what I can do for you when we get back," Jemall said, and Aleria got the impression that he wasn't really talking about the robe, after all.

"If we get back," she reminded him. "There's a battle line to be crossed."

As if the mention of battle had plunged them into one, the cruiser began to buck and dip again, and Lodi, huddled around the cat, screamed hoarsely, "Are they shooting at us again?"

"No. It's just ice," Dania reassured her, and she opened the windows of the cabin again. Reluctantly, Aleria hung herself out the open window once more and began dutifully firing at the accumulated ice. From the flashes she could just glimpse beyond the belly of the cruiser, she could tell that Jemall was doing the same thing on his side of the aircar. As she fired away at the ice the judge reflected grumpily that though this might well be the fastest route to De Paz, it certainly didn't qualify as the best. This was no pleasure trip!

When at last the aircar shot away from the wooded Rhedd River Valley and descended over the fragrant vine-yards of De Paz, Aleria felt a relief so palpable that it bordered on pleasure. Although Dania didn't slow the cruiser, the lower altitude at which she could fly now that they were out of the woods meant there would be no more need for those ice-melting maneuvers.

"Has anybody figured out how we're going to spot Con-in the darkness?" Lodi inquired of the others. The three of them sat up sharply.

Dania glanced down at the instrument panel. "Damn," she said. "I'd forgotten that civilian vehicles don't come with infrared sensors—and I was counting on using one."

"Maybe I can do something about that," Jemall offered. "Got anything extraneous I can convert?"

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"Altimeter, defoggers, ground-speed gauge—we need all those," the spacer lieutenant muttered. "Oh, here, there's a cigarette lighter, an ashtray, and an appliance outlet. Will that be enough?"

"I think so," was the big silver alien's response. "I just may have to produce a very *small* infrared sensor."

"Just so it has the broadest range possible," Dania told him.

"Not enough mass for anything larger than a toy," he shrugged.

Aleria had an idea then. "Add my six-shooter," she suggested. "It's useless anyway; I'm out of bullets."

"Right," replied Jemall. As he flexed his fingers Aleria crossed hers, hoping he'd get the pattern correct. The sensor was a mechanical device and the judge knew how uncomfortable Jemall was with mechanical things. Now he mumbled the necessary words, and what appeared to be a mint-condition video receiver appeared where the extraneous equipment had been.

It wasn't a bad conversion, considering his aversion to machines. "Close, but no cigar," Aleria smiled.

"What good would a cigar do me?" Jemall asked. "I just got rid of the ashtray." Then he bent his efforts, once more, to converting the available mass to the sensor they needed so badly. This time he actually came up with a rather primitive version of an infrared monitor. Primitive or not, when he aimed it at the planetary surface below them, it gave them the heat-scan readout they needed.

As they barreled along through the night toward the city of De Paz, most of the surface below them read empty. Then Jemall spotted a concentration of vehicles and human-oids to the south-southwest. Dania pulled the aircruiser into an

abrupt turn in that direction.

The picture on the screen became more and more dis-tinct as they neared the group on the ground. It was an

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attack force, all right—but did it consist of Nontecs or technocrats? On infrared, Jemall couldn't tell them apart.

"Maybe / can tell if I take a closer look. Take over the flight controls for minute." Dania nudged the bailiff.

"Not *me*," Jemall protested. "I've never handled one of these before."

"I'll do it," Aleria said, shoving him aside. She wedged herself forward through the narrow space between the front

seats and landed in his lap, hard. She pulled herself across the throttle panel and slid into the driver's seat beneath Dania, who had arched herself up—never taking her eyes from the course before them—to allow the judge room. Then the Space Service lieutenant slipped over onto Jemall's seat, giving Aleria the driver's seat to herself.

At the controls, Aleria sighed with relief. "I can handle this," she said. "I guess they all operate in pretty much the same way."

Dania nodded and turned her attention to the monitor, ignoring the discomfort that having both women bounce onto his codpiece had just cost the big bailiff. "I think these are technocrats," Dania announced. She focused the infrared sensor carefully at two of the smaller figures— probably guards—who were walking a pattern along the outskirts of the formation. On close examination, their outlines were distinguishable as being topped by the conical helmets that Magadisan soldiers wore into battle.

"These are technocratic forces," the lieutenant informed the others. "They tend to shoot first and ask questions later. Let's get out of range."

Dousing their running lights, they managed to shoot past the guards unnoticed and continued in the direction of the spaceport, Aleria at the controls and Dania monitoring the infrared for objects in front of them as well as below, for the night was moonless. The hectic interaction of the two preoccupied women wedged in the front seat beside him

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was too much for Jemall. He wriggled into the backseat beside Lodi to get out of range of those rapidly moving arms, feet, elbows, and knees.

Intent on their tasks, they barely acknowledged his ef-forts to give them more room to maneuver. Dania was too busy with the infrared monitor, and Aleria was devoting her full concentration to steering the cruiser. And she was doing all right for a novice: after a couple of shaky downshifts, she was handling the Magadisan craft like a native.

"Ahead, five degrees off to the west," Dania cried out suddenly. "I see another grouping." They moved in closer. "No soldiers apparent," Dania announced. "This may be Corr's troop."

"How're we going to keep them from shooting at us?" Lodi wanted to know.

"Put up the—oops!" said Dania. "I've done it again. I forgot we didn't have shields."

"Me too," conceded the judge. "Jemall, can you—"

She didn't get to finish her question. There was a hiss and a thump as the lower hull of the aircruiser was hit from both sides. Since there was no apparent damage, it was instantly clear that these blasts had been deliberately modest, the equivalent of a warning shot across the bow. Just then there was a loud crackle on their audio receiver. Aleria turned up the volume.

"You have entered territory held by the Army of the Revolution." The words over the audio channel were faint but distinct. "Please identify yourself and your purpose in coming here."

Dania leaned across the console to pick up the microphone. "This is Dania Korsej, vehicle registration number 4999-KA. I am transporting neutral Confederation personnel to the spaceport."

"There are no neutrals in this battle," the voice on the

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other end declared. "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

"I am transporting the Confederation judge who was brought in to try the altered robot. Her ship is docked at the spaceport. We repeat, we are neutral."

"And we repeat, there are *no* neutrals in this battle for freedom."

Aleria and Dania glanced at each other. No one was as intransigent as a true believer, and the voice on the audio certainly resounded with intransigent conviction. Aleria wondered briefly if her speculation that Corr was a leading rebel had been correct. Would the invocation of his name have any effect on these guards?

In the moment she hesitated, the rebels hit their cruiser with another warning shot. The aircar bucked, and Aleria grabbed for the controls, barely managing to keep the craft steady at its hovering altitude. *If we don't do something quickly, they're going to shoot us down*, the judge told herself grimly. She hadn't come halfway across the galaxy to be a casualty in someone else's revolution. She grabbed the microphone from Dania.

"This is. Confederation Judge Aleria Farrell," she announced. "I damand to speak with Corr."

There was a momentary silence. Then the voice re-sponded, "Revolutionary Commandant Corr cannot be disturbed—" *Revolutionary Commandant!* So they'd been right about Jiim. Aleria had been around long enough to know when to call in her markers. With all the authority she could muster in her voice, she announced, "If you don't disturb him and tell him who we are, you're the one who is going to be disturbed—*very* disturbed. Tell Corr it's Aleria Farrell, Dania Korsej, and Jemall. He'll want to see us."

"One moment, please. I'll have to check with my

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supervisor," said the voice on the other end. "Don't move till I get back to you."

Well, at least that was a small step in the right direction. Aleria kept the cruiser at hover for what seemed like an eternity before the audio monitor finally crackled again. But this time the voice was a familiar one—Corr's!

"Aleria, is that you?" he asked.

"Yes. And Jemall, and my clerk, and Dania. We're in Dania's aircruiser. Let us land."

They heard him say something muffled in the background. The first voice came back over the audio. "Permission to land has been granted. Bring the car alongside the oblong building at the south side of the encampment.

Revolution-ary Commandant Corr will see you when you land. Over and out."

Aleria sighed with relief—a sigh echoed by all the others aboard—and brought the aircruiser around in a broad circle to the designated landing area. So Revolutionary Commandant Corr would see them, would he? Well, when he did, she had a few choice words waiting for him—and she suspected that Dania and Jemall did, too.

## Chapter XIV

A detachment of rebel guards was waiting for them when they landed. Though they wore the drab coveralls of Nontecs, there were obviously some among them who had been technically trained, for they carried blasters and seemed to know how to use them.

As Aleria and her companions clambered out of the cramped aircruiser the rebels confiscated their weapons: the two blasters, the remaining six-shooter, and Jemall's katana. Jemall reluctantly turned over his great sword, but he bucked any attempt to remove his bandoliers, and after a momentary standoff, the woman leading the guards shrugged and allowed the bailiff to keep them.

"That ammunition won't do him much good without a weapon to fire it with," she noted. "Come on, the Revolutionary Commandant is waiting."

If Aleria hadn't been somewhat concerned about her ship—who had been periodically interrupting her thoughts to give her updates on the battle at the spaceport—and if she hadn't been so anxious to meet with Corr and tell him off, she would have stalled just to annoy the guard and the waiting Revolutionary Commandant. Instead, she merely drew herself up to her full height and marched off in the direction indicated, with the others—including Lodi, who was still carrying the cat—following close behind.

They made an imposing foursome—or quintet, if you

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counted the cat—the tall, flame-haired judge, the massive silver bailiff, and that tall, fair woman who wore the severe working uniform of the Space Services. Even Lodi cut a much more imposing figure in her stapled red cover-all than she had in her shapeless khaki clerk's robes. And although he knew them well, even the Revolutionary Commandant sat up and took notice when they entered his office.

"Well," he greeted them genially, "to what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of this visit?"

"You bastard," Dania hissed at him. The guards moved forward, hands on their blasters, but Corr motioned them to relax.

"It's all right," he told them. "I know these people—intimately. You can leave us."

The leader of the guards looked dubious, but Corr threw her a curt nod and she took the hint. She led her troop from the office, closing the door behind her.

Aleria looked around. The revolutionary headquarters was a makeshift, mobile unit designed for utility, not aesthetics or comfort. Its walls were corrugated metal, painted a pale gold. The metal floor was covered with brown rubber matting to absorb the sound of footsteps, and the Revolutionary Commandant sat upon a plain canvas camp chair behind an unpretentious metal desk. Half a dozen more camp chairs were scattered along the walls and in front of the desk. There was no other furniture.

The windows of the office had been blocked out to keep light from escaping, light which came from two unshaded bulbs suspended from the ceiling. Maps and charts hung all over the walls and there were piles of papers on the desk, each weighted down with a rough, greenish rock.

The contrast to the artist's luxurious home was marked. In fact, there seemed to be nothing to connect the austere Revolutionary Commandant with the sybaritic painter but

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his garb—he still wore his characteristic artist's smock—and the sketch pad that lay across the corner of his desk.

Now he turned to Dania, and his eyes were cold. "You were saying?" he asked.

"How *dare* you implicate me in three murders?" she demanded. "How dare you use me as your unwitting tool and call yourself a champion of equality? What did Kann, Gann, and Bardo ever do to you? What did / ever do to you, except what you wanted?"

Corr's face softened. "You don't think I intended them to be killed, do you? I thought you knew me better than that. I've never believed that an end, no matter how worthy, justified unworthy means."

"Tell it to the amphibious military," Dania snickered. "The programming for the murders and the destruction of the 'Grosrung was in that Guessword tape."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I do."

"Do *you* believe it?" Corr asked Aleria and Jemall. They nodded, and the artist sat down heavily in his chair and rested his head on his arms for a long moment. When he at last looked up, his face was a vision of incredible sadness. "If

that's what my friends think, imagine what my enemies will make of it. I'll probably go down in history as a murdering tyrant."

"If the shoe fits—" Dania suggested.

When the others failed to add any further comment, Corr admitted, "It's true. I hid programming in the Guessword tape. But the robot was programmed to shut down the 'Grosrung and close the Eye In The Sky. I didn't want to destroy the satellite; if we win, we'll need the 'Grosrung system as much as the Technocracy did, for its real purpose—communications. That's all I intended. I certainly never programmed that robot to kill!"

Jemall made an impolite noise that clearly indicated he

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didn't believe a word of the artist's explanation. The women stood by impassively.

"How did you set it off?" Aleria asked. "With a long-range 'pen' like the one you used to disrupt my courtroom?"

Corr shook his head. "I should have guessed *you'd* figure out what was happening. God, I wish you all would join us; we could use your intelligence and intuition in the ranks of the revolution."

"As far as I can see, you aren't exercising any intelli-gence at all right now," Dania told him. "Murdering innocent people won't buy friends for you or your cause."

"I never intended to kill them. I don't know what went awry. I think it was all those entertainment modifications. You heard the technical experts today; the programming in that robot had been altered so extensively that it was impossible to sort it out."

"What are you trying to say?" asked Aleria, with sud-den intense interest.

"I never programmed the robot to kill, or to do perma-nent damage—only to temporarily disable. Something must have caused it to short out. Otherwise it would never have overacted like that."

Aleria turned to Dania. "Just how was that program-ming about The Gift' supposed to work?"

Now that she was no longer on the witness stand but among friends, Dania apparently felt she could be more open about the robot's alterations. "If you took off your clothes around Sweetie or Honeybun while they were off duty, they propositioned you."

"Could the men take them up on it?" the judge asked.

Dania nodded. "They'd modified an outlet for entry, but as I understand it, they used a rubber to keep moisture out of the circuitry."

Aleria remembered the image that Camell had projected

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into her mind. When the young man had turned to face the cat, he had been totally naked; there was no condom in sight.

Aleria decided to get to the bottom of the incident, if only for her own satisfaction. Continuing the same line of questioning, she asked, "What did the three victims look like?"

"Bardo was tall, dark, and sort of gawky. Kann was slight, fine-boned—not much bulk to him."

"And the new man, Cheboi Gann?"

"Well, I only saw him—alive—once. When we found his body, we sacked him into a body bag right away." Dania thought a moment, then ventured, "I'd say he was a little on the husky side—broad shoulders, sort of stocky."

Aleria put her hand to her temple and replayed the mental image the cat had projected. "That's the missing piece of the puzzle," she announced.

The others looked at her in bewilderment.

"I believe Corr when he says he didn't program the robot to kill," the judge told them. "The murders were only partly due to his instructions to the machine to shut down the 'Grosrung."

Corr looked relieved. "Thank you heaven someone be-lieves me."

"Only because of what the witness saw," Aleria replied.

"Witness?"

"Camell. The cat."

Corr snorted in disgust. "Now you're going to tell me the cat can talk?"

"She's a sensitive!" Dania whispered.

"The cat?" the artist asked.

"No—Aleria!"

A light dawned across Corr's face. "The cat saw the murder and you read its memory!"

Aleria nodded. "The husky young man gave the robot

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his 'Gift' while it was on duty—in violation of its basic programming. And he didn't use a rubber. He blew its circuitry."

"Damn," Jemall, Corr, and Dania breathed simultane-ously. Lodi merely stared, openmouthed, while the cat nestled against her and began to purr loudly.

"Too bad you're not writing our history books," Corr told the judge. "Who's going to set the record straight for me if you leave?"

"She can do it, anyway," Lodi announced suddenly. "I'll work it into the court record when I get back to the courthouse. In all that commotion at the end of the trial, anything could have happened. No one will be surprised at anything I enter into the record."

"Lodi, your oath!" Aleria reminded her. "You can't mess around with the record!"



"I know—that's why she already is. Welcome to the staff, both of you." He turned to Aleria and Jemall. "Let's go," he said. "My car is outside."

"We'll walk you out," Dania said, and she and Lodi escorted Aleria through the still-open door. Jemall hung back for a moment, whispering something to the Revolutionary Commandant. The two males emerged a moment after the women, looking rather pleased with themselves.

After hasty good-byes, Corr and Jemall squeezed their large frames into the sporty black aircruiser, a two-seater. Aleria had no choice but to sit on Jemall's lap, an uncomfortable position because his decorative codpiece was extremely hard.

As Corr gunned the cruiser's engines and took off for the spaceport Aleria wriggled in the tight space, trying to find a more comfortable position. Her movements only made things worse; she felt the codpiece pressing up against her, harder and harder, raised by the pressure of the growing organ beneath it.

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"This is not the time or the place," she hissed at the bailiff as Corr headed the aircruiser out across the deserted plains. The artist, however, merely glanced at his two passengers and chuckled.

"Why isn't it?" he asked. "I can polarize the windows so that no one can see in. And if I set the car to hover for a while, we could engage in—a proper good-bye!"

Aleria, not averse to the idea, looked dubious. "There isn't enough room."

"Watch this," said Corr. He flipped a series of levers. The windows darkened, the car settled into an idling mode, and the seats flattened out to form a broad bed. In fact, they flattened out so suddenly that Aleria and Jemall found themselves flat on their backs, one on top of the other, like a couple of surprised pancakes.

Corr hit one more button, and even the joystick between the seats folded itself out of the way. "Who knows when or if we'll ever see each other again?" He smiled at Aleria. "You ought to have a proper sendoff—and leave me with a few more memories."

Aleria started to protest that they had crammed an awful lot of memorable conjunctions into the space of only two days when he pulled her from where she and Jemall had fallen and began to kiss her gently but insistently. She found that she couldn't help but respond as he caressed her neck and shoulders and began to remove her skintight jumpsuit with a determined urgency. Jemall, seeing this, hastened to rid himself of his confining codpiece, his Napoleonic tunic, and the bandoliers he'd been so insistent on retaining just a little while back.

Soon they had formed another of their happy tangles. As their aircruiser soared above the plain of De Paz the three of them soared in a flight of their own that was magic and mystery, a memorable melding all the sweeter for the knowledge that it might never come again. They moved in

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concert and in counterpoint, apart, together, above and beneath, until there was nothing in the universe but the three of them, and space, and pleasure, vibrant pleasure, in the Magadisan night.

Afterward, as they lay upon the extended seats catching their breath, Corr asked the other two rhetorically, "When will we three meet again? Or will we ever?"

Picking up on the allusion, Aleria smiled. "It did seem almost like a kind of witchcraft, didn't it? Perhaps I should hail you as thane of Magadis." She winked. "But to quote the same author, parting is sweet sorrow—and this parting, especially, has been *very* sweet—but we'd better get going."

She didn't get a chance to elaborate because Houston cut into her thoughts via the transponder implant. "About time you remembered us out here at the spaceport. If you're through being maudlin and getting your exercise for the evening, I could really use your assistance."

Aleria chose to ignore his sarcasm. "Still under attack?" she flashed the thought back at him.

"Worse than ever. You'd better get here pronto."

"The mob is storming the spaceport," she said aloud. "We'd better get a move on."

"How do you know?" Corr asked, but he took her word for it and grabbed for his smock and slacks.

"I've just heard from my ship," the judge answered.

"Subdural transponders?" guessed the artist. "Interesting idea. Doesn't it bother you to have others eavesdropping on your thoughts?"

Aleria, who at this moment was very much annoyed at having the ship listening in from inside her head, hesitated for a moment. "It's only initiated during emergencies," she said pointedly. "It has its drawbacks—and its advantages. But let's put him on audio; I'd much rather all of us could hear him."

"Be my guest," said Corr.

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Aleria began adjusting the necessary knobs and calling, "Come in, Houston. Houston, do you read me?"

"I was reading you just fine through the transponder," the ship replied petulantly.

"But I prefer the audio," Aleria said firmly. She introduced the Revolutionary Commandant to the ship.

"Hello, Houston," Corr said into the microphone. Then he turned to Aleria. "I thought you said that it was a two-person ship, and you and Jemall were the only ones aboard."

"It is. We are. Houston *is* the ship!"

The artist raised both eyebrows in surprise. "Sentient?" he asked.

"You better believe it," Houston growled over the audio receiver.

Aleria noticed a funny look in Corr's eye and decided to nip the thought behind it in the bud. "Your people might as well let us go," she told him. "Houston's no good to your revolution anyway; he won't work for anyone but me."

"If they find out he's sentient and he's not on our side, they may do something destructive," Corr warned. "After all, a sentient machine, especially one that can handle— *is*—an interspace jumpship—is what this revolution is all about." "I wouldn't worry about Houston," Aleria said darkly. "He can more than take care of himself."

"Which is what I'm doing right now," the ship in-formed them. "I'm holding your hoards at bay with my shields. The only problem is that while my shields are up, you guys can't get through either. I suppose I could just mow them all down, but that leaves such a nasty carbon residue."

"Don't you suppose anything of the sort," Aleria ordered. "Just hold your horses. We'll be there in a minute."

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"Well, how *are* you going to get past my forcefields?" Houston persisted. "How do you propose to disperse this mob?"

"We have our methods," Aleria told him. "Don't worry about a thing." But she worried privately about what those methods might turn out to be.

"We'll find a way, Houston, old buddy," Jemall reassured the ship.

"Oh, is Jemall still there?" Houston asked innocently, as though he hadn't been plugged into the bailiff's transponder as consistently as he was to Aleria's. "I had hoped you'd lost him in that melee in the courtroom."

"No such luck, Houston baby," Jemall told him. "You're stuck with me for the duration—however long that is."

The ship made an impolite noise.

"Don't take it so hard," Jemall consoled. "I'm not such bad company; you've said so yourself. Besides, I'm bringing you a present."

"You are?" Houston sounded almost ecstatic. "For me? You got something *pour moi*?"

Jemall's eyes met Corr's for a moment. Whatever are those two cooking up? Aleria wondered. But Jemall merely smiled at the artist and asked the ship, "Would I lie to you?"

"You have in the past."

"Well, I'm not lying now. I brought you a present."

"Gee," the ship responded, "that wrecks my strategy. I was going to get Aleria on board by throwing you to the wolves. But if you've brought me a present—"

"I have brought you a present," Jemall repeated.

"Well, then you must come right on home, both of you."

"We're coming, Houston baby, we're coming," the bailiff assured him. But despite his optimistic tone, Aleria the love machine

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could tell by the look on Jemall's face that he, too, had his doubts as to their ability to pull this one off.

*We've got our work cut out for us*, she thought grimly.

Just then, the aircruiser broached the perimeter of the spaceport. With all of the lights blazing, the area was as bright as day, a shocking contrast to the moonless darkness over the plain. In the glare of the floodlights, the shadows of the tall ships on their launch pads left dark stripes across a vision of carnage that stretched as far as the eye could see.

As they drew closer to the end of the field where Houston rested they passed the wrecks of several rockets that had been toppled by the mob, and even from the air they could hear the sounds of battle and the cries of the wounded. It was clear that the mob was out of control, destroying now merely for the sake of destruction, and Aleria doubted that even the appearance of Revolutionary Commandant Corr would bring them to order.

The words of a very old song came to her mind: "There's one more river, one more river to cross." Their escape from Magadis was blocked by the need to cross one more river—and if was a river of blood.

Corr was being less than successful at corralling his forces. They were too caught up in the mesmerizing rhythm of battle and weren't particularly inclined to listen to a voice of reason. Corr set down his audio mike in disgust and looked at Aleria helplessly.

She shrugged. "It's like the old story of the man who hit his stubborn mule on the head with a two-by-four. First you've got to get their attention."

"What do you think I've been trying to do?" he asked her.

"It isn't going to work," Jemall told them. "Not ordinary communications channels. They're having their first taste of freedom; it can be a heady experience."

"Listen to him," Aleria cautioned the artist. "He's speaking from experience."

"Oh?"

"It's a long story," Jemall told him. "We haven't time for it now. Let's just say that where I come from, sexual inhibition is a way of life."

Corr stared at him in disbelief. "I certainly would never have guessed that!"

Jemall shrugged. "As I said, freedom can go to your head—and other body parts." He looked down at the rebels swarming through the spaceport. "I think they've

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just had a taste of it, and they've got a lot to get out of their systems."

Corr nodded. "Now we know why I can't get through to them—but have you any suggestions on how to override this intoxication of theirs?"

"Loudspeaker," Aleria suggested. "Very loudspeaker."

"Where are we supposed to get one of those?"

"Oh, Houston can take care of the amplification. We can broadcast your voice to him, and he can patch you through

onto his outside speakers."

"Er—we can't," Jemall corrected her.

"Why not?"

"Remember that flap about the flaps-^and the hula skirt?"

Aleria nodded.

"Well, somehow the outside loudspeakers disappeared in the transmutation. I was going to put them back—I think they've turned into those funny little gold knobs on his nose cone."

Aleria glanced once more at the familiar figure of her ship and noticed for the first time that his speakers were not in their accustomed place, but two funny little gold bumps *were*. She fixed the bailiff with an imperious glare. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Jemall sighed. "I sure hope this works."

Corr looked at them both quizzically, and Aleria hastily explained psionic matter transmutation—as best she understood it—for Corr's benefit. They both watched as once again the bailiff flexed his magic fingers.

Nothing happened.

Jemall tried again. The four joints flexed, relaxed, flexed again. And the gold knobs flickered and became giant gold feathers.

"No!" screamed the ship, over both the audio and the

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transponders. Both the judge and the bailiff clapped their hands to their heads with the pain of that cry.

"Jemall," Aleria warned ominously.

"I'm trying," he replied.

And try he did, one more time. This time the feathers became long, springlike coils.

Aleria was furious, but Jemall suddenly brightened. "It's his shields! The forcefield is distorting my thought waves."

Aleria conceded the possibility. But that left them back where they were before: Houston couldn't drop his shields till they got the crowd's attention, and they couldn't get their attention without the loudspeakers.

Or could they? Aleria turned to the bailiff thoughtfully. "Could you make a fireball and suspend it right next to us?"

"Sure, especially if you've got something that will burn."

They glanced around, but there was nothing extraneous aboard Corr's sleek cruiser. They had brought Jemall's katana and the two blasters with them, but those things didn't contain the proper mass or elements.

"It pains me to suggest this," Corr ventured, "but the seat cushions can be removed."

Jemall looked at them and nodded; the cushions, on which they had so recently enjoyed their erotic farewell, were sacrificed in the cause.

"Out the side," said Jemall, struggling to maneuver them through the tight space inside the aircruiser. As each was tossed overboard he flexed his fingers and chanted briefly and the cushion held its position, floating beside them as though in weightless space.

Without the cushions, it was much roomier inside the car, if less comfortable.

Corr shook his head. "What a shame to sacrifice fine Corinthian leather like that. Oh, well, I suppose a revolutionary leader should eschew luxuries of that sort."

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But Aleria wasn't listening to his lament. "Once we get their attention, we'll still have to communicate with them. We can't wait for them to tune us in; they may go berserk again." She pondered a moment, then turned to Jemall. "Amplify the audio speakers on this cruiser," she ordered.

"I'll need more mass," Jemall noted. He looked over the interior of the aircruiser, but nothing appropriate caught his eye. Glancing down at his own costume, he remembered his bandoliers. "Bullets!" he exclaimed, and began prying them loose from the ammunition straps that crossed his chest.

When he had accumulated a not-so-small handful, he set them in a pile near the speaker, flexed his fingers, and concentrated, hard. A moment later he had "produced a monster speaker on an extension cord. He and Corr pushed it through the open window of the car and dangled it, suspended by its cord, below the ship.

That task completed, the bailiff set to work moving the cushions through the night air.

"How does he do that?" Corr asked.

Aleria shrugged, but Jemall stopped long enough to explain. "You transmute the air in front into a vacuum and it sucks the object along."

"Oh," said Aleria. "You learn something every day."

"Let's just hope this works, or we may be learning to live on Magadis," Jemall told her. He flexed his fingers and the cushions, piled upon each other, began to burn as had the candles in the courtroom sconces—had that been only two days before?

Jemall managed somehow to dim the nearest floodlights. Then he made the cushions blaze up brilliantly so that this fireball stood out, even in the brightly lit spaceport. The crowd took notice.

"Hit 'em while the iron is hot, Corr," Aleria told the artist. "Talk to them."

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Corr picked up the microphone, then covered it with his hand. "I'm tempted to announce, 'This is Oz, the Great and Terrible,'" he said.

"My god, Jemall," Aleria exclaimed. "Literacy lives, even on Magadis."

"Why are you so surprised?" Corr asked.

Aleria laughed. "I made an allusion to Das being the Emerald City when we first arrived. Our guide, the portmaster, didn't have the faintest idea of what I was talking about. It went totally over his head."

"Typical," noted Corr. "The technocrats, for the most part, have never had much interest in literature."

"The revolution may be more important than anyone has guessed," Aleria commented. Jemall and Corr nodded.

Corr took his hand off the microphone and got down to business. "Citizens of Magadis," he announced. "This is Revolutionary Commandant Corr. Cease fire. Cease fire."

His voice, amplified by the speaker, was so loud that it broke the glass of several nearby floodlights. Though Jemall had dimmed them, their total loss made the flaming cushions seem to grow brighter. The artist repeated his message. As he did so the melee below them began to quiet. When it finally became more of a crowd than a mob, Corr began to explain in steady, even tones why the spaceport should be preserved at all costs—and why it was necessary that Aleria be able to leave, carrying their petition for recognition to the seat of the Confederation government. The Nontecs and other rebels gathered below Corr's car let forth a rousing cheer. And the soldiers who had been fighting them apparently must have done a careful reassessment of the odds, for a remarkable thing happened: one after another, soldiers began removing their military tunics and conical helmets and walking across to join the ranks of the rebels.

After a few moments, it became apparent that it was now the love machine

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safe for Houston to drop his shields. But the ship was still a bit sullen. Before he would allow Aleria and Jemall to board, he bypassed Corr's audio and screamed into their transponders, "My speakers!"

The cry was shrill enough to inspire an instant headache. "Fix his damned speakers," Aleria ordered Jemall. "I don't want him screaming in my head!"

"Neither do I," the bailiff told her. Then, "Hold on, Houston baby," he cried, and he once again flexed his long fingers. This time the coils disappeared, again becoming what they had been originally—vast oblong speaker panels, through which Houston immediately began his preliftoff countdown.

While Jemall was replacing Houston's speakers, Corr, having finished his speech, was hauling in *his dangling* speaker. "Can I keep this?" he asked Jemall. "It's really a necessity for a revolutionary commandant, don't you think? More so than fine leather cushions."

"They had their advantages," Aleria told him. And he nodded, remembering their recent employment of those now defunct cushions.

With all his paraphernalia now aboard, Corr swooped down as near as possible to Houston's base. Aleria and Jemall collected what was remained their possessions and jumped from the car.

Corr, too, left the car—to walk them to their ship and give each of them one last hug—and one last fondle.

"Take care of yourselves," he told them.

"You too," Aleria replied. "And see that no harm comes to Lodi and Dania, too."

"I will," Corr replied, "though I don't think they'll really need my protection. They seem to be able to take care of themselves."

"Still," Aleria told him, "a little moral support never

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hurts—especially if it's backed up with a little muscle. I wish you all luck."

"That doesn't sound impartial, Justice," Corr told her. "It isn't. I only need to be impartial when I'm, on the bench."

"And sometimes not even then," Jemall smiled. Aleria glanced at him, saw the twinkle in his eye, and realized he was referring to their unorthodox use of her courtroom their first night in Das.

"Well, we human judges *are* only human," she amended, "even when the juries aren't."

The portable rocketway they had used on their arrival, had disappeared in the course of the battle. Against her

will, Aleria activated her transponder unit again, and seconds later Houston had dropped his ladder so the judge and

If her bailiff could clamber up.

Jf: Just before they sealed themselves in, Aleria glanced

ff out, one last time, at the spaceport of Magadis. The fire-

> ball Jemall had created from the seat cushions of Corr's

= cruiser had become a dying ember that winked like an

>j oversized glowworm in the now quiet night air. And as she

& gazed at it she saw Corr's sleek, black aircruiser dip its

/. flaps in salute before it sailed off into the darkness.

## Chapter XVI

"Now, about your unauthorized use of those transponders," Aleria told Houston sternly, as they shot past the great silent Vergrostrung into the void of space. "You may *not* use emergency override to get your own way. Try it again and I'll send you in for reconditioning!"

"I'm sorry," the ship apologized, and she could see that he really was. "It's just that I really don't appreciate being altered to suit *his* whims."

"Jemall has promised me that that won't happen anymore," Aleria said. "Haven't you?"

Jemall knew an order when he heard one. "I promise," he said—but Aleria caught sight of that twinkle in his eye and

suspected he had his long fingers wrapped around each other behind his back.

"Well," said the ship, "maybe I'll forgive you—if you give me that present you promised me."

"Yes," said AAeria. "I'd like to see it, too." "Are you doubting my word?" the bailiff asked. "I've got it right here." He pulled his katana from its scabbard. Wrapped around it was a folded sheet of paper. "It's creased," he said, as he smoothed it out. "But I can transmute it back to being flat. I can even make you a frame. It's for your wall."

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these lawless worlds

The bailiff held out the paper, and Aleria could see that it was a sheet from a sketchbook—Corr's sketchbook.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

"From Corr, just before we left for the spaceport." So that was what they'd been conspiring about! "He said he wouldn't need to satisfy that alternative sentence any longer."

Catching sight of the sketch, Aleria began to laugh. "So that's his idea of a robot hero! Well, I guess he hadn't met Houston at the time."

There on the page was the little fireplug robot, looking almost alive and about to bounce up and down in an attempt to see over the jury rail.

"Do you like it, Houston?" Jemall asked, almost shyly.

"I do. He looks like fun. I wish I'd met him."

Aleria shook her head. "Magadis sure was a strange planet. Imagine sentencing someone to paint a portrait of a robot—"

"I beg your pardon." Houston's voice dripped with indignation.

"I don't mean the subject matter," Aleria hastened to explain. "I mean the sentence itself. Jemall," she asked the bailiff, "wouldn't you say the Magadisan government was rotten to the Corr?"

The bailiff groaned, but he got back at her. "Maybe Nott. It was worse than Somm and better than others."

"Like your puns," Aleria said. "They were only Bardo-line."

Jemall picked up the nearest heavy object—his scabbard—and threw it at her, but she ducked it easily as it floated through the weightless atmosphere of the cabin. Aleria merely giggled and dared Jemall to catch her, and a game of tag was on—with only one possible resolution once they caught each other.

the love machine

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Ignoring their antics, Houston reached out one of his service arms and plucked the sketch of the little fireplug robot from where it floated in the air. Then he automatically set his course for the next planet on Aleria's circuit, where they would next weigh the fate of people and planets on the scales of justice.