

### MASTER OF MY FATE: ASHES OF WRATH

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Ву

Mary Ann Steele

### INVICTUS

(The Soliloquy of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor marooned for five years on an island off the coast of Chile)

Out of the night that covers me Black as the Pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance I have not winced or cried aloud. Under the bludgeonings of chance My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears Looms but the Horror of the shade, And yet the menace of the years Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley, "Invictus" Echoes, 1888

# THE NINE WORKS OF SCIENCE FICTION IN MARY ANN STEELE'S SERIES

# Listed in the order in which they should be read:

Warrior-Woman: The Forging of the Legend Master of Intrigue Partnership of Equals Birth of a New Breed: Genesis Birth of a New Breed: Attainment Trial By Fire: Survival Trial By Fire: Final Reckoning Dangerous Adversaries: Battle Joined Dangerous Adversaries: No Turning Back Dark Bargain To Find, and Not To Yield: Calculated Risk To Find, and Not To Yield: Daring Rewarded Master of My Fate: Ashes of Wrath Master of My Fate: A Ship Takes Shape Master of My Fate: The Phoenix Rises

### WEEK ONE: MONDAY

The crippled Columbian military ship dropped out of the black vault emblazoned with unwinking stars, to drift purposefully, menacingly, towards the despun lock integral to the axis of a rotating space station. Within that artificial satellite of a giant gaseous planet, five members of a Gaean scientific team worked furiously to detach the module in which they had arrived six weeks earlier, from its place among forty outwardly identical spheroidal hulls moored around a toroidal rim. The lives of Gaeans and Columbians alike hung by a wisp of glass-silk, in pawn to the skill of the helmsman daring that perilous approach.

In the fevered perceptions of the men manning the board in the mortally stricken vessel, the improbable artifact resembled a tiara spinning in the void: a ring inset with fragile bubbles, holding out hope of life. The awesome sight filling their screens dispelled an idea previously harbored: doubt that such a structure could be engineered. At that same moment, aboard the magnificent facility coveted by the attackers, a contingent of noncombatant Gaean researchers—men and women who took their station's sturdy reality for granted—worked desperately to escape from a trap about to snap shut.

Slowly, inexorably, the invader crept nearer. Ship impacted station. Clamps sprang out from the base of the vessel, anchoring it to the lock, thereby exerting a death-grip on the refuge the Columbian spacers intended to wrest from its defenders.

Victorious in her emotionally charged debate with the team leader from whom she wrung an agonized accession to her demand that he leave her behind to act as rear guard, a lone Gaean—one of a team of six scientists—took up a strategic position. Midway between the exit from the elevator housed in a tubular shaft connecting the lock in the axis to the spaceward end of Section One, and the door located at that module's opposite end, which led to the corridor in the rim affording access to thirty-nine other oblate spheroids identical in outward appearance to Section One, Cleo prepared to strand a body of desperate armed men on the isolated outpost.

Kneeling on the deck of the narrow corridor while entrenched behind a makeshift barrier of aluminum canisters erected solely to shield her from the view of the enemy, the woman as desperate as her foes harbored no illusion that her puny wall would either reflect away, or totally absorb, a pulse of ionizing radiation delivered from close range by a military handweapon.

I can take comfort in one thought, she acknowledged as she sighted down the generator of the ice-cutting tool pressed into service as a roughly comparable weapon. I don't risk sustaining a crippling wound. Anywhere a pulse strikes me, it'll send deadly impulses flashing along my nerves: impulses that'll wreak incredible havoc on the delicate organization of my brain. I'll never know what hit me.

Having wedged her bulky device between two tiers of canisters, Cleo gauged how high up the far wall a tall man's head would reach. Purposefully, she held the highly visible, glowing red dot of the tracer-ray steady on a point above head-height. Reflecting that the invaders must face her to fire on her, she steeled herself to inflict a fatal, hideous, full-body burn, should one of them round the right-angled bend in the passage affording the only route through the section. Hoping frantically that the sight of illumination indistinguishable from that emitted by the tracer of a military handweapon would deter them from stepping into view, she resolved not to reveal her gender by shouting a warning.

Sweat trickled down the face set in lines of grim determination. Certain that the intruders possessed no clue as to which section doubled as a shuttle-carrier capable of free flight, she intensified her determination to hold the Columbians at bay until 1810: the earliest time at which Wallace and his crew could possibly lift off the station. Reflecting that the Columbians would locate her comrades if they proceeded in the direction of the rotation, the rear guard shuddered. Convulsively, she gripped the device more tightly.

Needing no reminder that the disabled Columbian vessel moored to the axis carried a crew of twelve well-armed spacer-fighters, the woman bucking appalling odds weighed the chances that the disaster necessitating this attack might have resulted in the deaths some of those aboard. Cheered by that thought, she assured herself that the enemy possessed no inkling of how many defenders they faced, or how heavily those foes might be armed. Believing that they would refrain from splitting into small groups to search, she conjectured that even if she failed to stop their advance, Wallace would still stand a chance of lifting.

But they're not going to get past me, she assured herself gamely. And once I'm sure that Wallace lifted...

Thrusting a hand into a pocket, Cleo fingered the tablet Leroy had so reluctantly given her. *I've never once...even after Rollin died...even after Max fell in battle...ever contemplated killing myself*, she acknowledged, fighting abhorrence. *But irate as this crew will be at having been stranded here by a civilian...a female civilian...I've got no choice, now*.

Chilling tales of brutal sexual assaults perpetrated by the men of the Third Columbian Military Corps—the invaders who, seven Earthyears ago, had conquered and occupied Gaea—scrolled unbidden through the mind of the rear guard. *No choice at all*, she drove home to her alter ego.

Nerves quivering, the fine-boned, fragile-seeming woman riveted a searching glance on the wall ahead. When the arm and shoulder of a black-uniformed enemy spacer could just be spied as the man stole a look around the right-angled bend in the passageway, she mastered the fear assaulting her mind. Her forefinger pressed down on the activator, sending a single pulse flashing along the path limned by the tracerray. Eyes dilated, she watched the dot of illumination expand into a red-hot circle almost a meter in diameter, as metal plates absorbed the bulk of a tight, coherent beam of invisible radiant energy lethal to human beings. A minor portion of the impinging light reflected and re-reflected instantaneously off target, walls, deck, inner plates of the hull overhead, and canisters.

The short-lived glare of the expanded tracer-beam—a lurid red glow that momentarily marked the trajectory of lethal wavelengths the human eye lacked the power to detect—died away. The sharp crack accompanying the burst—sound that traveled almost a million times slower than the light—echoed in ears thankfully cataloguing it as the only sound. No charred, smoking corpse sprawled in the space below the point of aim. The corridor remained empty, silent.

Unutterably relieved to be spared the need to kill in so ghastly a fashion, Cleo refocused on the same point on the wall, distinguished now by a rapidly fading blotch of dull red. Prior to settling her body into a state of acute action-readiness, she stole a glance at the wristwatch propped on a level with her eyes. The time registered on a mind grown surreally calm: 1740.

I've got seventy minutes more to live, before passing into oblivion—or some plane of non-corporeal existence we can't imagine, she reminded herself bleakly.

Succumbing to a habit that had grown on her of late, she communed silently with her deceased husband.

*Oh, Max...with you gone...with Rollin dead...I don't find my life all that fulfilling. Hanging onto existence certainly isn't worth the price of enduring gang rape. If I could be certain that these spacers would kill me with a pulse from their own electronic weapons, I'd welcome that outcome, but capture I simply have to regard as unthinkable. I'll join you and Rollin, Max. Once I'm sure that Wallace managed to lift.* 

The digital dial of the watch seemed frozen in time. The silence began to appear ominous. Why haven't they called out a warning, or a demand? the Gaean fretted. They must know exactly what Wallace will be doing...must know exactly how much time they'll have in which to stop him. They can't have just given up! Could they be trying to find a way around me?

Nervously, she stole a glance over her shoulder. The corridor to her rear stretched away empty. *They're wearing Columbian military black*, she reminded herself. *And even if they chance to be a team of researchers—our counterparts—would they be able to calculate with precision which of the ventilating ducts must lead to this exact spot? Or to the deck below, and from there to here? Hardly likely. Surely I'd hear anyone's trying to open a grill or unbolt a plate!* 

Unnerved by the silence, the woman cast a second hasty glance behind her. Swiveling around, she peered anxiously at the bend in front. No glimpse of a black elbow or knee of a spacer glued to the edge of the turn in the wall met her straining eyes. A span of five minutes mimicked infinity.

A shriek tore from Cleo's throat as two strong hands, thrust forward from behind her, exerted a paralyzing grip on her upper arms, jerked those arms backwards, and wrenched the ice-cutter out of her hand. No slightest sound had served to warn her of the attacker's approach. Yanked forcefully to her feet, she stared over her shoulder into a coppery face of an ugliness so startling that her fright lent that unprepossessing visage the aspect of evil incarnate.

For a few pregnant seconds, the black-clad officer stared back. His sibilant voice dripping contempt, he drawled, "Your captain doesn't mind buying time with a woman's life, hm?"

A tart denial tore from a fear-constricted throat. "I volunteered!"

Disdaining to answer, the Columbian demolished the barrier of canisters with a few well-placed kicks. Propelling his captive ahead of him, he strode towards the bend. "Michael!" he called. "The corridor's clear!"

A stocky man of average height, bearing a massive electronic handweapon in a sling, rounded the corner. Pulling off the goggles equipped with an imager for aiming the weapon, he swept a raking glance over the captive, his shock at beholding a woman manifest to the Gaean.

"Suffering shades of the hordes of Earth, Nigel, she formed the entire rear guard?"

"Evidently so."

Watching the enemy leader's shock melt into dismay, Cleo saw both emotions transmute into an ominous purposefulness. Two silver bars on his collar proclaimed his rank as that of captain. Four spacers armed with handweapons emerged to range themselves in a row at his rear.

Slipping out of the sling, Michael laid the burdensome weapon on the deck, and

advanced to a position fronting the Gaean. Eyes hard as the core of a comet, and as cold, bored into those of the woman conscious that her captor's chances for preventing the lift narrowed with every passing second.

"Which section is equipped for the flight back?" he grated.

No reply passed lips clamped tightly shut.

Grasping the front of the captive's grayish-green uniform in both hands, the Captain as exquisitely aware of the headlong flight of seconds as was she, jerked open the bands of her tunic. Roughly, he stripped off the garment, baring her body to the waist. His hands shot to her wrists, and pulled her arms outwards while turning them. His eyes instantly gravitated to the puncture wound testifying to a recent injection. A half-stifled obscenity slid past a wide slash of a mouth. Closing iron fingers on her arm, he snarled, "So you're dosed with the antidote to truth compeller!"

No sound issued from the captive. Fanatically bent on telling this enemy nothing, Cleo scanned his rugged features, striving to ascertain whether he might employ violence in a desperate attempt to learn what he sought to know. Only half conscious of her partial nudity, she focused her undivided attention on the man in whom she detected exasperation. She gave no heed whatsoever to the four sets of eyes riveted to her bare breasts, and the fifth pair glued to her set, defiant face.

Sensing the woman's fear, perceiving her as ultrafeminine, and therefore wholly vulnerable to coercion, Michael decided to pursue a harsh course that he nonetheless judged to comprise his best option. Having glanced at his watch, he barked, "Conrad. Fetch the neurostimulator from the ship, on the double."

As a lean spacer sped down the corridor at a dead run, the Captain turned to another crewman. "Marvin, you and Leonard man the board in this section: the main one. We haven't time to search more than five kilometers of rim, and thirty-nine modules equal in size to this one. The enemy will have wiped some functions, but maybe not all. Try to pinpoint which section they're trying to detach. Sudden changes will occur in the stabilizing system if they lift, so you'll be able to tell by the monitors if they succeed in doing so. Send Conrad to brief me, the instant you learn anything definite. Justin, you and Nigel come with me."

Two spacers vanished around the bend. Throwing open the nearest door—a panel identified by stenciled lettering as the infirmary—the Captain marched his captive inside. Lifting her bodily, he laid her supine on the examining table. As Justin and Nigel held her immobilized, Michael bound her wrists and ankles to the end-frames of the table, employing strips cut from a roll of stout, narrow webbing taken from a cupboard. Gazing with merciless eyes at the half-nude captive stretched helplessly on the improvised interrogation-table, he accurately gauged the magnitude of the terror produced by his order to Conrad.

Interpreting that reaction as fright generated by her cognizance of the agony she knew to be imminent, the man concealing his reluctance to subject a woman to neurostimulation consoled himself with the thought that the interrogation would take but a short time.

"What's your name?" he asked in a peremptory tone.

"Cleo."

The Gaean perceiving no reason to conceal her name failed to divine that her captor regarded the eliciting of any admission, however trivial, as driving a wedge into her defenses. Having lowered the table as close to the deck as it would go, he drew up a chair, and sat down at her side. Impaling her with a pitiless glance, he yet spoke in a calculatedly reasoned tone.

"Cleo, the agony you're about to endure will inevitably force you to spill what you know. Why not avoid needless suffering? Tell me which section your people are working to detach."

Through a haze of fear—not of pain, nor of the other eventualities she had dreaded, but of the possibility that she might lack the fortitude to endure the torment now imminent—Cleo stared mutely into the implacable face of her enemy. *He'll do what he must*, she concluded unerringly, fighting panic. *You've got to do the same!* 

The door slid open with a clang that jarred on several sets of nerves. Conrad strode in, bearing the neurostimulator: a squat, cumbersome metal box. As Justin

pushed a metal cart into a position next to the table, his shipmate placed the device thereon. Rising to his feet, Michael snapped out an order to Conrad to join Marvin.

When the door closed behind the blonde spacer, the Captain addressed his two subordinates, his chin jutting, his tone that of a challenger throwing a gauntlet at the mailed feet of a foe.

"Justin, you're here in your capacity as medic. Nigel, you're going to bear witness to the others that despite my personal reservations about using this method, I didn't flinch from going all the way with it." Eyes hard as blue diamonds stabbed into those of the Lieutenant whose ugly face ephemerally mirrored strong emotion before freezing into a mask of impassivity. "Justin, get her ready."

Seating himself, the Captain waited while the medical technician pulled a series of long tentacles from within the machine, and attached the tips over specific nerve centers on the woman's arms, chest and forehead. That contact, the victim well knew, would shortly allow impulses generated by the machine to course down her nerves: impulses her mind would interpret as severe pain. Enveloped in a fog of dread, she nonetheless divined that the technician obeyed the order with keen reluctance.

Michael now addressed his captive in a voice of cold menace. "Cleo, once I activate this outfit, the pain will increase steadily. You won't pass out. The device keeps you fully conscious. You can't lie to me, either. It'll detect a lie, while it's delivering the stimulus. The process doesn't cause physical injury, but beyond a certain point, the agony will damage your mind. That point differs for different people, so I won't know when I've passed it. Not that it's likely you can hold out that long, but I'm warning you. Now then. Which section is the free-flying vehicle?"

Cleo fought to relax her rigid body. Think of Max, she commanded herself. Block out what you're about to feel. Riveting her glance to the clock on the side wall, she read 1835. Twenty-five minutes at the most, she advised her alter ego. You can hold out. You've got to! Her eyes met those of her captor, but her lips remained clamped over clenched teeth. Shrugging, the interrogator activated the device, steeling his mind to ignore screams.

Silence surrounded the woman now subjected to slowly intensifying agony. Three pairs of eyes converged on the meter recording the level of pain-producing stimulation, and watched the needle begin a steady creep around the dial. Cleo, her eyes closed, her shapely body taut, lay still. No cry shattered the silence. No groan wrung any heartstrings.

Gazing in disbelief at the woman obviously suffering the torment delivered by a fully functional device, Michael all but ground his teeth as he observed the time emblazoned in luminous green numerals on the wall-clock. Justin's seamed brown face testified to unqualified admiration. Nigel alone remained unmoved, his lithe body still as if carven of stone.

Cleo gazed inwardly at the well-remembered image of the husband cut down an Earthyear ago as he fought the invaders occupying a major portion of his world. Having deliberately resurrected a vivid memory of happiness shared with Max, she focused her mind on reliving the past. Used to achieving a state of intense concentration, she succeeded in blocking out a fraction of the pain for a short interval.

When the level increased to the point where that tactic no longer worked, the captive bit her lip, but stubbornly refused to allow a sound to escape her. Certain that if a man possessed any decency at all, he would find a woman's outcries unnerving no matter how determinedly he tried to ignore them, Cleo suspected that Michael might grow unnerved. Pride kept her silent.

He might wince, but he won't quit until I break, she admonished herself bitterly as her desperation mounted. And I won't give that ugly bastard the satisfaction! No doubt he enjoys inflicting pain. Damn him! Damn them all!

As the agony intensified, Cleo lost the power to force herself to lie still. Even as she continued to concentrate on mental images—and those changed more rapidly, now—her muscles took on a will of their own. Her body writhed involuntarily, pitting the considerable strength of her arms against the webbing. Struggling to withstand the steadily worsening torment inexorably eroding her ability to block out any fraction of it, she failed to notice the added sensation of the skin of wrists and ankles rubbing raw.

Abandoning the effort to raise scenes out of her memories, she issued stern exhortations to her alter ego. *Don't give in! Every second you hold out gives Wallace a better chance. Don't quit! You can take a minute more. You can. You will!* 

The tangy taste of blood issuing from a ravaged lip impinged momentarily on the woman's stressed consciousness, prompting her to shift the focus of the bite. Sweat soaked her writhing body. Mucus ran freely from both nostrils, as she resisted the now overwhelming compulsion to scream.

Absorbed by the sensation assailing her, Cleo grew dimly aware that the level of pain now seemed to be staying constant. Through the words she desperately addressed to herself in the innermost reaches of her being, she heard others couched in a soothing, insidiously persuasive tone. Beguiled into listening, she let her attention stray from those fevered self-adjurations.

"Cleo. You've suffered enough," Michael asserted in a solicitous tone. "Tell me which section, and I'll turn it off. Hear? Tell me. No one in Gaea could expect you to hold out past this point!"

You think so, do you, you rotten bastard? the Gaean expostulated inwardly as she again savaged her lip with her teeth. The contempt blazing from her eyes registered with the force of a blow on the man whose heart hammered, whose gut knotted into spasms, even as his hand moved.

An unbelievable wave of agony engulfed the sufferer. Her body arched violently upwards. Pain more excruciating than any she had ever experienced shattered her resolve. A high-pitched, bubbling, animal shriek tore out of her throat, followed by others.

The screams produced a new pause in the intensification. "Cleo. Which section?"

Her mind reeling on the edge not of unconsciousness, but of a terrifying

fragmentation, the tortured Gaean clung to one central idea. *Scream. Yell. But don't talk! Don't! Five lives hang on your silence. Don't spill what you know. Don't! Don't!* A series of piercing shrieks reverberated off the metal walls of the cabin before the woman's teeth again savaged her lip, and she held her outcries to low, anguished moans.

Michael's voice rasping in her ear constituted a force geared to batter relentlessly at her determination. "Cleo. If I increase the stimulation, I'll increase the risk of damaging your mind. We're approaching that point. Say the number. Say it, and the pain will stop."

With the last vestiges of her will, the pain-racked captive bit down on her lip, on the number she had refused to name even in her thoughts, on the black, stark fear of what an increase in the now unbearable agony would do to mind, body, psyche. Mustering the fast-ebbing dregs of the desperate courage that had carried her to this point, she struggled to keep from shrieking out the numeral she beheld etched in figures of fire across the screen of her narrowed inner vision.

The agony intensified. The figures dissolved. Past being able to speak coherently, past screaming, past producing anything but a low, keening, infantile wail of anguish, Cleo never heard Conrad burst in to declare that the Gaeans just lifted.

Michael switched off the device, dropping the woman into a depth of unconsciousness resembling coma.

Four men silently contemplated the limp, soaked, dead-white, disturbingly still figure whose softly rounded contours so emphatically suggested frailty: an illusive disguise, that delicate femininity, for a spring-steel toughness none of the Columbians had ever seen surpassed by a male in like circumstances.

The observers stood motionless, their faces a study in contrast. Michael's, pale and strained, bleakly reflecting his bitter awareness that he had gambled and lost, betrayed more than a hint of the psychological cost of what he had forced himself to do. On Justin's, concern blended with profound admiration. Conrad's radiated shock. Nigel's revealed the simple, intense force of an overwhelming anger. Inwardly shaken, the interrogator regarded the grim, hate-filled face of his lieutenant. "Who in hell would ever have thought a woman could withstand that degree of agony without breaking?" he breathed, more in stupefaction than in defensiveness.

Nigel's eyes smoldered as he hissed, "Damn her to hell!"

Justin interposed adamantly, "What courage she displayed!" As he studied the information revealed by the device still monitoring the woman's pulse and respiration, he smelled the evidence indicating that with the sudden cessation of the acute stress of her ordeal, Cleo's sphincters had relaxed, causing her to soil herself. "I'll tend her, Michael," the medical technician declared a shade combatively, having received no order to act in his professional capacity.

Flayed by his consciousness of having made an egregious error in judgment, Michael regained full mastery of himself. With no hint of desperation or despair evident in face or voice, he barked in a tone admitting of no argument, "I'll finish what I started, Justin. Do you detect any sign of physical damage?"

"No, but she needs the shot that will mitigate the stress." His brows knitted, the medical technician glaring irately at his superior managed to stifle the outraged objection trembling on his lips. His cognizance of the futility of uttering it, rather than fear of the reprisal he knew his questioning an order would produce, prompted that response.

"Tend to that," Michael snapped. With all of his accustomed decisiveness, he issued commands while Justin hastened to obey.

"Nigel, take Leonard, and make a thorough survey of the sections left on the rim. Estimate what water could be diverted from the life-support systems of the main section and the others—water that could serve as fuel. I want your assessment, in writing, seven hours from now, of the feasibility of our equipping a section for total self-regenerating life-support, and detaching it for prolonged voyaging in space. Figure on our using whatever we can salvage from our ship or the rest of this station."

Even as Nigel's lithe body stiffened, he spoke deliberately, choosing his words

with care. "You're going to make a decision based on my six-hour survey, when a sixweek, in-depth study might not assure us of a reasonable measure of safety if we leap off in a jerry-rigged section?"

Icy blue eyes impaled the man whose drawling voice stopped just short of conveying insolence. "That's right. If I decide to try, we'll spend six weeks doing it, not studying whether or not to do it. You're as skilled as any life-support expert I've ever encountered, and I'd trust your estimate over that of the men who built this place. Will trust it, with my life and everyone else's. So get busy."

Electric tension seemed to crackle in the space separating the Captain standing with chin jutting, and the Lieutenant glaring balefully at him. Nigel's eyes narrowed, and his hands clenched. Mastering the anger directed now at the Captain, he turned on his heel and left without a word.

Betraying no emotion, Michael addressed the medical technician whose eyes still raked the inert figure of the woman injected now with the necessary medication, but still lying in her feces.

"Justin, you'll take Conrad, and determine what, if any, supplies of food the Gaeans left. Collect what you find, and what's left on the ship, in this section. You'll then study the network of life-support systems to decide what excess organisms we can use for food. We'll hoard the standard meals—theirs and ours—after tomorrow's breakfast. You're in charge of feeding us. I'm confident that you'll manage to disguise whatever vile slop we'll have to live off, so we can face eating it. I still remember the tasty meals you dished up when we ran out of food on O'Neill, that time when the supply ship vanished."

His ire no whit assuaged by the compliment, Justin let that circumstance show nakedly. "I'll do my best," he affirmed evenly. His eyes strayed back to the utterly motionless form of the traumatized Gaean.

Michael's voice took on a brittle edge. "I'll clean her up, Justin. Before you go, strip off those electrodes and dose her with sleep inducer."

"Yes, sir." Managing to convey frigid disapproval by his use of the conventional

response to the Captain who preferred academic informality to military rigidity in his dealings with his closely knit team of experts, Justin obeyed. Having found a spring-capsule of the drug that produced deep, natural sleep, he injected the contents into Cleo's arm, and removed the electrodes.

Piqued, Michael issued his next order in a voice unmistakably conveying displeasure. "On your way out, tell Marvin that he's to compute the orbit of this station around the gas giant, project where the station will be eight weeks from now, calculate a trajectory back to Columbia, and use whatever information he can glean from the station's bank to determine how much fuel one of these sections holds and how much propulsive power it's got. Tell him to calculate how long it'll take us to reach Columbia in a modified section. Emphasize that I want a written report seven hours from now. Add that he's to include any recommendations he can offer."

"Yes, sir." Still outraged, Justin compounded his offense by snapping the Captain a salute before turning on his heel, and departing.

Glaring after him, Michael stifled an obscenity. His mouth set in a tight line, he turned his attention to the Gaean. Unable to loosen the knots in the webbing pulled tight around her wrists by her struggles, he cut the restraints. Having freed her ankles, he drew off her pants. Efficiently, he completed the distasteful chore of scrubbing her free of the nasty mess produced by a relaxation akin to that produced by violent death. With equal care, he sponged her entire body, removing the salty residue of perspiration.

Exhibiting his usual thoroughness, the Captain positioned the unconscious woman so that her head hung downwards over the end of the table. Holding the basin so as to immerse the short, brown, wavy hair matted into sticky tufts, he ran his fingers through the submerged tangles, and then blotted the excess moisture from her dripping hair.

A search through the cabinets yielded a container of antiseptic, which he used to treat her skinned wrists and ankles. Picking up the soiled pants direly in need of the treatment that would restore the ability of the fabric to repel dirt and moisture, he proceeded into the corridor.

The Gaean's tunic lay on the deck where he had flung it. That sight evoked a resurgence of the anger produced by his discovery that she had dared to dose herself with the antidote for the drug producing an irresistible compulsion to answer questions truthfully.

I judged her a fool for inviting interrogation under neurostimulation, he mused dourly, but she evidently knew that she could hold out until that bastard who sacrificed her to save his own skin lifted. Fanatics, these Gaeans! he railed as his rage intensified.

Snatching the garment off the deck, Michael conducted a brief inspection of the other cabins along the corridor. Discovering quarters fitted with a double bed, he stood motionless for a time, meditating on the danger to discipline posed by the presence of the woman. Rendered unpleasantly aware of the need to rid himself of the reeking burden in his hands, he tossed the woman's befouled uniform into the adjuster in the bathcabin accessible both from this cabin and the one adjoining. A radical thought impinged: an idea born of the anger ebbing, but not yet extinguished. Frowning, he locked the door between the cabins, and turned back the bedcover on the double bed Wallace had fashioned from two single bunks.

Upon returning to the infirmary, the Captain lifted the unconscious woman, bore her nude body into the cabin, laid her supine in the double bed, and covered her to the chin with the bedcover. A glance at his watch apprised him of the time: 1820.

*She'll regain consciousness at 2220*, he reminded himself. Wincing at the thought that the ordeal might permanently have scarred his captive's mind, he resolved to be present at her awakening.

Anger blended with the fear knotting the man's gut. *Damn her to hell!* he raged. *And damn that Gaean captain! He didn't hesitate to abandon an obviously noncombatant woman desperately improvising a means of holding us off. Why should he be so blasted sure that she'd die fighting?* 

An unnerving suspicion lanced out of nowhere to demand confirmation.

Reaching into the adjuster, Michael retrieved Cleo's tunic. An inventory of the contents of the pockets revealed a comb, a folding knife, an electronic stylus chewed on the end, a set of keys, and an elongated gray tablet. Seizing that, the Columbian sniffed it, and frowned blackly as suspicion faded into certainty.

*So.* Their one-woman rear guard planned to kill herself after completing her mission. Damn!

An overwhelming sense of the utter futility of the long-term solution he contemplated rose to smite him. Bitterly, he gazed down at the still, pale face exhibiting no trace of the ordeal borne with such surpassing fortitude. With an effort, Michael banished his doubts. Striding resolutely into the corridor, he turned his attention to administrative tasks.

Cleo came slowly to her senses at 2220. Her mind sluggishly focused on the ordeal that had preceded her loss of consciousness. She lay for a time without moving or opening her eyes, sorting out a host of nightmarish recollections. No pain assailed her—at least, none matching in intensity that forming her last frightful memory. Her wrists hurt badly, judging by ordinary standards. Her ankles pained her to a lesser degree. She grew aware that under what felt like a bedcover, she lay naked. That realization jolted her into opening her eyes.

A swift glance at her surroundings apprised her of her whereabouts. It also revealed the stocky figure of Michael, who sat in the chair before Wallace's terminal, his chin propped on one hand. She noted that the Columbian appeared to be totally absorbed in the contents of a datapad.

An overmastering need to know that she had held out long enough to shield Wallace's escape contended with her dread of drawing her captor's attention to herself.

Would I remember finally spilling the number of the section? she wondered confusedly. Surely, even if I did, Michael lacked time enough to reach Sixteen. And if he did make it that far before they lifted...he'd be...

Cleo retained no memory of having talked, but her final impressions consisted

only of a confused blur of ever increasing agony. Gathering the remnants of the store of courage she had spent so lavishly earlier, she clutched the bedcover to her chest. Shakily, she rose to a sitting position.

Michael heard her move. Interrupted in his third reading of two starkly discouraging reports, he rose to impale the author of his present dilemma with a withering glance.

"Did they get away?"

"They did." His eyes cold as frozen methane, the officer added in a voice freighted with menace, "I ought to space you."

Still gripping the bedcover, Cleo sank back down. For a brief instant, she savored the vast relief generated by the news that her comrades had escaped. Her eyes met those of her captor squarely. "If you think that prospect comes as other than welcome, you're mistaken," she retorted evenly, and truthfully.

Venomously, Michael stared at his enemy. Fatigue, anxiety and anger contended for expression, combining to erode the veteran spacer-captain's wonted self-possession.

Meeting his glance, Cleo generated a most unaccountable pity for the enemy she had defeated by her stubborn passive resistance. *He's not cruel by nature,* she judged accurately. *He did what he had to do, exactly as I did.* 

A thought impinged. "You didn't damage my mind," she observed, speaking her thought aloud. "At least...I don't think you did."

The memory of what he had inflicted on this delicate-seeming woman sullied Michael's normally comfortable self-image without diminishing his anger in the least degree. "I could have," he acknowledged bluntly. "I approached perilously close to the point where that would inevitably have happened. You're tough—mentally as well as physically."

Sensing an undercurrent of shame, the Gaean intuitively sought to alleviate it. "I don't blame you for doing what you did," she asserted dispassionately, stating the truth. Touched on the raw, the Columbian snarled, "I don't need or want your forgiveness!"

Accurately gauging the intensity of the man's emotions, Cleo divined the magnitude of the conflict they engendered. "Nonetheless, you have it," she countered levelly.

That calm rejoinder unexpectedly evoked an outburst of hot ire. "You thricedamned Gaean bitch, you've stranded the six of us in the forsaken back of nowhere! You planned to swallow that slime-infested poison-pill, and leave us to rot here till we spaced ourselves. You owe us, blast your gall!"

The speaker's eyes glittered as they traced the contours of the shapely figure clearly outlined beneath the thin cover. The memory of a nude feminine body lying limp and helpless under his ministering hands surfaced in startlingly vivid detail on the screen of Michael's inner vision. Anger blended with a suddenly irresistible urge. His voice rasped as he declared meaningfully, "I've a mind to collect on that debt, woman."

With deliberate movements, the Columbian pulled apart the interlocking bands fastening his tunic, and shrugged out of its form-fitting clasp. Seating himself, he pulled off gleaming black boots. Rising, he fronted the startled occupant of the bed. The sound of interlocking bands ripping apart grated on her ears as he yanked open his pants and let them drop to the deck. Stepping free of the encumbrance, he stood for a few seconds stark naked, raking his intended victim with eyes mirroring raw lust. Jerking the bedcover off her, he dropped his full weight on her unresisting body.

Having guessed the man's intention from the words that preceded his actions, Cleo stifled an impulse to leap to her feet and attempt to fight him. Keenly aware of the disparity between his strength and hers, she foresaw the outcome. If I resist, he'll hurt me, not kill me, she conjectured, reasoning with lightflash swiftness. He'll turn cruel, even if he isn't by nature!

Staring through dilated eyes at the compact, muscular, yet supple body emerging from its uniform, the widowed Gaean mastered both fear and outrage. He's a man, like any other—like Max! A man driven to the last barricade. What difference will his raping me make? My life's over! As soon as a chance offers, I'll space myself. Don't fight him! Don't risk goading him into injuring you! If he does, you'll forfeit all hope of staying able to end your life! Give the bastard what he wants!

As her ravisher dropped on her, her arms encircled his neck. Her hands drew his head towards hers. Glimpsing the shock that registered on his granite features before his mouth closed over her own, she molded herself to his muscular torso. A sharp stab of pain shot through her swollen, bitten lower lip, only to be forced to the back of her mind by sensations more intense.

Responding to her assailant's roughly questing tongue, Cleo experienced a most unaccountable quickening in her loins: a flood of warmth, of wetness. It was as if a lifetime of rigid social conditioning had never existed. Driven to the last barricade herself, the captive reacted with fierce abandonment, her behavior more wanton than any she had ever displayed to the husband she had so deeply loved. When Michael's knees forced her thighs apart, she wrapped her legs around him, arching upwards. Her actions clearly projected an active acceptance that robbed his determined penetration of her womanly depth of its potency as a symbol of aggressive dominance.

Her hands slid down his back, pressing him closer. Her breath coming in gasps, she moved in time with his thrusts. Recklessly, defiantly, she refused to experience his hard manhood as other than a fulfilling force. She forbade her alter ego to think of this rapist's act as a shameful invasion of her innermost self. Strong hands gripped her shoulders, as their owner repeatedly drove into her. When Michael achieved the ultimate release, so also did the Gaean, with an intensity that stunned her.

Utterly spent, Cleo sank back on the bed, bearing the weight of her assailant's sturdy frame.

Michael lay motionless for a time, enjoying the ebbing wash of carnal pleasure even as he fought an onslaught of scalding shame. At length, he sat up. Regarding his victim with bewilderment he took no pains to conceal, he spoke. "I'll be damned if I can figure out how you think!" he flung at her.

"You said I owed you," the captive reminded him acidly.

A flush flooded her captor's rugged face, even as her remark goaded him into retaliating. "I meant to force you," he informed her evenly, the dregs of his anger contending with a burgeoning sense of guilt.

"I fully realize that!" the captive retorted tartly. Passion rose to shake the woman stung anew by that bald admission. "I didn't do what I managed out of personal hatred for all of you!" she cried heatedly. "I wanted my comrades to be able to get home to their families, just as you used that damned device on me for the sake of your men!"

Stung to the quick, Michael felt his cheeks burn. "Do you have a husband...and children...waiting for you in Gaea, Cleo?" he asked, aghast at the implications to his honor.

"No. My son—five Earthyears old—died when Yancey annihilated Davis Station. So did my sister, my brother, my cousins, and my uncle. My husband fell while fighting Norman's corpsmen. I have no family left! That's why I volunteered to stay! That's why Wallace finally let me! All the others had family waiting!"

Cleo sensed the magnitude of the shock generated by that personal revelation. Pity fleetingly appeared in her adversary's eyes before dismay overrode it. Michael grated accusingly, "Could you get pregnant out of this?"

*Now you think of that!* the woman silently castigated her assailant. Keeping the bitterness out of her voice, she shook her head. "No. Wallace insisted that every woman on his team be rendered reversibly sterile."

The relief engendered by that admission showed nakedly on the Captain's rugged face, before the other worries assaulting the man's exhausted mind produced unmitigated bleakness. Suddenly weary to the point of numbness, he rose, and thrust a hand into a pocket. Withdrawing two strips of the same webbing with which he had bound the captive to the interrogation table, he grasped both of the woman's skinned wrists, drawing them back preparatory to binding them to the edge of the

metal bedspring.

Outraged, Cleo glared up at him. "Have you a reason for doing this other than pure meanness?" she demanded, her voice dripping scorn.

Pain shot down her right arm as Michael drew the bond tight against the angry red abrasions circling her wrist.

"I'm bedding down in here tonight too, woman, for several reasons," he informed her, his eyes glacial. "If you think I intend to fall asleep next to a mobile enemy who just assured me that she doesn't care whether she lives or dies, you're crazy. As soon as I passed out, you'd hit me over the head with whatever came handiest, and try your damnedest to breach the station!"

Consumed by virulent anger, the noncombatant retorted shrilly, "I accomplished all I set out to do! I never tried to kill any of you! I aimed higher than your heads! You saw that!" Controlling hot wrath with a strenuous effort of will, the sorely tried captive succeeded in forcing all trace of emotion out of her voice. Plaintively, she asked, "Would you accept my word that all I'll do is fall asleep?"

Ceasing to knot the webbing, Michael weighed that appeal. No trace of guile could he detect in the woman's face or voice. Admiration of her self-mastery contended with the dregs of anger, and with mounting guilt. Wondering at himself even as he reversed his decision, he released her wrists. Watching as she drew her arms hastily across her chest, cradling her abraded right wrist in her left hand, he shrugged in sardonic self-deprecation.

"I don't know why I believe you'll keep your word, but I do," he conceded, the admission seeming to the woman to emerge against his will.

His action prompted Cleo to mutter "Thank you," in a tone equally grudging. Turning her back to her unwelcome bedfellow, she curled on her side, pulling the bedcover around her. Michael stretched out next to her, facing her. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, both captor and captive dropped precipitately into deep, dreamless sleep.

## **WEEK ONE: TUESDAY**

The grip of a hand on her shoulder woke Cleo out of a deep sleep. Her eyes flew open to behold Michael, fully dressed, standing over her. Tossing her uniform on the bed, he dropped her boots on the deck. "Get dressed," he ordered.

Acutely conscious of her nudity, the Gaean drew her clothes towards her. As her captor turned to lift two standard breakfasts out of the oven in the galley, she hastily donned her uniform. Seating herself on the bed, she maintained a frosty silence as she ate the meal he handed her. Michael wolfed down his own ration, regarding his captive with an intent frown the while.

The woman studied her enemy in her turn, noting the symbol affixed to his uniform.

Second Corpsman, this captain, she observed with relief. He's not one of Norman's bastards. Whatever brought this crew to this unlikely location? What will Michael do with me? Lock me in here...keep me for his personal pleasure?

Despair assaulted the widow still grimly determined on self-destruction. In her mind's eye, she saw herself furtively gaining access to a lock, closing the pressureproof door leading to the station, pressing the switch that would withdraw the air from the cramped enclosure, and with her last gasping breath—her final, convulsive movement of a finger—opening the door leading to the vacuum of space so as to speed her dying. Focused on that mental image, she acted out of habit. Rising, she tossed the food-container into the rough-processor, and dropped the flatware into the sterilization unit of the galley. A curt order shattered her reverie. "Sit down, Cleo. I have things to say to you."

Alarmed by the tone of the officer's voice, the prisoner warily seated herself on the bed, facing him. She noted the lines of strain clawing out from the corners of his eyes and mouth: imprints that the Columbian's inadequate measure of sleep had failed to erase. His voice icily controlled, he announced, "I've been up for an hour, reviewing my limited options. Ten minutes from now, I intend to announce my plans to my crewmen. Two of those involve you."

A chill shivered down the woman's spine as she beheld the same inflexible determination that had led to this man's decision to subject her to neurostimulation. Taut with apprehension, she awaited the new blow about to fall.

"I expect that we'll build a self-regenerative life-support system into a section which we'll attempt to launch," her captor announced. "If we succeed, we'll make the transit to Columbia." Pausing, he watched mounting fear show nakedly on the strained face of the captive who scarcely seemed to breathe. "I intend to work my subordinates brutally. I'm willing to make you one of my crew. I'll treat you exactly as I do my men. Will you consent to work alongside them, at remodeling a section?"

Relief surged through the highly self-disciplined researcher who saw nothing to fear in that prospect. Her entire person plainly conveyed that emotion to the officer relieved to have cleared with ease what he initially suspected might constitute a formidably high hurdle. "Of course," she agreed readily, the more so for judging that at some point she might manage to gain access to a lock.

Glacial eyes bored into hers. "Now the hard part. I'm going to share you, Cleo. With my five crewmen." Pausing for effect, Michael watched the composed face of the Gaean swiftly metamorphose into a mask of horror. Giddy with shock, she gasped audibly, her disbelief swiftly melting into outrage.

Speaking with the authoritativeness habitual to him, Michael forestalled a virulent outburst. "Not because I want to," he informed his captive forcefully. "Because I need to stay in control. If I tried to keep you for myself—or even

attempted to keep you strictly away from all of us—it's entirely possible that I'd face mutiny."

Even as violent anger contended with ghastly fear, Cleo caught the underlying intensity of the emotion seeping through the voice the speaker strove to keep dispassionate. "You'll be better off...decidedly so...if I control the terms...if I keep a handle on what we do. If I go on making the decisions."

Her breath rattling in her throat, the woman stared at the Columbian out of dilated eyes. A vivid image of Nigel's cruel, ugly face filled the screen of her mind, nearly stopping her heart. Sulfurous words rose to her lips, searing the tip of her tongue. *Get hold of yourself!* she frantically adjured her alter ego. *Screaming out accusations will only harden his resolve. Think!* 

Watching the fluidly expressive face change, Michael ungrudgingly admired his captive's self-control. Well aware that Gaean culture not only condemned extramarital sexual intercourse, but also ordered social life in such a way as to render any chance of its occurring virtually nil, he harbored no illusion that the passion this archetypical Gaean had displayed on the previous night could be considered anything but a spell of madness provoked by intolerable stress.

Softening his tone, he sought to reassure her. "Cleo, under ordinary circumstances every one of us is a decent, ordinary person. But when men get thrown into a deal like this, they become capable of doing things they'd never dream of doing otherwise. If anyone had told me a week ago that I'd ever rape a woman, enemy or not, I'd have said he was out of his mind. But I did."

The tremor punctuating that last statement—an unpremeditated response, no theatricality—struck the agitated hearer forcibly.

"You'll have this cabin to yourself. I'm going to work my spacers twelve hours a day. We'll each spend one night a week with you. Six sleep-shifts: from 2000 to 0400. You can rest assured that I'll drive my crewmen so relentlessly that of necessity they'll spend the bulk of that time sleeping. The seventh night you'll have to yourself. In the daytime, you'll just be one more crewmember. In what area of

expertise did you work, here?"

"Life-support," the woman spat out, her voice quivering with barely controlled fury.

*Damn! But maybe*... Refusing to allow any secondary considerations to deflect his attention from the battle of wills in which he engaged, Michael stated equably, "So. That's my intent. Comments?"

Outraged expostulations fought for expression. Maintaining a fragile control over her temper, Cleo retorted sardonically, "Why ask that? You're not giving me any choice!"

"No, I'm not." Michael's voice, level, inflexible, projected unshakable determination as plainly as did the set of his rugged face.

"What if I refuse?"

"You're in no position to refuse, any more than you were last night."

Grown aware of burgeoning defiance, the officer softened the harsh tone in which he couched that chilling observation, and strove to come across as making a reasonable request. "Cleo, last night you made a sensible choice, and defused an anger that could have had consequences I frankly admit I'd have regretted today. I'm asking you to make that same choice, ahead of time, for five more nights, with five more people. I honestly believe that this decision will work out best in the long run for all of us, but especially for you."

Conquering an ominous onslaught of faintness, the captive got hold of herself. Steadying, she stared at the enemy who showed no sign of relenting, intuitively certain that he truly did believe that final statement. She rasped, "You won't let them gang up on me?"

Resisting the temptation to remind her icily that he just clearly outlined the conditions, the Captain replied patiently, "I told you: one partner a night. No more than one. No man will enjoy access at any time but his specified shift. My conditions, those. I'll see that they're kept."

For a span of seconds, the Gaean weighed that crisp assurance. A lurid

visualization of what could happen if this officer lost control of these men marooned perhaps for the duration of their lives set her heart hammering. *I won't be restrained—confined to a cabin,* she reflected, heartened by that belated realization. *I'll be able to get to a lock, and space myself.* Steeling nerves still ragged from the trauma endured on the prior day, she assented dully, "I'll agree."

An afterthought caused her to urge with far more intensity, "Michael...when you inform your men of your decision...explain to them that I've agreed...that I consent. Emphasize that I feel I owe them. Make sure they understand that. Otherwise, they'll think you've given them license to rape...forcibly." A perceptible shudder accompanied that final observation.

His admiration for this woman's courage increasing with every passing minute, Michael nodded. A disturbing thought surfaced. "Cleo." Blue eyes bored into hers. "If you meet with any problem you can't face again...of any sort...you'll come to me with it, hear? We'll re-negotiate, if we have to. But I want you to pass me your word that you'll bring any problem that arises to me, and that you won't find some way to end your life, before talking to me."

*You've thought of everything,* the captive bent on self-destruction admitted as her heart sank. *Damn you!* Outrage boiled up anew. "You're asking a hell of a lot of me, you know that?" she hissed. "You can't force me to give you that word!"

"No, I can't." Michael's control slipped momentarily. Cleo watched the rugged face all at once turn haggard. That dropping of the man's guard registered with telling force on the woman sitting stiffly upright, her eyes riveted to her enemy.

Swiftly regaining his composure, the Columbian added forcefully, "But I know full well that if you give me your word, you'll keep it. I'm asking it of you, Cleo. I'm not trying to force it from you. But if you don't give it, I'll be compelled to reconsider my decision to make you one of my crew."

Glaring at her captor, the Gaean weighed her options. At length, she declared in a voice conveying bitter finality, "I'll give you my word. For one week."

Judging that he had pushed his victim to her limit, the arbiter of her fate agreed

equably, "Until next Monday night, when my turn comes round again. Agreed?" "Yes."

"Cleo." Reaching out, Michael took both of his captive's hands in his. His voice husky, he urged, "Listen to me. If you'll do for each of the others what you did last night for me...and I can manage to keep them working towards a goal, no matter how remote...between us, we'll keep all of us civilized." Rising to his feet, he pulled her up with him. "I didn't hurt you any, last night, did I?" he asked in a tone more gentle than any he had yet employed.

Flushing, the violated widow whispered, "No."

"All right then. Let's go."

"Wait a minute." Stepping into the bathcabin, Cleo stood before the narrow mirror, and combed her hair. For a full second, she stared dourly at her reflection. Blue-black circles shadowed her eyes. The wavy dark hair framing a face that seemed to her to have aged ten Earthyears since yesterday accentuated the pallor of skin normally rosy.

Exerting the power of an indomitable will, the prisoner straightened her shoulders and walked out, her head held high. "I'm ready," she informed her captor evenly.

His eyes met hers. The admiration in his, plain to her view, warmed her in spite of all he had done to her. *I'm crazy to give him that word,* she berated herself savagely. *Crazy! Maybe my mind isn't the same as it was.* Forcibly burying a host of unnerving doubts, she preceded her enemy through the door he opened, in perfect control of her expressionless countenance.

With Cleo at his side, Michael strode into the conference cabin of Section One: the main command center, which the Gaeans called Central. A swift glance around the premises assured him that all of his spacers awaited him.

The captive kept her head high, her shoulders straight, but she glimpsed the five faces through a blur of perturbation.

Carrying three datapads and a recyclable bowl containing crumpled scraps of

stiff glasscloth—items he had picked up on leaving the cabin—the Captain seated himself in the center of the long table, facing his crew. Two men dropped into seats opposite him. A third slouching in a chair set against the wall, his boots propped on another, hastily shifted his feet to the deck and pulled the chair towards the table. A fourth hastily rose from the terminal he switched off, and took an empty place. Only Nigel, tall, graceful, limber, lounging negligently against the back wall, never moved.

Cleo seated herself next to Michael, facing his crewmen. Concentrating on keeping her face expressionless, she avoided making any eye contact with the spacers studying her aspect minutely. Resting her eyes on the clock, she noted the time: 0505. Emotionally drained by the trauma now entering a new stage, she perceived the day stretching ahead as interminable, and likely to end in horror.

Passing the bowl to the man seated opposite him, Michael directed, "Pick a scrap, and hang on to it. Pass the bowl on."

Hastily, the crewman complied, and the bowl made the rounds of all five spacers.

Michael now addressed his crew. His voice bore not the slightest trace of indecision, or fear arising from an expectation of a mutinous uprising. The woman straining to interpret subtle nuances detected absolutely no lack of confidence that whatever orders he issued would be obeyed.

"Well, gentlemen, we've landed in a tough situation: one that's going to tax our abilities before we get out of it. We face two choices, which I'll outline. I'll accept your comments presently, but I'll make the final decision as to which option we take."

Compelling eyes swept over the faces riveted to that of the leader. "First. We can settle in here after giving up hope of ever leaving, or delude ourselves into believing that we might some day be discovered and rescued. We can sit around feeling sorry for ourselves, and getting on each other's nerves for an interminable span of Earthyears. We can remain stranded, but safe."

Those blunt words aroused strong emotion that the Gaean saw mirrored on hard, resentful countenances. "Second. We can use the talent and drive we all

possess, to work at improvising a vehicle capable of crew-controlled free flight, thoroughly enough and carefully enough that we insure a reasonable chance of our surviving the trip home in our creation. I've collected data on that latter option: the reports two of you turned in to me last night. I'll now summarize what I've learned."

Cleo watched determination overspread the hard features of the man seated opposite her. *Michael will talk them into going along with his idea,* she surmised. *He has stirred them out of whatever self-pity they might have been nursing. Or...four of them.* Stealing a glance at Nigel's arrogant, ugly, copper-hued face, she shuddered anew. *If that bastard ever so much as pretended to be decent or ordinary, I'll eat a damned eel out of a secondary tank alive and wriggling!* she raged in the privacy of her mind.

For a brief span of moments, her nerve failed her. *How can I possibly…ever…let him…*? Resolutely, she thrust that gut-wrenching visualization out of her mind. *One thing at a time. One week: that's all I have to endure. I'll see how it goes. Whatever happens, I gave my word.* An alter self chided her scathingly. *So you did. Fool! Idiot!* Racked by fear, the Gaean forced herself to concentrate on Michael's words.

"First. Communications. The ship's broadcasting unit for downlink with Columbia suffered irreparable damage, as did its optical antenna. Unfortunately, the vessel carried no spares. The Gaeans destroyed the comparable unit integral to this station's board, and evidently took any spares away with them. We could rig equipment with which to contact a ship over a short distance, but that's all."

Five grim faces displayed no surprise at that announcement.

"Second. The vehicle. The section the Gaeans detached—the one in which they arrived—undoubtedly was the only one designed for manned spaceflight. It was the only one equipped with its own independent, regenerative life-support system. The other sections the builders intended to remain an integral part of this station. For some reason, the early settlers of this system ceased to occupy this facility on a permanent basis. They made that choice Earthyears before Norman's Third Columbian Military Corps invaded Gaea. This temporary Gaean crew evidently managed to withdraw a full complement of fuel from the reservoir below the deck in the rim before Marvin reached the main board."

You're right, Cleo conceded, savoring relief. More than enough water to get Wallace and the others home.

"Our main problem will be fuel. If we divert part of the water available to store for fuel, we'll be short. And we'd have to store it: add it gradually, in relatively small increments, to holding sites scattered around the station, from which we'd later fill the fuel tank of the section we refit, and that of its countermass. We'd drastically disrupt the whole delicate balance of this station's life-support system if we just drew that much water off suddenly, as the Gaeans did.

"Marvin deduced that their section and its countermass must bring the extra amount needed for the return trip. That quantity, stored in the reservoir below the corridor in the rim, can be drawn off without causing damage, but the remainder constitutes the normal amount the designers intended to leave cycling through the web of photosynthetic exchangers and the intricate system for stabilizing the station.

"That normal amount, however, suffices to support far more than seven people. I deem it possible to isolate what we'll need, if we do the job with painstaking care, over a period of time. So we'll ration water tightly. I'll have to do more calculating on how much we can divert. The less fuel we use, the longer the return voyage will take."

Sardonically, the Captain added, "Of course, it can be argued that time forms the one thing we have in abundance, but I'd personally prefer to arrive home before my hair turns gray." Men well aware that such a physiological change normally befell the people of either inhabited world of the star's system only after their age exceeded ninety Earthyears rewarded that sally with wry smiles.

"It appears that none of the sections remaining moored to the rim was designed for passenger flight. None is fitted with an independent life-support system suited to our need. We'd have to choose a section relatively free of specialized, built-in equipment, and install what we require, using components from all the others. This section, which the Gaeans call Central, is the only one equipped as a barrack, but the accommodations are minimal. Why the scarcity of bunks, I don't know, unless the Gaeans' space-worthy section served as barracks when large numbers of personnel worked here."

*Right again,* Cleo silently admitted.

"We'd be living in cramped quarters while we dismantled parts of other sections, but we've all spent fourweeks aboard ships even less spacious. We'd handle that." Hope surged as Michael noted that no face registered disagreement.

"Gravity. The station's angular motion generates centrifugal force. The station's diameter is 1.8 kilometers, and its angular velocity is one revolution a minute. That arrangement produces an artificial gravity close to Earth-normal. For the five or six weeks of the Gaeans' trip home, they evidently accepted weightlessness as a necessity. Well, I don't. We won't know for certain just how long we'll be voyaging. I'll go into that factor in more detail, shortly. But when we leave...if we do...we're going to tether our section to the countermass opposite it on the rim, and spin, so as to create a similar centrifugal force."

Five listeners stared incredulously at the speaker. Electricity charged the space between the senior officer and his crewmen, as the inflexibility of his determination to attempt a difficult, dangerous maneuver guaranteed to complicate a launch became apparent to them. Men inured to hardship and danger frowned, and visibly tensed. Their collective eyes seemed to protest that the other problems facing them posed enough of a challenge.

Ignoring that reaction, Michael smoothly continued his summary. "Food. We'll ration the standard meals, which we'll keep those for special occasions. Justin will feed us, using surplus organisms from the life-support systems. He boasts experience, and displays an originality of mind that parallels his skill as a chemist. The secret of enjoying his cuisine consists in never asking just what it is you're eating."

A few audible chuckles followed that sage observation.

Vastly reassured on perceiving the calm self-possession exhibited by the woman so traumatized when he last saw her, the medical technician mastered the anger generated on the prior day: ire that he had nursed all night. He smiled, now, as he accepted the oblique but genuine peace offering.

"Time. Marvin determined that the Gaeans wiped certain functions that would have allowed a man on the board in Central to locate the section from which they were detaching the umbilical connections to the rim. They deleted only what was necessary to conceal their whereabouts, and destroyed only that gear which would have enabled us to communicate with Norman's headquarters in Gaea, or with Columbia.

"Marvin studied what remained of the specifications of the station. The propulsive systems and fuel tanks with which these sections and countermasses were equipped—gear enabling them to be flown to the point in space where they'd transfer into the long elliptical orbit this station travels around the gas giant—still remain intact.

"The builders assembled the station in space, and set it spinning. A complex gyroscopic system for maintaining stability, augmented by another, which operates by changing water distribution within the station, assures that removal of a section and its countermass—or the arrival of the Gaeans' space-worthy section and its countermass—produces no dangerous mechanical strains on the structure. We'll be able to use the propulsive system of the section we refit.

"Unfortunately, the propulsive power is exceedingly low. We'll only be able to achieve a velocity after launch of some hundred times less than that possible to a military ship. Our coasting run back to Columbia will therefore take a substantial amount of time, even with maneuvers such as gravity assists.

"That drawback will be aggravated by an unfortunate circumstance. The disaster destroyed the bulk of our ship's memory. It wiped the huge block of information regarding the bodies in Einstein's minisystem. That data, on which the computers drew to solve highly complex navigational problems, automatically kept the

ship on the programmed flight path, so we'll be reduced to doing far more than the usual calculations ourselves.

"However, Marvin thinks he might be able to alleviate that problem somewhat, by rewriting some of the programs. Given his area of expertise, and mine, I feel confident that we can safely operate the ungainly vehicle we launch, so as to make the transit to Columbia. We'll nonetheless be looking at a voyage that at best could last five fourweeks, and at worst, an Earthyear."

Noting the acute dismay that flashed across more than one of the faces he scanned, Michael experienced a visceral tightening, but no anxiety reflected from his rugged countenance as he added, "Embarking on a voyage of even that maximum duration has to be weighed against permanent exile here."

Sitting back, the shrewd judge of men allowed his subordinates time in which to digest that blunt statement of grim alternatives. At length, he saw determination replace dismay. Seemingly at ease, he regarded the five men he knew so well, observing subtle signs that he had just won converts to his proposal.

Bracing himself, he figuratively cast his future on a single roll of the dice. His crisp voice offering not the slightest hint that he knew exactly the magnitude of the risk he ran, he spoke. "Comments? Nigel."

The Lieutenant's sibilant voice carried easily to all those present. "No sense sitting around here to rot, hm? Let's fly."

That unhesitating assent surprised Cleo. *If that rotter plans to rebel, would he agree?* she asked herself. *Surely, if anyone contemplated mutiny, it'd be Nigel! Big ugly bastard.* Shivering, she again forced her mind from the obvious next thought.

"Justin."

The technician's smile warmed Cleo through, even though he bestowed it on the Captain. "I'd hate to have to feed you fish garnished with duckweed and stuffed with fresh-water shrimp forever, Michael. I say chance it."

That man would stay decent and ordinary in the center bank of fires at the heart of the proverbial hell, Cleo assured herself, instinctively liking the persona behind the seamed, brown-skinned face. *He's obviously older than the others. Compassionate sort. He'll be no problem, and perhaps, an ally.* 

"Conrad."

The lean, hard-bitten blonde spacer seated across the table from the Gaean shrugged. "No risk would deter me from wanting away from here," he declared forcefully. "I'll go for it."

Driven at this juncture to appraise each individual, Cleo studied the speaker. *Tough*, she concluded. *Mean? Entirely possible. Bitter, obviously. Decent? It doesn't show, especially, today, if he is. Cold. Hard. Oh, Max. What have I gotten myself into? Thank the Powers you'll never know!* 

"Marvin."

Examining the next man to comment, Cleo beheld a thin, tall, gangly individual who lacked the grace distinguishing Nigel, Michael, and Conrad.

Swordsmen, they must be, the shrewd observer conjectured accurately. Not this man. Thin, pale face. Lank black hair. Big dark eyes that seem to radiate indecision. Nervous hands. Petulant mouth. Cranky, I'll wager. Complainer? Michael wouldn't tolerate that, surely. Bright, I'll wager. Maybe intellectual brilliance earns Marvin a certain degree of tolerance. Not a man I need fear, especially, she concluded in relief, but hardly one I find attractive.

The spacer responded in a firm tone. "I'm ready to put my ability to this crucial test, Michael."

No indecision freighting that reply, the Gaean admitted. Am I mistaken in my judgment? Or is he doubtful of his acceptance by these self-assured types like Michael or Nigel? Could he feel inferior?

"Leonard."

Swiveling her eyes to the face of the man poised to answer, Cleo experienced shock. Owing to her flustered state, she had not particularly noted him earlier. Now she perceived his astonishing youthfulness.

He's only a boy...less than twenty-five! she expostulated silently. And what a

face! Pure, classic, male beauty. Not handsomeness. Beauty! Features reminiscent of one of those ancient marble statues... Renaissance. Michelangelo's David. Slim, delicate, almost girlish figure. How in the name of the institutionalized absurdity we call government did he get to be part of this crew of tough veterans? Did an erring military bureaucracy assign Michael a raw recruit to complement a crew of specialists? These men seem to be a scientific team...like us...but this lad is scarcely old enough to qualify as a specialist!

Intrigued, the captive listened as the boy replied unhesitatingly and vehemently. "I'll trust the space-worthiness of any craft we rig, Michael. Let's go for it."

A clear assertion of faith in his comrades, that response, the canny judge deduced. What a contrast he makes to Nigel! The incongruity of their being assigned to the same crew struck the woman forcibly. Angel and devil. What irony!

His heart racing, Michael surveyed his team, concealing all evidence of his vast inner relief. "Well. I welcome your unanimous agreement with my choice of option, gentlemen. That's the one we'll begin to implement, starting today, with no delay. I warn you, I'm going to work you relentlessly. Twelve hours a day. No watches. We'll all sleep the same shift. That brings me to another decision."

The Gaean's gut contracted as she nerved herself to face hearing the announcement she knew to be forthcoming.

"This is Cleo," the Captain announced. "I'm making her a member of this crew. She has consented to do her part in the work ahead of us. She has agreed to something else as well. She feels she owes us. I concur. So each of you will spend one night a week in her cabin. During the sleep-shift of the day you drew from the bowl."

Flagrantly violating protocol, Justin leaped to his feet and interrupted the Captain.

"Michael...!"

"Sit down!"

With that harsh, sharp, imperious command, Michael aborted his subordinate's

protest. "Justin, I'll entertain no objections," he rasped menacingly. "My decision stands. Whether you choose to take advantage of Cleo's generosity or not remains your own business, but I'll have no one's changing his mind later, disrupting the schedule.

"And if you don't sleep there on the night you drew, you won't have a bed. When I said cramped, I meant it. I've assigned quarters, and posted a schedule showing where each of you will sleep each night. Cleo's the only person who rates a bed she can call her own. It's double. You share it, on your night. I've taken Monday, having availed myself of her offer last evening. Sunday she has to herself. In the daytime, she's simply another crewmember. Bear that fact firmly in mind. I'll tolerate no infringing on the rules I've set."

As he spoke, Michael thrust out his chin, and narrowed glacial eyes. His tone left absolutely no doubt in any mind that he meant what he said. "I'm passing a datapad around. Sign your name beside the day you drew."

In the pulsating silence greeting that wholly unexpected and totally unorthodox announcement, five pairs of eyes converged on the woman who sat with chin up, trying valiantly to conceal her inner turmoil. Flushing hotly, she glanced rapidly from face to face, but lacked the will to force herself to look long enough at any of the men publicly granted permission to sleep with her to enable her to assess how each of them reacted to Michael's order.

How could I ever have agreed to stand for this? she castigated herself savagely. My mind must have become unhinged, owing to what I went through! If that's so, need I abide by my word? Under the weight of those bold stares, she flushed scarlet, and dropped her eyes.

Allowing no pause for speculation by anyone concerned, Michael drew his crewmen's attention back to himself. "Justin, I'm assigning Conrad to help you prepare the food. Marvin, you'll rig a board in whatever section we decide to use for a vehicle. Nigel, you'll take Leonard and Cleo to work under you at the task of building a life-support system into the section we equip. Cleo's a life-support technician. You'll find her training useful. We'll all assist the three of you when you need extra hands. I'll coordinate the three groups, work out long-range plans, and store fuel.

"So. We'll eat breakfast at 0415, and start work at 0500. The midday meal will be served at 1100, dinner at 1800. Recreation will extend from after dinner to 2000. Cleo's entitled to a period of recreation the same as anyone else, so don't show up in her cabin until 2000. You'll each be allowed one shower a week, on the night you spend with Cleo. She'll shower on Sunday night. Each team's leader will see that his crewmembers get a morning and afternoon break: twenty minutes. All right. Get to work."

In the throes of the consternation produced by her discovery that she faced working for Nigel, the traumatized Gaean scarcely noticed Michael's mistaken assumption regarding her qualification.

*Oh, my rotten luck!* she railed inwardly. *It would be* Nigel *who's their life-support specialist! Technician? Surely not. Engineer, most likely. I won't even try to meet him on even terms. He terrifies me! I'll just do what he asks. My perishing soul, how will I ever survive a week of this life? And I gave my word! Crazy or not, I gave it. If I'm sane enough to have given it, I suppose I'll have to keep it...* 

Michael broke in on the woman's unutterably bitter reflections. "Take note," he ordered as he handed her the datapad each man had signed next to the day he had drawn.

Willing her hands not to shake, the recipient rapidly scanned the device so as to ascertain the order in which the names appeared. Michael, Conrad, Leonard, Marvin, Justin, Nigel. Unsure whether to be glad or sorry that Nigel's name came last, opposite Saturday, she sought to master surging fear. *I've got five days before I have to face that,* she reminded herself gamely. *Five days to live in dread of what it'll be like!* she qualified her first thought, as her blood chilled.

Tearing her glance from the device, she grew conscious of glittering dark eyes impudently tracing the contours of her figure. Leonard appeared at her side, drawing the Lieutenant's attention to himself. "Let's get to work, hm?" Nigel commanded in that soft, sibilant voice that Cleo felt certain she would grow to hate. Silently, she followed the two men down the corridor.

Lingering in the cabin until everyone left but the Captain, Justin blocked his superior's path to the door. His seamed face radiating challenge, he asserted evenly, "Michael, I need to talk to you."

"Say on." Though he kept his voice expressionless, Michael scowled, even as two ominous creases furrowed the brow of the man exquisitely conscious of having placed himself in a position for which a highly derogatory ancient term still existed in the language.

Nothing daunted by his perceiving clear evidence of annoyance, Justin asked bluntly, "Can Cleo become pregnant as a result of your decision?"

"No. She has been rendered reversibly sterile."

Relief flashed across the seamed brown face. The medical technician's eyes narrowed. "Has this girl a husband...children...whom she'll prefer to die rather than face, if she ever gets back to Gaea?"

A surge of guilt translated into a savage onslaught of anger, which Michael barely controlled. Seared by the heat of that regal wrath, Justin intuitively sensed its cause, but he flinched not at all as he calmly awaited an answer.

Frowning blackly, Michael snapped in a hard, curt tone, "No. Her husband was one of Signe's rebels. He fell fighting. Her only son died, along with her whole family, when Yancey annihilated Davis Station. She stayed behind yesterday intending to kill herself after she accomplished her mission. By effecting a capture, we saved her life. I intend to see that she stays alive. Pressing reasons led to my making the decision I did. Keep your objections to yourself, Justin. They won't sway me, and if you persist in voicing them, I'll take punitive action. Now, is that all?"

Shock showed nakedly on the face of the objector: emotion produced by the revelation regarding the woman, rather than by the overtly stated threat. "For the moment," he replied evenly. "You've allayed my major concerns. I'll keep a professional watch on Cleo, now that I know her history."

For a few seconds, Michael glared with angry eyes and jutting chin at the subordinate meeting his glance squarely. Stepping aside, Justin gave his superior access to the door. Michael stalked out.

Meanwhile, Nigel led his crew to the third section counter-clockwise around the rim from Central. Opening a hatch in the deck, he nimbly descended the ladder to the space below, followed by his two team members. Pain stabbed the Gaean as she recalled consulting with Wallace's wife in this area where Marva conducted certain portions of her research on proteins, in what now seemed to the captive battling despair a remote, previous incarnation. The older woman's originality, flexibility, and formidable talent as an investigator rose to mind, prompting renewed admiration that swiftly submerged beneath a searing sense of desolation.

Wrenching her thoughts back into the present, Cleo guessed why Nigel intended to begin his work here. Striving to keep her mind off the unnerving prospect of copulating with him, she dwelled on the structure of the station.

This lower deck houses the components forming the ecological sub-system that serves this section, she reminded herself. This sub-system connects to the sprawling circular web of similar units housed in the lower decks of thirty-eight other sections. The totality of these mini-ecosystems—a closed loop integrated by special equipment housed in the specialized fortieth unit called Central—forms a continuous, selfregenerating biosphere supporting the life of the station's inhabitants.

Nigel faces building an independent system, capable of supporting life indefinitely for seven people, into the lone section these usurpers plan to convert into a free-flying vehicle. This place sports waste-management components of the right size, the life-support engineer acknowledged. I expect it's where I'd start. Score a point for the big ugly bastard.

Having traversed the narrow path between the curving wall and the bulky pipes connecting various components, Nigel halted beside the metal tank in which the raw human waste from the head in the latrine serving the workspace above accumulated. On the deck a tool kit lay open. "I undid the cover yesterday," he announced. "We're going to build a lifesupport system, from scratch, into Section Eleven. We'll start with the wastemanagement unit. The one in this section—Three—is the right size. The unit has been used recently. Cleo, you'll clean out this tank. A technician ought to be capable of rigging a pump. Deposit the contents into canisters. Flush the tank with the least amount of water you can manage. If you don't know how to rig a pump, use buckets. I'll give you an hour. Leonard, you and I'll strip equipment out of the latrine above. Come along."

Through a red haze of outrage, the Gaean engineer noticed the evidence of shock that appeared on Leonard's guileless face as Nigel issued that order. The boy made no remonstrance to the second officer, but as the latter turned on his heel and strode away, the youthful spacer shot the woman a sympathetic glance.

Radiating wrath, Cleo stood with hands on hips, glaring after the departing pair. Well, if that vile rotter hasn't handed me the ultimate shit detail! she silently raged. Buckets! I'll show that premier bastard I'm no recruit as raw as this sewage!

Banging open the door of Marva's tool locker, the irate Gaean yanked out a large pipe wrench and a length of metal pipe. At top speed, she raced back down the path. Swiftly, she shut off the valve located between the pump in the wastemanagement line, and the comminutor. With savage fury, she attacked the union joining two sections of the line. Lacking the strength to turn the wrench, she slid the length of pipe onto the handle, and leaned her full weight on the extension, emitting a grunt of satisfaction as the union gave under the increased leverage.

Having unfastened that connection, the Gaean engineer uncoupled a second union connecting Marva's special apparatus to a system designed for freeze-drying large quantities of heat-sensitive organic material. Rummaging through her colleague's store of pipe, unions, valves, elbows, and the like, she selected a reducer, a variety of elbows, and several lengths of flexible pipe having the same diameter as the line from the pump. Working at top speed, fired by corrosive wrath, she built a connection from the waste line to Marva's apparatus. Perched precariously on a stepstool, she pushed back the cover and peered into the tank, wrinkling her nose against the overpowering reek.

"Yuck!" she muttered. "Buckets! Damn Nigel's slime-infested soul!"

Judging the tank to be a sixth part full of semisolid waste, she jumped down, and proceeded to an electrical box mounted on the wall. A three-way switch under labels that read *off, manual, automatic*, pointed to *off*. With a determined twist, she set the pointer on *manual*. Returning to the tank, she ran approximately two liters of water out of the intake valve, and switched on the agitator.

Enveloped in a loathsome stench, the improviser held her nose while the whirring blade stirred the contents to a thick slurry. Retching now, she added more water, agitated again, and pumped the fetid contents of the tank through her improvised connection into Marva's freeze-drying apparatus.

Having run several more liters of water into the emptied tank, the still-seething engineer again agitated the contents. Water streamed outwards to the rounded edges of the base, and up the sides far enough to rinse away the residue of fecal matter. Watching intently, she pumped the rinse-water into the vessels, and inspected the tank. *It'll pass*, she growled to her alter self. *We're not going to be eating out of it!* 

Striding round to where the slurry only partially filled each of the four commodious vessels of Marva's unit, Cleo opened the lid of a perfectly insulated, vacuum-walled trough, and drew on the pair of thick gloves hanging from a hook. From a similarly constructed locker, she lifted chunks of frozen carbon dioxide. Those she dropped into the trough she pumped half-full of viscous organic liquid. Carefully, she immersed each of the vessels into the stupendously cold bath, and left the four portions of slurry to freeze.

Taking no chances, she checked manifolds, condensers, and other parts of the unit before preparing a similar frigid bath for the condenser of the auxiliary pumping system. Having switched on the powerful vacuum pump that drastically reduced the air pressure in the main condensing system, she waited until the gauge indicated that the pressure approached the proper working range. Conjecturing that the vessels would require half an hour in which to freeze, the Gaean selected a large socket and ratchet from the tool locker, and began loosening the nuts securing the bolts that held the circular flange around the base of the tank, to the deck. At the allotted time, she raised the containers of frozen slurry one at a time from the cold bath, and attached each to the manifold connecting to the main condensing system and the auxiliary pumping system by a system of lines that could be opened or closed off independently. Opening certain of those, she allowed the auxiliary pump to evacuate the air from the vessels.

When the gauge indicated that the pressure in the auxiliary system had fallen as low as that in the main system, Cleo switched the evacuated containers onto the main system. Staring through transparent walls, she watched the surface of the frozen fecal matter begin to quiver and shake, as water vapor drawn inexorably away left voids within its volume. Savoring satisfaction, she stared at her handiwork until frost formed by condensation and freezing of atmospheric moisture coated the outsides of the frigid vessels, obscuring her view.

Well. What time is it? Uneasily, the captive glanced at the watch the Captain had noticed and retrieved when he returned her barricade of canisters to their storage locker. Michael must have slipped the watch back into the pocket of my tunic before handing me my suit this morning, she concluded. Thoughtful of him, his returning my property. I wonder why I don't hate the deck he walks on? After he raped me, and then arranged to let his men do likewise? Damn his gall! I don't understand my gut reaction to his criminal assault. Fifty minutes gone. I made it in time.

Working vigorously, the captive set about removing the remaining bolts from the flange.

Kneeling on the deck, Cleo never heard Nigel steal up behind her. When the soft, hissing "Finished?" sounded in her ear, she gave a visible start. Turning to look up into the face the ugliness of which still unnerved her, she retorted acidly, "The tank's clean. I didn't use canisters. They'd be too heavy. I lyophilized the sewage. It'll take twenty-two hours for the slurry in those vessels to finish drying to a powder I

can bag and store. You might want to add that fecal material as a starter, with whatever other organic substances you employ, when you activate the new system. I've about got the tank undone from the line." *Score one for me!* she exulted inwardly.

Nigel's inscrutable expression changed no whit. Declining to inspect the tank, he drawled, "I see." Impaling the self-possessed Gaean with glittering dark eyes, he couched an inquiry in one curt word. "Technician?"

"Life-support engineer," Cleo informed her adversary evenly.

"Hm." Disdaining to comment, Nigel surveyed the diversion line she had rigged to the lyophilization unit. Picking up a socket and ratchet from the tool kit he had left on the deck, he silently helped her remove the remaining nuts, and then disconnect the water-intake line and the line leading to the comminutor. Together, they pulled the tank free.

"Come along," the Columbian ordered.

Mutely, Cleo followed him back up the ladder to the deck above, and into the latrine housing the head that formerly emptied into the tank. The facility designed to receive solid waste, freed from the system, rested on the deck outside the door. Within, Leonard lay flat on his back, unfastening the pipes under the sink.

Turning to the woman, Nigel ordered, "You and Leonard detach these two urinals. Bag up all their connections, and leave the bags inside the items. Do the same with the sink. Move all three into the corridor with the head. I'll be back in an hour."

At the instant the officer vanished into the rim-corridor, Leonard wriggled out from under the sink, and turned anxious eyes on his new crewmate. "You didn't empty that blasted tank with a bucket, did you, Cleo?" he inquired in so friendly a fashion as to cause a palpable decrease in the woman's visceral tension.

"No. I pumped the waste into a freeze-dryer one of our researchers used, and left it dehydrating into nice dry brown powder, which I'll bag up for the son of a slimeball tomorrow." Leonard's infectious laugh warmed the captive to her core. "I'd like to have seen his face," he chortled.

"It never registered a thing."

Scratching his head in perplexity, the boy confided, "Nigel has always treated me decently, but he surely seems to have it in for you." His eyes, a dark blue-green, Cleo saw to grow troubled. "He can be a mean bas...so and so...when he chooses."

"Bastard's the correct term, Leonard. Don't worry about what you can't change. Do you want me to start on a urinal?"

"If you would. I've about got this."

Grateful for the companionable ease with which the youth accepted her, Cleo worked with her usual brisk efficiency. The sink and both urinals reposed on the deck next to the head when Nigel returned to find the pair unfastening the medicine locker.

"Leonard, take a break," he ordered. "Cleo, you and I'll move these components to Eleven."

Her calm shattered, the Gaean saw that Leonard glanced uneasily from the team leader to her own self, before departing. *It could be that this oozing piece of excrement won't give us both a break at the same time,* Cleo admitted, *but I'll wager the thrice-damned brute doesn't give me one at all!* 

That estimate proved correct. When Leonard returned, the trio finished transporting the fixtures to the mostly open space of Eleven's upper deck, which formed an exercise area.

Upon hastening back to Three, Nigel's team wrestled the waste tank up the ladder and onto a wheeled conveyance, and delivered the tank to Eleven. Nigel descended to the space below, where he had undone certain cumbersome components he could not utilize in the system he planned to install. Those he and his crew carried to Twelve. At 1100, he led his team to the main section for Justin's lunch.

Exhibiting courtesy that Cleo judged habitual to Michael when he encountered women in social settings, her captor stood back to allow her to precede him through

the line. *Polite rapist,* she commented sardonically in the privacy of her mind. Absently, she picked up a recyclable bowl and flatware, and held out the bowl to Conrad, who ladled it full of stew. Lifting what appeared to be an ordinary roll from a pile on a tray, Cleo took a seat next to Leonard. Marvin sat down diagonally across from her, at the only table. Michael settled into the place opposite the Gaean. Nigel seated himself with sinuous grace beside her.

As if constrained by the presence of a woman, no one spoke until Leonard sampled a roll. "Damn, but this tastes like the real thing," he observed, breaking the ice. Michael blandly agreed, prompting Nigel to observe sardonically, "Illusory, that judgment, but I trust that it's edible." Having thus displayed a modicum of civility, the three conversationalists devoted their full attention to the stew.

By all the wealth of Earth, Cleo marveled silently after doing the same, Justin ranks as a genius! That food-chemistry laboratory in Ten must have been used when the station was first placed in service, but over the last Earthcentury, the researchers periodically ransacking that old lab must surely have stripped it of the raw materials a chemist would need to synthesize edible protein. And even if it were stocked, I'd hate to find myself obliged to produce meat, with what I recollect of my basic foodchemistry courses. Evidently Justin isn't that sort of chemist, but he must have remembered how to synthesize flavorings. We certainly didn't leave any stock frozen meals that looked or tasted like this offering!

Curious, the engineer poked around in the stew, unsure what the smooth, small squares of white solid resembling chicken might be. Unused to guarding her facial expression, she let her puzzlement show.

Regarding the lone woman over his own bowl, Michael addressed her. "Don't ask, Cleo," he advised, his rugged face creasing into an unexpectedly engaging grin. "It doesn't pay to speculate. Keep your appetite."

A flash of bitter resentment born of her consciousness of what this enemy had laid on her died almost as soon as it registered on the captive's mind. The man's purely friendly smile disarmed her. *Michael could have forced far worse consequences*  on me than those I'm facing, she conceded grudgingly, deciding in that split second how she would interact on a daily basis with this autocratic holder of power. Meeting his eyes, she replied composedly, "If this basically came out of a secondary tank, you're right. I'd as leave not know. But it's delicious."

Leonard, seated on the Gaean's left, cheerfully volunteered a new comment. "When Conrad first rose to the rank of assistant cook, that other time we ran out of standard meals, he got pretty gaunt before he became hardened to what he saw going into Justin's creations."

Having overheard the remark, the hard-bitten blonde crewman standing behind the counter responded. "Watch your mouth, spacer," he called out in a mock growl. "I know just what I can drop raw into *your* next serving, to liven up your digestion!"

Chuckling, the boy shot back, "I'll keep a wary eye out, never fear."

Cleo bit into the roll, which boasted a texture and flavor approximating that of bread made from synthetic wheat flour. She knew it had not been made of that.

This doesn't taste of yeast, she ruminated, and Justin lacked the time in which to culture any. Most likely, he employed chemical leavening agents, such as sodium bicarbonate and potassium acid tartrate. But whatever did he use for flour? Sugar he could extract from the tubers growing in the tertiary tanks, but with no grains available... Potato flour? Eked out with starch from dried, ground duckweed? Not an especially appetizing thought, that. Amazing, though, what he has accomplished in such a short time.

At this juncture Marvin rose to leave, having spoken to no one during the meal. Maintaining his silence, he carried his bowl and utensils to the metal basin full of hot soapy water that reposed at the end of the serving counter. Knowing what was required, he washed them before dropping them into the steaming rinse. Casting about, he saw nothing on which to wipe his hands.

"Can't you manage to remember to set out a towel, Conrad?" he snapped. Bristling, the assistant food-chemist glared angrily at his associate. "You're lucky to be eating," he snarled. "Wipe your dainty white hands on your pants!" Two spots of red mottled the offender's pale cheeks as he turned abruptly and left. Scowling, Conrad banged a metal dish down on the counter with wholly unnecessary force. Cleo watched Michael's face crease into a black frown, but no sharp reprimand passed the mouth thinned to a slash. Conversation ceased.

What a vast difference one sees in the way people react to misfortune, the lone woman reflected bleakly. But even so, Marvin's crankier by far than most men who've formed part of a tightly knit team routinely living in impossibly cramped space. The majority of them joke and shrug off discomforts. Leonard has learned that, as have Michael and Conrad. Even Nigel has! And I'd bet my next meal that Justin would remain serene marooned in the midst of six chronic complainers like Marvin.

Upon emerging from the dining hall, Cleo warily watched Nigel collect a tool kit and a bulky glass-cloth bag. Bidden to follow, she and Leonard trotted behind him down the rim, as he led the way to a distant section that Cleo had visited only a few times, drawn, she divined accurately, by the same magnet that had lured her. In the space below the main deck, next to the outsized waste tank, stood a complicated piece of apparatus identical to the one currently functioning in Central. The complex unit bore signs of having been used at some point in time.

Casting a quizzical glance on the team leader, she heard him drawl, "You know what this is, hm?"

"It's the twin of the monitor in Central: a unit that continuously measures the balance between the respiratory quotient of the human population and the assimilatory quotient of the photosynthetic organisms: chiefly, of the algae," she replied promptly.

"Exactly. And since the assimilatory quotient of the algae depends directly on the nitrogen supplied for its metabolism from the human waste, we need this outfit. The balance is critical within less than a percent. I'd truly hate to die in space by slow strangulation, because we neglected to bring along enough extra shit."

Patently astonished at hearing the woman offer so technical an explanation, Leonard shot her a glance expressive of embarrassment, as he assessed her reaction to the provocation. Cleo merely agreed frostily, "So would I." *If you're trying to cause offense by being crude, Nigel, too bad you couldn't have read my mind this morning,* she retorted silently, but acidly. Belatedly realizing what her team leader intended, she failed to conceal burgeoning apprehension.

"See a problem, hm?"

"Those glass condensers I know to be irreplaceable. No others exist, except the ones on the monitor in use in Central. These would have to be taken off and cleaned, and the gaskets sealing the ends to the metal replaced. I judge it an almost impossible task to remove all six without breaking one. I was tempted to try, some time ago, but I decided not to risk it."

"Well, you're going to risk it now."

Dismayed, Cleo stared narrowly at the speaker, suspecting him of deliberately setting her up to fail, so as to blame her for a disaster.

His next words proved that suspicion, at least, to be unfounded. "We'll both risk it," he declared. "The job will take two pairs of hands. Leonard, watch carefully what I do."

Having accepted the small wrench he handed her, the Gaean nodded as he pointed to the first of the six delicate, blown-glass cylindrical caps, each enclosing a coil of hollow glass tubing. After she removed four bolts, and Nigel the other four, he directed, "So. We now spread the pressure of our hands equally around the base, and lift at exactly the same time, with the same minimal force. The old, dried-out gasket will likely stick. We slowly raise the item, until we're sure that the gasket material has separated from the metal."

Suiting his action to his words, the Lieutenant spread the fingers of both hands around the base of the cap, as Cleo did likewise. As she nervously observed the Columbian's maneuver, she noticed the finely modeled shape of his hands. The notion struck her that Nigel possessed a well-proportioned body. His face alone prompted her to think of him as ugly.

"Lift, now," came the peremptory order. Idle speculation ceased as Cleo

concentrated on exactly matching the force Nigel exerted. Slowly, the pair raised the cap, watched the gasket tear, went on lifting, and at length saw both remnants of frayed, cracked fabric separate slowly from the metal to hang from the glass base.

"That's high enough," the Columbian declared. "Let go."

On seeing the glass rest safely in Nigel's grasp, Cleo breathed a sigh expressive of relief that vanished with his next words. "You two will now detach the other five. Wrap each cylinder in glass wool, and set them on the deck, there. I'll be back eventually. If you finish before I return, separate the three tiers of the monitor so we can move the outfit."

Defiantly, the captive asserted, "We're bound to break one or two of those caps."

A sardonic smile that framed the corners of Nigel's mouth with two deep, vshaped creases appeared on the unprepossessing face. "No faith in your skill, hm? Well, do your best. Don't go to pieces if you do break one. Try harder to keep the rest intact." Turning on his heel, he left, carrying the condenser.

The pair charged with a nerve-racking task exchanged bleak glances. "Blue sky of Earth, Cleo, I feel as if I've got five sore thumbs on each hand," Leonard remarked wryly.

"Me, too. And if we break the other five caps, I suspect that Nigel might decide to hang me up by my thumbs."

That observation, accompanied by a brittle smile, prompted the youth to lay a comforting arm across the shoulders of woman who sensed his gesture to be purely comradely. "We won't," he asserted stoutly. "Let's attack the blasted chore." Picking up a wrench, he gingerly loosened a nut.

Warmed by his friendliness to the enemy acutely conscious of having earned Nigel's hatred, Cleo set about pairing with him in the successful removal of a cap. Forty-five minutes later, three additional unblemished cylinders lay swathed in glass wool on the deck. Drawing her sleeve across her forehead, the Gaean wiped away the perspiration produced by the strain. Leonard clasped and unclasped his fingers, limbering them. "I must say, I've spent more peaceful afternoons," he remarked, smiling at the woman again moved to admiration of beauty almost feminine in its delicacy. "How about you?"

"I'm beginning to think that days of that sort are gone forever."

The captive smiled back, but Leonard caught the underlying sadness in her tone. His face sobered. "Cleo, cheer up," he urged gently. "We can't do more than our best. Nigel will just have to accept that. Once everybody's used to this life, things will go better."

At a loss for a tactful way to phrase the further thoughts the woman could read in his eyes, he said no more, but the object of his solicitude sensed that he harbored genuine sympathy with regard to her plight. His kindly words succeeded in lifting her spirits. The smile generated by his concern lit her face with a radiance he beheld for the first time.

"That's better," he remarked cheerily. "Now, let's attack these last two miserable bubbles."

They broke the next one. Staring at the cascade of shattered tubing dropping to the deck out of the ruined interior of the still-intact cylinder, the expert let her shoulders droop as discouragement flooded back.

"Damn!" Leonard ejaculated in disgust. "Well, you warned him." Curiosity burgeoned as he recalled the woman's response to Nigel's sardonic query. "You know what you're doing. Are you a technician, Cleo?"

"I'm a life-support engineer."

A low whistle greeted that astonishing admission. "No lie! So is Nigel. He lucked out, if he'd only admit it."

"Slim chance of that," the Gaean retorted tartly. "Let's lift this remaining glass excrescence."

"Whatever that means."

"Wart. Pimple. Unnatural growth."

"That last describes the damned outfit to perfection, all right."

Exerting a wealth of care, the pair raised the final fragile piece, and saw it come away beautifully, satisfyingly intact. "Super! I can go back to breathing," Leonard declared. Two people bonded now into a comradeship transcending politics beamed at each other over the swathed cylinder.

By the time Nigel reappeared, the monitor, separated into three discrete parts, reposed on the deck. The woman stared in utter disbelief that she did her best to hide, at what the newcomer bore in his hands: an unblemished glass cylinder, identical to those integral to the device, in addition to the one initially detached. When he tried the pristinely clean, gasket-free cap over the aperture from which they had lifted the first, the gleaming object fit to perfection.

Able to control her face far better than she could master her burning curiosity, Cleo asked in a creditably noncommittal tone, "Where did you find that?"

"I didn't find it. I made it," the creator drawled, driven by pride to explain himself to this subjugated enemy.

"I see." Nigel's a glass blower! she marveled, impressed. Score two for the big ugly bastard. You're trailing again, woman.

Cleo's ire again rose like bile, as Nigel dismissed Leonard for a late break without giving her one. By the sheer power of her will, she kept her disgust for his lack of decency off her face. Stoically, she worked with undiminished efficiency as the three-person team moved the cumbersome monitor to Section Eleven.

When the team leader stepped into a latrine to answer a call of nature, Leonard frowned as he queried, "Has Nigel given you a break yet, Cleo?"

"No. Don't say anything. It's all right."

"The hell it is!"

"Shhh. Here he comes."

By 1800, the long span of exacting work seemed to the woman to have lasted a week. The thought of what faced her two hours hence set her teeth on edge. *I surely hope that if consciousness survives death, it can't develop awareness of this version of reality,* she reflected morosely as she accompanied her teammates to the dining

hall.

Supper revived her. *Breaded fried chicken!* she exclaimed inwardly. *Tastes like it. Looks like it. What is it?* Michael's warning unheeded, she speculated. *Oh, my battered, blistered soul. It's fried eel! Has to be.* Momentarily, the stricken diner ceased chewing the piece in her mouth. *Don't think about what it looked like in the tank...alive...wriggling. Don't! It tastes good. Down it, woman.* Managing to swallow that piece, she deliberately raised another morsel on her fork.

Involuntarily, she hesitated. Chancing to glance across the table to where Michael sat reading her mind, his rugged face wreathed in a broad grin, she flushed hotly. Hastily popping the meat into her mouth, she tried for nonchalance, and almost succeeded. Feeling the Captain's eyes on her, she smiled gamely.

"You were right," she admitted. "It doesn't pay to speculate, but it's good."

The keen observer sitting opposite noted the lines of strain marring the attractive face, and the shadows beneath the brown eyes. He smiled back, taking no pains to conceal his admiration for his captive's courage. For the few seconds elapsing before Nigel engaged his attention with a remark, Michael musingly indulged in speculations wholly unrelated to food.

Determined to spend her recreation-time in her cabin, the woman weary from the physical and emotional strains of the day spent an hour lying on her bed, trying unsuccessfully to relax. *Should I undress, and get under the bedcover?* she wondered. *Or would that seem too blatantly inviting? Better not. Oh, Max. Damn the perverse luck that required my presence in the capital that day. Why couldn't I have died with the others...with Rollin...on Davis Station?* 

Guilt flayed the woman nagged by qualms regarding the immorality of committing suicide. *Selfish thought, that,* she castigated herself. *I take that back, Max. I hate to think what losing both of us would have done to you. I'd never wish on you the agony I endured when I learned that you fell in battle. You were lucky, in a way. I can think of far worse ways to die, than by the sword. And you managed to take three of Norman's bastards with you!*  Conrad's entrance set Cleo rearing up abruptly. Unsure of what to expect, she regarded her unwanted sexual partner silently, warily.

Striding over to glare down at her, his face flinty, the man jutted his chin, and narrowed his eyes. "You needn't worry about entertaining me," he informed her bluntly. "I wouldn't be here, except that I have no place else to sleep. I hate your guts, you damned Gaean bitch! But I've never raped a woman in my life, and I'm not about to start now. You stay on your half of the bed, and I'll stay on mine."

Having stamped around to the far side of the double bunk, he turned to face away from his companion. With a few deft movements, he stripped off his uniform, and slid under the cover to lie with his back turned, as close to the edge of the mattress as he could get.

In Cleo's mind, that cutting verbal attack equated with a slap across the face. Numbly, she undressed, and slipped under the bedcover to lie with her back to her unwilling bedfellow. *Bitter doesn't describe what prompted that outburst!* she reflected bleakly. *He hates me!* 

Michael's words drifted to the forefront of her mind. Decent and ordinary. Well, Conrad refrained from employing physical violence. I guess I can't blame him for hating the enemy who stranded him here. And I don't have to let him... Go to sleep. Think of Max. Put this nightly trauma out of your mind. One week. That's all you committed yourself to endure. Next Monday, tell Michael to go to hell and take his crewmen with him!

Cleo fell asleep thinking of Max, concentrating on the happy times, as she always did when remembering, but her mind played her the cruel trick with which it periodically racked her. When Max walked through her dreams, the setting never varied. The vivid re-creation of disaster became indistinguishable from reality: more real than the dreamer's present circumstances. Her mind had not only stored that sequence of events in every detail, it had rehearsed the projection of the tragedy. At 0125, shouts roused Conrad out of a deep, sound sleep.

"What in the hell...?"

Abruptly, the startled spacer reared up to behold his nude companion, her wideopen eyes fixed on some remote point in space, kneeling upright in the bed. "Max!" she cried in a voice freighted with anguish. "Rollin's dead! He's dead! Oh, Max..."

The reenactment fragmented, dissolving not into merciful unconsciousness, but into Cleo's acute awareness of two strong hands gripping her arms and shaking her. Her eyes focused finally on the hard-bitten, frowning face framed in tousled blonde hair. The heart-wrenching vision still more real than her surroundings, she mumbled, "I was dreaming..."

"I gathered that." Wide-awake now, Conrad let go of her arms, staring at the apparition as if poised to grab her in case a relapse occurred.

Groping for the bedcover, Cleo clutched the fabric around her, and sank back down. Conscious that she had awakened a tired spacer who hated her, she nerved herself to withstand an angry outburst, but Conrad instead succumbed to curiosity.

"Who was Rollin?" he asked, his voice conveying no overtone of anger.

Haunted eyes stabbed into his. "My son. He was five, when Yancey annihilated Davis Station. Rollin died...with my sister...my brother...my cousins...and my uncle..." Jarred to his core, the Columbian rasped, "And Max?"

"My husband. He was killed fighting Norman's corpsmen, an Earthyear later."

Perceiving the shock showing nakedly on the lean, tough face of the man staring mutely down at her, Cleo explained wearily, "I'm still plagued by this recurring dream. I'm sorry I woke you."

"Turn your back to me."

Taking that curt order as the angry response she had expected, Cleo dispiritedly turned her back to her bedmate. She heard the rustle as he lay down. With no warning, he thrust both arms round her. Startled, she stiffened, but almost instantly went pliant, as she wearily acknowledged his right to use her sexually. Pulling her close, so that her back pressed against his chest, he growled in her ear, "I'm going to hold on to you, in case you do that again. Go back to sleep."

Fully immersed now in her present reality, Cleo lay silently in Conrad's embrace,

astonished by his reaction. *Decent and ordinary after all,* she admitted sadly. *He refused to employ his sexuality as a weapon, even though he hates me, but he's willing to hold onto a crazy, screaming, hagridden Gaean bitch for half the night.* The warmth of the lean, hard body pressed against hers proved unaccountably comforting. Relaxing, she drifted off into a sleep untroubled by any recurrence of the nightmare.

## WEEK ONE: WEDNESDAY

Cleo awoke to behold Conrad sitting up, facing her, his arms clasping the bent knees hidden by the bedcover. For a few seconds, the two bedmates stared warily at each other. No trace of the icy anger that had so chilled the woman on the previous night lingered in the spacer's voice when he spoke.

"You've taken one rough blow after another," he conceded gruffly. "And I was hard on you, last night." He paused, his eyes bleak. "I still hate what you did. Or maybe it's more that I'm royally pissed because a woman mustered guts enough to do it. So here I am, stranded in the ass-end of nowhere."

Lying motionless, the Gaean wisely said nothing, giving the Columbian time in which to find words that adequately expressed what he felt. At length, he urged huskily, "Forget what I told you last night. It was the truth then. I'm not so sure it still is. I need to rethink things."

Vastly reassured, Cleo acknowledged, "Perhaps we both do."

"Was sleeping with all of us your idea or Michael's?"

A flush mantled the woman's cheeks. "He urged that course on me. I feel that I owe all of you. I consented for that reason."

"You'd still do it for me, after what I said last night?"

"Yes. Now, if you want."

Frowning, Conrad debated with himself. Reluctantly, he shook his head. "Not now. Not yet. Too dangerous, when I'm still not sure how I feel about you. Too easy to take my anger out on you in a way I'd come to hate myself for, afterwards." Touched to the core by the man's bitter honesty, Cleo nodded. "When you're ready, Conrad. And thank you...for explaining how you feel. That helped me."

Rising, the spacer dressed with his back to the Gaean. Keeping her own back turned, she quickly donned her uniform. While her companion used the bathcabin, she stripped the bedding off the bed, and took her turn in the cubicle when he emerged. When she strode out, she discovered that he had located the spare sheets, and had made the bed. Having opened the door, Conrad stood back to let her precede him through it. She flashed him a smile expressive of gratitude. His smile lacked any nuance of sarcasm. Side by side, the pair walked in to breakfast.

A familiar odor rose from the hot muffins accompanying the breaded fishcakes. Banana oil, Cleo silently catalogued the scent. Isopentyl acetate: a fragrant ester. A fruit, bananas were, on Old Earth. What it must have been like to be able to walk up and pick something to eat off a tree?

After breakfast, her team leader, his eyes inscrutable, curtly ordered her to bag the freeze-dried waste, and clean the lyophilization unit. Concealing smug satisfaction behind a neutral face, the engineer nodded, and hastened to Three.

Just as she expected, the dehydration process had reached completion earlier. As the high evaporation rate keeping the slurry frozen diminished, the temperature of the four vessels had begun to rise to that of the surrounding air. No frost remained, now, on their exterior surfaces.

After shutting the vessels off from the main condensing system, Cleo opened the lines into the auxiliary system under vacuum, and allowed air slowly to refill first that volume of space, and then the glass receptacles. Having detached each vessel from the manifold, she poured the dry, powdery waste into self-sealing glass-cloth bags, and stacked those on the deck. She next pumped the viscous liquid, from which the frozen carbon dioxide had sublimed, into its reservoir, and shut down the main condensing system. She then arranged for the ice in the condensers to thaw slowly, and drain away. Deftly, she cleaned the apparatus.

The second hour of the morning saw the captive gingerly flushing out the five

original glass cylinders removed from the monitor, employing a wickedly corrosive cleaning solution consisting of potassium dichromate dissolved in concentrated sulfuric acid. Taking infinite pains not to get any of the dark, orange-red liquid on skin or clothes, she watched the rinse fall smoothly away from sparkling, squeaky-clean glass.

That would be the final blow that pushed me over the edge into hysteria, she concluded grimly. To burn a big hole in the front of the only set of clothes I've got to my name. Not to mention what chromic acid would do to my skin! Brr. I detest using this stuff, but it works.

The danger she acknowledged bringing on herself. His face as impenetrable as ever, Nigel had simply ordered her to clean the five pieces. Using the harsh acid arose out of a keen desire never to find herself again faced with the task of removing those six glass caps, despite his being able to fashion replacements.

Musingly, she appraised his feat. Whatever else he is, he's a superb craftsman, she conceded grudgingly. Damn his guts!

At 0710, her nemesis reappeared, his silent, catlike tread as usual giving her no warning of his approach. *Does he do that in hopes of catching me napping?* she wondered irately, after again reacting with a visible start. On covertly studying his tall, lithe, limber frame, she decided that the man habitually walked that way. *Swordsman,* she surmised. *Athlete. I'll wager that face alone gives him a prime advantage over an opponent!* 

The subject of her musings helped her carry the five fragile glass components to the monitor, which had been reassembled by Leonard and Nigel. With painstaking care, the two engineers applied liquid gasket-former, and fastened the pieces into place. Leonard returned from his break. Anger clawed at the vitals of the woman denied any respite from hard work, causing her dread of the final night in this wretched week to increase. *At least, I can face tonight,* she reflected, as the upsurge of flaming ire subsided into smoldering embers. The thought of coupling with the good-natured youth whose comradeship so comforted her produced not the least qualm.

Midmorning found Leonard and Cleo laboring side-by-side within the cramped space from which they had removed the waste tank from the lower deck of Three, obeying curt orders to detach the pump, the comminutor, the heat exchanger, the apparatus for irradiating the nutrient stream, various other components connecting to the station-wide monitoring system, and all the intervening line. The pair worked in comradely fashion, joking occasionally.

At one point, seeing what Leonard intended, Cleo asked hesitantly, "Would you be offended if I showed you an easier way to do that?"

Glancing up in surprise, her teammate responded, "Hell, no."

"Watch." Deftly, the engineer unbolted both ends of a long battery of monitoring apparatus, which she detached intact. "You don't have to take it all apart."

No trace of chagrin greeted that demonstration. "I lucked out too in landing you as a partner, Cleo," the lad acknowledged with a grin. Sitting back on his heels, he swept an appraising glance down his companion's shapely figure. Far from displaying desire, he appeared of a sudden to plunge into dejection. That mercurial change in expression, for which Cleo could assign no cause, momentarily darkened the face of classic beauty. Troubled blue-green eyes grew remote, became lost in some bitter inner vision, and dropped, to stare at the deck. Wordlessly, Leonard returned to his task.

Disturbed, Cleo resumed hers. *Did I offend him after all?* she wondered uneasily. *No. It wasn't that. Maybe he's homesick. He's just a lad: a gallant one, not to hold my action in landing him in this mess against me*. Moved to compassion, she generated affection, being unutterably grateful that the boy sturdily refused to model his behavior on that of the Lieutenant.

The seemingly interminable morning slowly wore away.

Over a steaming bowl of unidentifiable but fragrant baked casserole—*I guess* that's what you'd call this concoction, the Gaean mused—she greeted Michael, who

sat down opposite her. "Lunch smells good," she commented crisply, prompting the man half finished with his meal to assure her that it tasted even better than it smelled. Sampling the offering, Cleo recognized the flavors of onion and tomato. Not for the first time, she wondered how a palate limited to synthesized tomato flavoring might react to a freshly picked, Earth-grown fruit.

A new arrival took his accustomed place diagonally across from Cleo. Turning to face the subordinate least able to handle the misfortune afflicting all of them, Michael remarked pleasantly, "Fine job you did, Marvin, retrieving those two isolated fragments from the ship's bank. They'll help."

Brusquely, the spacer shot back, "You'd be better off if you had Harmon instead of me."

Concealing the annoyance generated by that self-denigrating response, Michael held on to his temper. "But I don't," he replied equably. "And I consider myself lucky to have you."

The two spots of red that had accompanied his petulant outburst of the prior day again lent color to Marvin's otherwise pale face. He dropped his eyes to his bowl. Emotions Cleo could not identify reflected in confused succession across features patently unable to conceal what the man within felt. As she watched, the recipient of the compliment mindlessly stirred his fork through the food. His eyes looked pained.

Rendered uncomfortable by the exchange, Cleo marveled at the gangly expert's inability to relate to his fellow crewmen. Her imagination proved unequal to the task of approximating what his approach to a night in her bed might be like. *Tomorrow,* she reminded herself as her gut clenched. *He'll be difficult, no doubt, but somehow I can't bring myself to feel afraid of him. Take it as it comes. Tomorrow's an eon away.* 

The afternoon taxed Cleo's fine-boned but wiry body. In top physical shape, she prided herself on her stamina, but six hours of lifting, carrying, shoving and sliding massive, unwieldy components through narrow corridors and up and down ladders exhausted her. Of the three team-members, only Nigel displayed the requisite strength. Leonard, taller than she but almost as slim, she judged to be in superb physical shape, but even his strength proved no match for that of the older man, who took the brunt of the lifting on his own self.

Nigel keeps doing more than his share out of a desire to see the job done right, Cleo concluded dourly, not out of any wish to spare either of us. Tough bastard. He could break me in two with those hands, she acknowledged with a shiver. Maybe he will.

Justin served the portions at supper. Sliding a square slab of what looked and smelled like fish onto Cleo's plate, he smiled warmly at the lone Gaean, evoking a comment. "Justin, you're a gourmet's delight," she exclaimed, her praise manifestly sincere.

"Hungry people aren't usually fussy, Cleo, but thank you."

Nigel, next in line, smiled his sardonic smile. "Your skill's exceeded only by your imagination, Justin, although at times, I wish mine were less vivid."

The head cook laughed, his response a pleasant sound. "You know too damned well what lives in the photosynthetic exchanger, Nigel." The recipient of that quick rejoinder chuckled as he strode towards the table and sat down next to Cleo.

Nigel can be human to his friends, the woman admitted. And even so arrogant a bastard would find it easy to accept Justin as such. That observation only served to increase her resentment of the team leader's treatment of her.

Able on this night to relax, the exhausted Gaean spent the hour of recreation lying dressed, except for her boots. Catching herself dozing off, she fought the insidious tendency. At exactly 2000, she saw Leonard step through the door.

No smile greeted her. The boy's face mirrored emotions she failed to identify. He seemed tense, and stricken with the same dejection she had detected earlier, but she noticed something else as well. *He looks...ashamed,* she decided, puzzled by his aspect. *Of what? Of wanting to do what Michael gave him the right, or at least the opportunity, to do?* 

Standing beside the bed, the youth spoke, earnestly and forcefully. "Cleo, I

want you to know that I don't blame you for what you did," he assured her. "I admire you for it. You've got amazing courage. I also want you to know that I'm your friend. But I'm not going to make love to you. You needn't worry about that."

As she digested that unexpected assertion, the widow studied the boy's set, stricken face. A direly unsettling thought occurred to her. "Have you a wife in Columbia, Leonard?" she asked anxiously, dreading to hear an affirmative answer.

"No!" came the vehement denial. "It's not that. Don't worry about me, Cleo. Let's go to bed. I'll wager that you're exhausted." Her solicitous query seemed only to have worsened the lad's tension.

Puzzled and uneasy, the Gaean said no more. Turning her back to her companion, she stripped off the uniform she let fall to the deck for lack of a better place to leave it. Chancing to turn just as Leonard did, she caught a glimpse of a lean, hard abdomen, and a smooth white chest that she saw to be all but hairless. Each of the pair slid in, to lie rigidly under the cover.

To the woman mentally prepared to yield her body to this youthful teammate whose kindness she deeply appreciated, his reluctance came not as a relief, but as a worrisome problem. Sensing the magnitude of the lad's mental distress, she fretted as to the cause.

An idea struck out of the black, providing a new angle. Leonard's slender, graceful body, and the beauty so nearly feminine, filled her inner vision as speculation grew into certainty. *Dare I ask?* she agonized. *If it's that, he'll be glad to know that I don't care. I surely don't! I've never harbored any irrational aversion to men or women who form bonds with same-sex lovers. I'll risk asking...put him at ease on that score.* 

Thus resolved, she spoke, softly but determinedly. "Leonard." Turning only his head, the youth glanced warily at her. "If you're a man who prefers to couple sexually with other men, just say so. I'll understand."

Galvanized into violent action, the youthful spacer reared bolt upright. "No, Cleo! I'm not! I'm not that! I don't want you to think that of me!" His voice cracking with the intensity of his emotion, he fronted his bedmate, his desperation evident.

Aghast at her mistake, Cleo sat up to face him. "Oh, Leonard...I'm sorry! I didn't mean..." Groping for words, she stared in manifest dismay, totally at a loss as to how to remedy her egregious error.

Exerting heroic effort, Leonard mastered his discomposure. "It's all right, Cleo," he reassured her hoarsely. "I know what made you think that. I'm not angry at you." Dropping to lie supine, he stared out of a pale, troubled face at the inner plate of the hull curving above him, seeming to the perturbed witness to lapse into black despair.

Seared by her consciousness of her companion's mental anguish, Cleo groped for tactful words with which to heal any hurt she might unwittingly have dealt him. Unable to imagine what so direly troubled his mind, she lay for a few minutes facing him, wondering whether to risk a new outburst. Deciding that she could not simply turn over and fall asleep, she opted to run the risk.

"Leonard, I'm your friend," she asserted firmly. "If you'd care to confide what's causing you such dreadful mental agony, I'll surely listen. If I can't help, at least I can sympathize. I give you my word that I'll keep anything you tell me strictly to myself."

Turning his slim body, Leonard propped himself on one elbow, touched by a concern he sensed to be absolutely genuine. Silently, he debated with himself, his inner conflict plainly evident to the friend silently willing him to confide to a sympathetic woman a traumatic problem he had evidently kept buried deep inside until now. At length, his longing for a confidante won out over what seemed to be wrenching shame. Haltingly, he began to speak, his voice husky with pain.

"I went to space as soon as I turned seventeen. You're supposed to be eighteen, but I got accepted into Second Corps at that age, owing to the war. A lot of experienced spacers whose enlistment in the four other corps just expired flocked to Third, figuring that they'd rate a far greater chance of promotion in an outfit waging all-out war. When I got assigned to a military ship, I discovered that I'd be bunking with the Lieutenant. He was as big as Nigel, but twice as broad shouldered. And strong." Momentarily, the clear voice faltered, but swiftly regained its force. "I'm not a man who prefers men, Cleo...but he was. He...forced me...to be...what he was."

Shocked past speech, the Gaean hung on the narrator's words, scarcely breathing.

"That went on...for two fourweeks. He warned me...that if I told anyone...he'd insist that I seduced him. He said that with my face, I'd not be believed, but that he would be. He warned that I'd be dishonorably discharged. He boasted that he had the Captain under his thumb. From what I could judge, he did. He made...worse threats. Far worse. I figured he was capable of carrying them out, so I kept my mouth shut."

Cleo's heart turned over. *Eight weeks of hell!* she exclaimed inwardly. *And I considered a week an eternity!* 

"Finally, we were granted shore leave. I slipped away...overstayed my leave. I hoped they'd lift, but they didn't. I hid out for a day, near the corridor below the locks. My captain evidently didn't report my desertion. Instead, he sent his crew to scour the area, but I managed to avoid capture.

"I kept an eye on what crews emerged from the locks. When a Second Corps ship docked, I boldly walked into the lock, and told the spacers on guard that I bore a message for their captain, from mine. One of them took me to Michael, who commanded the vessel. I baldly informed a tough-looking officer whom I'd never before laid eyes on, that I'd deserted. I emphasized that I'd far prefer that he space me himself than return me to my captain. It was wartime. Either captain could have executed a deserter on the spot. I didn't care." Pain shadowed the boy's face, and freighted his voice.

"Michael asked me why I had deserted. I wanted to tell him, but the memory of the Lieutenant's threats stopped me...that, and the shame scalding me. When I said nothing, Michael strapped me into a chair in his cabin, and shot me with a dose of truth compeller. He was supposed to let a medic do that...summon a witness. He didn't do either, but he recorded the session.

"He must have suspected, because he asked all the right questions. I couldn't do other than spill everything. Afterwards, he didn't say a word. He just put me out with a dose of sleep-inducer.

"When I woke up, I was lying tied to the bunk, in the same cabin. Justin came in with breakfast. After freeing me, he removed an IV tube, and a catheter. I asked him how long I'd been out. He told me I'd been unconscious for three days, which shocked the living hell out of me. Justin agreed to leave me untied, but he issued a stern order that I remain in the bunk. He flatly stated that I'd never make it past the door if I tried to slip out, and my doing so would wreck what slim chance I had of getting out of the mess I was in. I believed him, and stayed in bed.

"After a while, Michael showed up. He told me that I had a legitimate grievance, and could cause no end of trouble for my captain if I brought formal charges, or even talked privately to friends about what happened. He issued a grim warning. He said that I'd cause even more trouble for myself if I did either. Then he informed me that he had arranged to transfer me to his own crew, on the condition that I say nothing about what had happened, to anyone. He advised me to put the whole business out of my mind, and concentrate on learning what he'd have his men teach me. He assured me that the problem I had encountered wouldn't arise in his crew.

"Well, it took me only a second to accept his offer. I never did learn just how he arranged it all. I discovered later that he had an opening, having just lost Jensen, who enlisted in Third Corps. Even so, Michael's crewmen are supposed to be specialists. Not long after, I discovered another thing that shocked the everlasting hell out of me. After learning what happened to me, Michael challenged my former cabinmate to a duel. He fought the bastard the second day I lay asleep. That encounter turned out to be a near thing, as the Lieutenant was a formidable swordsman, but the Captain killed him. Michael never told me that. Nigel acted as one of his seconds, and I overheard Nigel describing the duel to Conrad. I've served under Michael ever since."

Exquisitely conscious that her perception of the man who had physically assaulted her in a fit of blind rage changed forever at this moment, Cleo breathed, "And I thought it was only women who got raped!"

His voice husky, Leonard confided, "I tried to put the memories...the shame...out of my mind. I succeeded to some extent, but the first time we were granted leave, Michael's whole crew went to visit courtesans. Michael and Nigel took me. The Captain put his invitation in a way I couldn't refuse. I'd never laid a woman, so I went. But...the first thing she did was to take my shaft in her mouth. That's what the Lieutenant had done...what he'd made me do...among other things. Her doing that...froze me. No matter what else she did...I couldn't shoot. All I felt was embarrassment...shame. I've never gotten off in a girl. After that, I hired the women just to sit and talk. They didn't mind. I guess they enjoyed the paid break. I'm...messed up, Cleo. I'd just be one more problem to you, and I won't lay that on you."

An overwhelming desire to comfort this sensitive soul whose experience of rape she perceived as having been far more traumatic than her own, prompted her to offer an intimately personal solution. "Leonard, listen to me," she urged in a voice breathing passionate intensity. "I'm a widow. I was married for eight Earthyears. I've got that much experience. I know, now, what your problem was. I can help you, if you'll let me."

Shocked both at her revelation, and her willingness to offer herself after hearing his tale, Leonard stifled an urge to agree, acting out of a sense of inadequacy heightened by the cultural programming that had shaped his outlook throughout the span of his growing to maturity. A typical product of a male-dominated, sexually permissive, militaristic society, which in principle, if not always in practice, placed high value on personal honor, he equated masculinity with sexual potency. His pride forbade his taking what he feared he could not give.

"I wouldn't be able to satisfy you, Cleo," he confided bleakly. That exquisitely

painful admission emerged in a husky whisper.

Touched to the core by what she perceived as selflessness, Cleo gripped the lad's upper arms in the intensity of her desire to override his scruples. "Leonard, tonight you've already given me what I needed far more than physical satisfaction, when you said that you were my friend!" she asserted, her argument the more convincing for being utterly true. "Let me give you something back."

Cleo watched the yearning to accept contend with the shame the painful recital had dredged out of the depths where Leonard normally kept it hidden. At length, he whispered, "If you're sure you wouldn't mind letting me try..."

Moving closer, Cleo asked softly, "You've kissed girls, haven't you?"

"Hell, no. Courtesans don't let you kiss them on the mouth."

Shocked, the Gaean gasped, "They'll do what you said that brazen hussy did without being asked, and then won't let you kiss them on the mouth?"

"That's right."

"Well, kiss me."

Hesitantly, Leonard embraced the woman he saw not only as physically attractive, but as ingenuous: lacking the worldliness, the overt carnality, that characterized professional partners. Unconsciously, he perceived her as younger than her Earthyears: a contemporary. His mouth closed over hers, in a gentle, exploratory salute.

Melting against him, Cleo caressed his tongue with hers. Her arms slid round him, pressing his bare torso against her chest. Even as she sensed arousal, doubts assailed her. What if I inadvertently make some gesture that brings back an awful memory? she agonized. I'll worsen his problem!

Deliberating with lightflash speed, she recalled his fear of failing to satisfy her. Intuitively, she divined that shifting his focus onto achieving that goal might allow his body to react in a normal manner. "Leonard," she urged when he freed her lips, "I know what makes me feel good. Let me show you." Taking both of his hands in hers, she placed them over her breasts. "Now...play with my nipples. Make them stand up. Like that... Mmmm."

Smiling warmly, Cleo ran her hands down the spine of the youth caressing her with such gentleness. At length, she reached for his hands. Wordlessly, she guided his fingers to the places she knew would produce pleasurable sensations. Thus plainly invited to explore his partner's intimate feminine center, Leonard unhesitatingly complied. His tension drained away, as he saw that his touch aroused her. Although her fear that she might cause him further psychic damage persisted, that emotion nowise prevented her body from responding.

After a time, she pulled him down against her, and held him tightly. Growing aware that his engorged shaft pressed against her thigh, she exulted at the discovery. *He's not all that badly messed up,* she concluded in relief. *He certainly isn't impotent, so the problem must center in his mind.* Resisting her urge to caress his erect manhood out of fear that so bold a gesture might elicit a hateful recollection, she urged, "Leonard, kiss my breasts."

No whit reluctant, the youth brushed each of her nipples in turn with lips almost as soft as a girl's. The sigh of pleasure wafting by his ear sent passion surging through him. His now rock-hard member throbbing with need, he gasped, "Cleo...do you mind if I...?"

"I want you to! Let me...there." Manifestly eager hands guided his shaft. His thrust aroused a swift, fierce response in the woman who until now had acted out of kindly concern, rather than carnal desire. The Gaean thrust back, her hands pressing her partner against her slim but shapely body. Sensing the force of the passionate arousal that had annihilated the youthful spacer's inhibitions, Cleo gave herself freely, out of the deep affection she had so swiftly conceived for this gentle teammate: emotion born not of pity, but of warm liking, and profound respect. When she heard his gasp at the intensity of the climax he had been certain he could not achieve, she hugged him tightly, awash in relief.

For a time, her youthful lover lay limply in her arms. At length, he rose on both elbows, his classic face alight with joy. "Cleo, I shot my load the normal way!

Finally!" Sobering, he regarded the successful therapist sharing his joy. His face clouded. "Did I satisfy you?" he demanded.

Incapable of uttering a lie, Cleo sought to reassure him. "If you mean, did I have a climax...no, Leonard. Not this time. I guess I was far too worried that you wouldn't, but everything you did...every touch of your hands...gave me marvelous pleasure. Next time, you'll make me reach fulfillment. There's nothing wrong with you. All you need is practice."

The clouds vanished. The protégé thus beguilingly encouraged leaned down and kissed his partner. Cleo sensed burgeoning confidence: an authority in the lad's bearing that had been lacking at first. Immeasurably pleased by the success of her venture, she ardently returned his intimate kiss. When Leonard stretched out beside her, she curled her body against his, and snuggled closer when he laid an arm across her. Full of the ineffable peace that follows the ultimate expression of friendship, two people scarred emotionally by cruel dispensations of an uncaring fate—two products of radically different cultures, who had never, even at the start, perceived themselves as enemies—drifted serenely into sleep.

## **WEEK ONE: THURSDAY**

Awakened by Leonard's gentle touch, Cleo smiled up at him, feeling tired to the bone. "I let you sleep as long as I could," he informed her solicitously. "You looked exhausted." Having rolled onto her side, the woman patently grateful for his refusal to wake her earlier reached down to the deck to find her clothes gone.

"I had to use the bathcabin an hour ago," the lad explained. "I tossed both uniforms into the adjuster." Sensing her reluctance to rise naked and walk to the bathcabin, he urged, "Don't get up. I'll fetch them." Returning clad in his pants, bearing his companion's uniform, the youth turned his back while she dressed.

As she combed her hair before the mirror in the bathcabin, the Gaean observed the dark circles under her eyes, and the gauntness of her face. *I've lost mass,* she concluded dispiritedly, and I had none to spare. I need eight hours of uninterrupted sleep, which I'm not going to get. Walking back out, she discovered that Leonard had made the bed. Preceding him through the door he held open, she accompanied him to breakfast.

Over his plate of flat round cakes topped with thick, brown, sweet syrup, Michael glanced dourly at the newcomers, and muttered a greeting, his grouchiness owing to his missing his morning coffee acutely.

Wouldn't you know that when disaster struck, it'd target a ship four days before the vessel was scheduled to be re-supplied? he groused to his alter self. Better go on letting Justin hoard what little coffee powder remains, along with the few standard meals he retrieved out of the freezers in the galleys. Damn it...you shouldn't *complain,* he chided himself dejectedly. *You've heard nothing but compliments on the food.* 

Glumly, he sipped orange juice concocted by a man who never in his life had seen an orange. Exquisitely conscious of the manner in which food affected the morale of men enduring confinement as daunting as that which his crew now faced, the experienced leader reflected that both Justin's resources and his imagination had limits, and after a time, the novelty of the dishes would wear off.

Allowing his glance to stray to Leonard, the Captain took in the serenity suffusing the handsome, clean-cut features: the ineffable contentment. On the screen of his mind, Michael reviewed a certain list. Watching as Cleo turned to her youthful teammate with a radiant smile and a comment on the food, he drew several inescapable conclusions.

Nigel's team spent the morning installing the waste-management components they had transported to Eleven on the previous day. The work went slowly. The built-in framework for the units they had removed seldom fit the ones they set about anchoring in place. They spent considerable time not only returning to Three for materials, but also scrounging in other sections for supports, brackets and the like, which they could adapt.

Judging that she possessed the most complete knowledge of the station's resources, Cleo nonetheless developed a grudging admiration for Nigel's ability.

At some point, he must have spent hours studying what's available, she reluctantly conceded. He boasts the same originality of mind and flexibility that Marva displays: the same eye for spotting something not designed for what he needs, but which he can make work. This section won't look cobbled together when he finishes building from the plan he's carrying in his head.

Shortly after Leonard returned from his break, Michael descended halfway down the ladder to summon the second officer to the deck above. "I intend to make some measurements of space, Nigel, and I need your estimate of how much your system's components will require," he announced noncommittally. Rising from where he had been improvising a framework to support the massive pump, the team leader followed the Captain ascending through the hatch.

As if nothing else weighed on his mind, Michael asked a succession of technical questions while making a series of measurements that he recorded on a small datapad. Having drawn Nigel as far from the open hatch as the layout of the deck permitted, he turned and faced his lieutenant. His eyes growing suddenly flinty, he spoke with deliberate, steely force. "When I issued you your orders, I stated plainly that you were to give your crewmen each two breaks a day. This afternoon, you'll give Cleo one—for the first time."

A flash of strong emotion momentarily flitted across the unprepossessing face of the second officer: a reaction he quickly concealed. "Crewmen, yes," he responded, his sibilant voice bearing an edge. "Cleo's a prisoner of war."

Scowling, Michael raked his subordinate with a withering glance. "Don't play a game of semantics with me, Nigel," he snapped. "I told you I was making her a member of my crew. I meant exactly that. Has she refused to perform any task you've set her?"

"No." That deceptively calm reply slid through thin lips that instantly compressed into a tight line.

"All right then. You'll obey orders, Nigel. All of them. I'll be logging your failure to obey this set completely."

The raw energy charging the space separating the two men palpably impacted both of them. Nigel's eyes glittered. His sibilant voice conveyed more than a hint of menace as he observed, "It has been a long time since you saw fit to issue me a reprimand, Michael."

"It has been a long time since you earned one!"

A sudden, ominous tensing of the offender's lithe body preceded his next incisive words, which he spaced for emphasis. "It could be argued with no recourse to semantics, that we've effectively ceased to be a part of the Columbian military," he hissed. "We're stranded in no-man's land, perhaps forever. It could be argued that you possess no authority to issue the orders you have!"

No whit daunted, Michael stepped closer to the antagonist taller than himself. His chin jutted, and his eyes flashed blue fire. In a voice cold as the heart of a comet, he cast the implied threat back in the offender's teeth. "If you're considering promoting yourself into my rank and my job, Nigel, there's one way you can do that. Any time you're ready, I am. If that's what you want, name your time, and your place, right now."

His eyes stabbing into those of the man recklessly daring him to issue a formal challenge, the opponent thus bluntly goaded retorted in a tone of chilling certainty, "If we go that route, Michael, I'll kill you."

"That's extremely likely, but that's the route you'll have to take." Patently unfazed, Michael thrust his chin a shade deeper into Nigel's personal space.

The adversary the Captain knew to have made no idle boast stood still as a statue cast in bronze, staring meditatively into his superior officer's granite face and icy eyes. Seconds passed, during which Michael's aggressive stance grew subtly more threatening.

At length, the taller man shrugged. "I don't see your rank and present job as worth my skewering you so as to inherit them," he drawled sardonically.

"That's the only way you will." Concealing the magnitude of his relief at the outcome, the victor in the confrontation repeated his command. "At 1500, send Cleo on a break."

"At 1440. Before Leonard's."

"Just so she gets one." Having glared at his subordinate long enough to drive home the fact that he retained his dominance, Michael stalked away across the uncluttered main deck of Eleven.

Smoldering dark eyes followed his departing back. Nigel remained motionless, his eyes remote. Seconds passed before his clenched hands opened, and his tightly compressed lips relaxed. Slowly, the tension drained out of him. With the feline grace habitual to him, he dropped back down the ladder to the deck below, and

silently continued his task.

Over a lunch of cooked vegetables from the tertiary tanks, mixed with small chunks of fish and creamed in a thick, lemon-flavored gray sauce—*citric acid, like the orange juice,* Cleo mused, amazed at how well it improved the fishy taste—Michael engaged the man so sharply reprimanded earlier in a brief exchange of remarks, just as if nothing whatsoever had happened. Turning to Marvin, the Captain asked a few questions regarding the space the board would require in Eleven, and for once, received a civil answer. Leonard addressed a joking remark to Nigel, who returned him a sardonic quip no different from those he characteristically employed. Cleo rose, and spoke pleasantly to Conrad as she washed her utensils. The assistant cook favored her with a smile as he replied.

His sensing no tensions failed to reassure Michael, but no hint of worry surfaced on his rugged face. His compact, muscular body seemed to the others completely relaxed, as he ate the newest offering. Dark speculations regarding various possibilities of future trouble, one of which touched his mind with cold fear, he resolutely buried in the inmost recesses of his consciousness.

The afternoon proved a repeat of the morning. Having lifted the pump into place, Nigel's team members commenced installing the comminutor, which would break down the waste into small particles, and the heat exchanger, which would regulate the temperature of the nutrient-rich stream pumped through the photosynthetic exchanger.

Cleo worked up a sweat, lifting. *Do I ever need a shower!* she groused to her alter ego. Sighing as she recalled washing each night with a damp cloth, she resolved to go on hoarding the bottled two-liter ration of water that Conrad, at the start of the week, had set out in each crewman's quarters for personal washing.

Another thought impinged. That five percent aqueous solution of aluminum chloride I prepared after raiding the chemical locker serves adequately as a deodorant, she admitted, but my hair...

Despondently, she ran a hand through lank locks damp with perspiration, well

aware that wetting them with a small portion of soapy water, employing an equally frugal rinse, and blowing the wet tangle dry in the jets of warm air issuing from the walls of the shower cylinder in her bathcabin, would leave her hair feeling only slightly less greasy. By the time Saturday night comes round, maybe I'll present no feminine appeal whatsoever to tempt Nigel, she conjectured sardonically. Fear stabbed through her, as she reflected that he looked grimmer than ever on this day.

At 1440, Nigel turned and addressed her. "Take a break," he ordered in a perfectly noncommittal tone. Startled, she rose, staring at the team leader in surprise. Disdaining to elaborate on his order, he turned back to his task.

Silently, Cleo debated with herself. Where shall I go? Run the kilometer and a half to the dining hall? Well, I got used to doing that, working in Fifteen. I'd enjoy a drink of juice. Besides, the exercise will offset the effects of working all morning in the cramped space behind the waste tank. Swinging up through the hatch, the Gaean ran effortlessly down the rim.

Arriving in the dining hall, she sank into a chair, her shoulders slumping. What brought this on? she wondered uneasily. Nigel can't have developed a change of heart!

To her surprise, Michael strode in, to advance directly to a cooler. "Orange juice or lemon?" he inquired pleasantly over his shoulder. Having instinctively straightened upon seeing him enter, Cleo opted for orange. Taking the glass he handed her, she thanked him.

"How goes it?" he inquired. "Do you think that Nigel's system will keep us breathing and eating?"

"If you had asked me that on Tuesday morning, I'd have expressed grave doubts," the Gaean replied candidly. "But now I can say yes. Your engineer's an expert who knows exactly what he's doing."

Knitting his brows, Michael observed, "You must know quite a bit yourself to be able to make that assessment."

"I'm a life-support engineer."

Shades of the ancients! Well, you should have guessed, the officer chided himself acidly. Gaeans lack our reluctance to allow women entry into such professions, and every member of their team most likely qualified as a specialist.

"That ought to make your job easier," he remarked, concealing his shock. Regarding her captor composedly, Cleo replied succinctly, "It does."

Seeing her now in a new light, Michael studied her minutely. *No hint of complaint*, he noted. Having from the beginning sensed her fear of Nigel, he kept a sharp eye out for developments, knowing better than she did that her fear was justified. The anxiety he had thrust to the back of his mind at lunch resurfaced. *Damned if she hasn't got guts*, he acknowledged bleakly. *She'll need them*. Forcing his apprehension out of his consciousness, he changed the subject. "What do you think of the menu?"

Ungrudging admiration lit the tired face of the captive, filling it with animation. "Justin's a marvel!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe what he has accomplished. I'm training myself not to speculate."

Chuckling, Michael confided, "I learned that lesson the first time we had to depend on his ability to convert pond shrimp, fish, eels and duckweed into nourishing meals."

A nervous glance at her watch having apprised her that she ought to leave, the team member entertaining no wish to take more than the allotted twenty minutes abruptly rose. "Time I got back," she informed the Captain whose friendliness cheered her. "See you later." Michael's eyes followed her as she vanished out the door.

For the remainder of the afternoon, Cleo's thoughts kept returning to Nigel's action. Knitting her brows, she debated whether or not the Captain's visit that morning had produced the change.

Did Michael jump the mean-spirited bastard? she wondered. If he did, that'll no doubt make Nigel hate me worse than ever. My break came before Leonard's, and Michael showed up right at the same time. He must have said something this morning!

Frowning, she weighed the ramifications of so unexpected a gesture. If Michael suspects Nigel of plotting to rebel—and I can't imagine who else might spark that worry—would a captain tenaciously hanging on to the authority his rank confers deliberately provoke a confrontation over something he could easily have ignored if he did notice? He mind harked back to the revelations made by Leonard on the previous night. Michael must be a duelist of formidable prowess, she reflected, but he entertained fear of mutiny.

Or did he? Was that statement I accepted as true simply an excuse to get me to agree to his outrageous arrangement? Would he lie in an effort to gain what he wanted?

Unsure, the captive reviewed what she could remember of his arguments. *If no* one posed a threat to his authority, why would Michael have wanted to share me? Why wouldn't he just have moved into that double cabin with me? Surely it wasn't Conrad he suspected of incipient revolt! Neither Marvin nor Leonard displays the least sign of being a swordsman. Justin does, but would he ever remotely contemplate mutiny? He objected forcefully to Michael's announcement that he planned to share me. Would Justin have challenged a decision by the Captain to keep me for himself, simply out of gallantry?

Taking advantage of Nigel's brief departure to locate a special tool, Cleo turned to her teammate. "Leonard," she inquired with studied casualness, "I've been wondering...you mentioned that Michael's a duelist. Just how good is he with a blade?"

Her query produced a ready answer. "He's one of the finest in Second Corps, Cleo. I know of only one other master swordsman who I feel certain could outfight Michael."

"Who's that?"

"Nigel."

Cleo's heart gave a sickening lurch. Oh, the foul luck! she griped. So Michael

wasn't lying. But then why provoke a man capable of prevailing in a duel? Maybe Michael didn't. Perhaps my vindictive team leader just figured that he could relax a bit.

*No. I doubt that.* Her imagination supplied a daunting image of what life would be like with Nigel in charge. Shuddering, she decided that if such a change transpired, she would unhesitatingly space herself.

After a supper as uneventful as lunch had been, Cleo washed, combed hair feeling slightly oily, removed her boots, and lay down apprehensively to await Marvin. Her back ached. Her knees hurt, from kneeling on the metal deck for drearily long stretches. *I'm tired,* she complained bitterly to her alter self. *Will I ever again get caught up on my sleep?* Closing her eyes, she tried, but failed, to relax.

At 2000, Marvin walked hesitantly through the door, his normally lank black hair fluffed from his shower. Halting abruptly, he gazed at the woman lying fully clothed on the bed, his gangly body noticeably tense. "Did you...really agree...to do this with each one of us?" he asked in a low voice. "With...me?"

Unhesitatingly, the Gaean replied, "Yes, I did, Marvin. I felt that I owed each of you."

The man stepped closer. Studying the face so unable to hide what its owner felt, Cleo watched the surprise produced by her reply metamorphose into embarrassment, only to melt even more swiftly into an expression she failed to interpret. *Resignation?* she asked herself in puzzlement. *Fear? Hopelessness?* Relieved at least to behold no evidence of animal lust, she studied this new sexual partner warily.

With a nervous movement of both hands, the spacer jerked open the bands of his tunic, and wriggled out of the garment. Seeing his intention, Cleo hastily undid her own. Given that Marvin had to remove his boots, the Gaean finished undressing before he did. Throwing aside the cover, she lay supine, striving not to project that she harbored reluctance.

Without a word, the Columbian dropped to a position beside her. His hands

clutched at her. Mastering an onslaught of fear, Cleo offered no resistance to a grip more fumbling than aggressive. She sensed arousal in the man, but perceived no intent to be brutal. Thrusting her arms around him, she tipped her face up, expecting him to kiss her.

No contact of his mouth with hers occurred. With sudden force, he heaved himself on top of her. Thrusting her thighs apart with his knees, he penetrated her, offering no slightest caress as he did so.

Denied any chance to grow aroused herself, Cleo experienced the acute discomfort caused by the absence of the natural lubrication her body lacked the time to produce in sufficient quantity. Ignoring that circumstance, she tried to move in time with the man's thrusts, but on his third, he reached a climax. His startled partner harbored no doubt on that score.

The tall, gangly body went limp, then. Cleo caught a blurred glimpse of a pale face contorted in a grimace more expressive of despair than of physical release. Abruptly, Marvin rolled off her. In a single, continuous movement, he turned his back, slid to the far edge of the bed, and hunched almost into the fetal position.

Lying in a state of shock, the widow contemplating the spacer's actions roundly disparaged his behavior. *Marvin's as unskilled at lovemaking as he is at relating to his comrades!* she reflected censoriously. *As utterly graceless! I'd never have thought a man could reach a climax that fast. What a boor!* 

Mystified by his performance, she again reviewed what he had done, and grew less critical.

I'm being hard on him, she decided. He made sure that I'd consented before he grabbed me, and he most certainly demonstrated no intent to hurt me. If this is all he asks of me in a night, I'll get eight hours of sleep. Maybe it has been so long since this pitiable social misfit coupled with a woman, he couldn't help himself!

Disgust briefly entertained now vanished completely. *Maybe it's partly that Marvin's shy...unused to women, other than courtesans,* the widow surmised. Striving to picture what kind of person would voluntarily choose to take up that life, the Gaean found her imagination unequal to the task. Leonard's admission that Michael's crewmen habitually visited courtesans rose to mind. *I'm probably the first respectable woman Marvin ever took to bed,* she conjectured. Shame scalded her. *If I can still call myself that,* she amended bitterly, *after what I've agreed to do. Look what I've already done!* 

Guilt rose to batter defenses weakened by the events of the week. Determinedly, the prisoner of war resisted its assault.

I'll be damned if I'm ashamed of what I did last night for Leonard! she expostulated fiercely. And with Michael...surely the trauma of suffering such ghastly agony earlier, after steeling myself to inflict a hideous death on any enemy who came in view, somehow triggered my reacting as I did when he forced himself on me. I'd have coupled with Conrad, having agreed, but he turned out to have scruples of his own. I don't care what judgment other Gaeans would pass on me! They'd have no right to judge! They're not walking around in my boots!

Maybe I have no right to pass a critical judgment on Marvin.

On a sudden impulse, Cleo drew the bedcover up from the foot of the bed, covering both herself and her bedmate. Wriggling sideways, so that her back rested against that of her silent, tormented partner, she felt him start away, only to settle back against her.

"Good-night, Marvin," she bade him in as friendly a tone as she could muster.

Having paused briefly before responding, he replied in a strained voice, "Goodnight, Cleo." The captive fell asleep marveling at the differences in the six spacer-fighters whom Fate in a fit of caprice forced on her as lovers.

## **WEEK ONE: FRIDAY**

The Gaean awoke to behold Marvin staring down at her. "Cleo," he entreated in an urgent tone, "could I...would you..." Overcome by his fear of hearing a blunt refusal, he averted his eyes from hers.

Reaching up, she slipped both arms around her woefully inept partner, and drew him down on top of her. Her hands stroked his back as he spread her legs with his knees, and penetrated her. Knowing now what to expect, she tried to respond, but her manifestly aroused partner reached a climax even more quickly than he had the night before. Spent as much by agitation as by physical release, he lay limply on the woman still bemused by his achieving fulfillment so quickly.

Determined of a sudden to invest the coupling with some semblance of pleasurable love-play, Cleo stroked his back, and with one finger traced the creases in his neck. When he raised himself on his hands, she smiled up at him.

No answering smile greeted her. Marvin's pale, expressive face plainly registered acute embarrassment. Abruptly, he rose, and fumbled for his clothes. Moved more to pity than to contempt, Cleo dressed, and retired to the bathcabin. When she emerged, she discovered that he had departed.

Her face a study in amazement, the widow stood rooted to one spot, shaking her head.

Well, if he isn't the most... There you go, passing judgment again. He was embarrassed. I could see that. Of doing it? Or of the way he did it? Of having no skill? Or of reaching a peak so fast? Does he always do that? Marvin baffles me as much as Nigel does. Well, he didn't hurt me, and he didn't ask a great deal of me. I wonder how much good his precipitate climax did him...if any.

Resolutely thrusting the bizarre experience behind her, the Gaean made the bed. Head held high, she walked down the corridor to the dining hall.

Michael looked up from his breakfast to see Cleo enter alone. Noting instantly that her face registered no strong emotion of any sort, he watched her smile in friendly fashion at Justin as he ladled her bowl full of what she judged to be cereal. Bearing the bowl and a glass of clear amber juice, she seated herself opposite the man wondering what in hell prompted Marvin to let her arrive alone.

"Good morning," she greeted the Captain, her tone as serene as her face.

"Good morning," he responded noncommittally, even as his mind rapidly sorted unsettling possibilities.

Retaining her aplomb, Cleo sampled the cereal, noting that the sweetish offering exhibited neither the flavor of grain, nor the texture. *Better I don't know*, she decided. The beverage she readily identified as apple juice. *Malic acid?* she conjectured, frowning in an attempt to jog her memory. *That occurs in apples, as I recall. Amazing how readily one forgets information one never uses!* 

Keeping an eye on the entry, she saw Nigel and Leonard stroll through the line. Conrad carried in the tub of wash-water, and shortly thereafter, the rinse. Marvin made no appearance. That circumstance caused her to conclude that her inept partner must have been too embarrassed to face her over breakfast. Wry amusement melted suddenly into pity, as she recalled his mental anguish.

Having managed not to give the impression of wolfing down his meal, Michael left the dining hall early. Frowning blackly, he proceeded with purposeful stride to the main deck of Two, where he beheld Marvin seated at a long worktable. On the surface lay a welter of electronic components, wire, cable, insulation, tools, and testing meters.

"Do you feel all right?" the Captain inquired, two deep creases furrowing his brow.

His arrival produced patent agitation even before he launched that peremptory query. "Yes. No. I...I mean...I wasn't hungry," Marvin stuttered. "I... My stomach's upset. I'd have heaved breakfast."

"Better knock off and see Justin."

"I'll be all right." In a desperate attempt to turn the Captain's attention away from his absenting himself from breakfast, Marvin launched into a fevered explanation of a problem relating to his assignment. His perturbation caused the summation to sound querulous, to the officer wondering what in hell had happened to the poor sod.

"Michael, I can't begin to think of assembling a board in Eleven until Nigel gets the independent ventilating system working. That's likely the last thing he'll do, and the least dust would be catastrophic. But if I assemble the board here, it'll be too big to fit through the door of Section Eleven, and I'll find it difficult to attach my creation to the gear that causes the unit to rise into the position for a launch."

"Could you put it together in separate pieces?" Michael asked, his attention focusing now on the problem.

"Yes, but I couldn't test it. Or at least, not make the final tests. And I couldn't work it. And it'd be difficult, then, to connect the power cables from Eleven's supply. I'd have to tear part of it back down."

"If you assembled it completely here—tested it and worked it until Eleven's ready—would it be so onerous a chore to take it apart into sections to move it? Impossible to modify it so the power cables could be connected more easily?"

Without conscious thought, Marvin compulsively turned a component over and over in his hands. "Well, doing the job that way would pose problems. None of the supports built into any of these sections remotely approximates those used in a military ship. I'll be building the whole supporting framework of the board almost from scratch. It'd be a lot easier, and much safer, to build it where it's going to be used.

"Also, I'm not certain what dimensions the equipment Nigel will be installing on the main deck will have. It just seems that to install the equipment most crucial for a launch last, is to do the job butt backwards. Nigel could shift his equipment to accommodate the board easier than I could alter the board's dimensions. Also, if the space allotted me turned out to be cluttered with other components already in place on the underside of that area of the main deck, I'd have one hell of a time running my power cables, and making my connections to the fuel tanks and propulsion units."

Foreseeing a momentous clash between the two subordinates posing the greatest challenge to his ability to lead, Michael pondered the problem. At length, he snapped a crisp directive. "You and I'll confer with Nigel and his team. Five heads work better than two."

"Now?" Marvin all but yelped.

"Yes, now! What's the matter with you, this morning?"

"Nothing!"

Michael commenced to entertain suspicions, but he kept them to himself. Manifestly perturbed, Marvin accompanied him to Eleven, and followed him down the hatch leading to the lower deck, where the life-support crew labored at connecting sections of line into components installed on the previous day.

As Nigel beheld Michael's compact body descend the ladder, he bristled, but the ominous reaction subsided as he observed who accompanied the Captain who crisply announced that he came to entertain suggestions for a solution to a problem Marvin would outline.

His nervousness abating as he focused on technicalities, Marvin repeated verbatim what he had summarized for Michael, to the three teammates sitting cross-legged on the deck.

As the speaker concluded his statement, Nigel nodded, frowning. "Unfortunately, Eleven's ventilating system is one of the last things we'll convert to independence from the station's system," he confirmed. "And while we're moving and balancing the tanks, the moisture level will fluctuate wildly. As for dust, it'll be impossible for us to avoid causing it, especially metal dust from filing or grinding, which would fatally damage your electronic components. I agree that you've got a problem, Marvin. I wish that we had a way to wall you off temporarily, but even if we did so, the variations in moisture content and air temperature would still affect your delicate gear. Besides, dust could easily blow in through the ventilators. You'd hardly want to work without ventilation, hm?"

Used to Michael's dispensing with rigid military protocol, especially when his crewmen conferred during problem-solving sessions, Leonard readily spoke his thought, unconstrained by his lack of expertise. He knew right well that the Captain encouraged input from all concerned, figuring that one idea often sparked another, and sometimes set up a chain reaction of useful suggestions. "Too bad metal walls don't generate fields that vaporize dust, the way hulls vaporize meteoroids," he remarked musingly.

The Gaean raised in a culture that counted civic cooperativeness as a prime virtue nodded in agreement. "Or the way clothing repels dust and moisture," she added, thinking along a similar line. Inspiration struck out of the black, generating a burst of excitement. "Marvin!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Could you work in a tent?"

Observing his computer expert give a visible start as the Gaean engineer shot that question at him, Michael beheld his suspicions regarding the root cause of the social misfit's agitation become corroborated. Flushing red, Marvin stammered, "A...a what?"

"A tent. A cloth enclosure: walls and ceiling. The air would circulate, but the cloth would repel dust and moisture the way clothes do, unless they get so drastically overloaded that the adjustment fails. Could you work inside a tent?"

Conscious that three intrigued listeners awaited his answer, Marvin forced himself to consider the suggestion. "That would eliminate two out of three of the worst problems," he conceded, brightening. "But where would we get the cloth for an enclosure big enough? Bedcovers...?"

"I know where! Nigel, may I take Leonard to help me carry some rolls of cloth?" Curtly, the Lieutenant snapped, "Carry on." Proceeding at a trot down the corridor in the rim, Cleo led the way to a section on the far side of the station: a facility designed as an astronomical observatory. As she neared it, she musingly reviewed its function, recalling that the remote-sensing equipment included a sophisticated imaging system located on a platform able to scan on several axes: a platform that extended from the despun portion of the axis of the station. That gear enabled the vault of space, or selected bodies, to be portrayed on ultra-large computer screens set into one wall of this section. Other equipment allowed the detailed pictures generated by the imaging system to be stored on videodisc. A holographic studio occupied one end of the main deck, and a holographic projection stage took up more space.

Darting to a locker, the engineer withdrew three rolls of soft, thick, flat-black cloth, pleased to discover that two still reposed within clear wrapping, although the third lacked a quarter of its original bulk. Rummaging through the cabinet, she turned up a box that once held six spools of black cloth-weld, noting with relief that five remained. Next to the box reposed an electronic cloth-welder, and several powerpacks.

Curiosity prompted Leonard to inquire, "How did you know where to find those?"

"Our team leader used to show holographic videos here...for recreation." A haunting memory of watching a kindly, ascetic face nakedly mirror anguish rose to smite the prisoner of war. The searing agony assailing Wallace even as the team leader yielded to her impassioned plea that he allow her to act as rear guard, caused Cleo's eyes to cloud with pain.

Observing the change, the youth squeezed his companion's shoulder in mute sympathy.

Beset with a surreally clear vision of the heart-wrenching parting she had resolutely striven to keep out of her thoughts, the Gaean responded by smiling wanly as she tucked spools of weld into her pockets and Leonard's. Thrusting the tool through the band of her pants, she heaved one of the large rolls onto her shoulder. Bearing the other two, Leonard accompanied her back around the rim, disturbed at catching that glimpse of mental pain: emotion that the captive normally concealed.

Three faces looked up as the pair descended the ladder. Lifting the unwrapped roll off Leonard's shoulder, Michael pulled out a length of the cloth. "By the teeming life of Earth!" he marveled. "Where did you find these?"

Succinctly, the Gaean explained, her face again exhibiting its usual composure.

In the grip of excitement that effectively squelched his embarrassment, Marvin enthused, "A tent will work! What a superb idea! I'll save a wealth of time..." Recalling his undignified retreat from her cabin, he broke off, flushing hotly.

Stricken with pity, Cleo smiled warmly at him, marveling that he seemed bent on torturing himself. *The poor man must be acutely sensitive*, she divined in a second burst of insight. *He* is *shy*. "I'm so glad I remembered where I saw this cloth, Marvin," she assured him, smiling. "I wouldn't have, if Nigel and Leonard hadn't said what they did. I hope that my idea works."

"It'll work." Michael directed that remark to his associate's benefactor, wondering just what in hell sort of night the pair had spent. Relieved that Cleo seemed neither angered by, nor contemptuous of, the man with whom she had shared a bed during the sleep-shift, he classified Marvin's reaction as one more incomprehensible manifestation of his social ineptitude.

Turning to the woman whose warmth both amazed and reassured him, the programmer managed to say "Thank you, Cleo," without stuttering. To her surprise, his face broke into a vivid, transfiguring smile: the first such expression that the Gaean had ever seen him employ.

Michael added, "From me too, Cleo," before heaving the two full rolls onto his shoulders, and departing.

Smiling to herself as she picked up a pipe wrench and her cheater's bar—the pipe she used for extra leverage—the Gaean turned back to her task. Almost immediately, she grew conscious of dark, impenetrable eyes raking her meditatively. Her smile died away. *Next to Nigel, Marvin will no doubt rank as one of Columbia's premium lovers,* she reflected sardonically, even as her gut knotted. *One more night,* 

## and then I have to face that.

Shortly thereafter, the team completed the installation. Waste tank, pump, comminutor and heat exchanger had all been fastened in place, and connected by the line that would carry the nutrient stream to the three tanks of the photosynthetic exchanger. Beside the waste tank stood the monitor, its six glass caps sparkling in the light shed by the overhead fixtures.

Stroking his chin with his hand, the team leader surveyed the results of three people's efforts with frowning eyes. Standing next to him, the Gaean engineer silently owned to harboring a deep, though reluctant, admiration for the accomplishment her nemesis had managed in so short a time. The Lieutenant muttered ruminatively, to no one in particular, "It'll pass, hm?"

Leonard declared emphatically, "It looks good, Nigel."

"It looks as if it came originally in the section," Cleo added equably.

That commendation prompted Nigel to rake the woman with a sharp glance. The sincerity in her expression matched that of her tone of voice. Her eyes rested on the monitor as she recalled a stressful task, so that she failed to notice his reaction to her comment.

"We'll leave this area for a time, and start on the bathcabin," the leader informed his team. "One, for seven people. Space will be at a premium. Can't be helped, that. Come along."

Standing on the upper deck, Cleo observed that Nigel had left intact the metal panels forming what had been a shower area for those exercising. The enclosed space he now declared to be too large. He then decreed that the rest of the morning would be spent dismantling two of the walls. Again ordered to take a break, Cleo sipped juice alone in the dining hall, wondering anew what had prompted the vindictive bastard to reverse his decision. By 1100, sink, head, urinals and medicine locker reposed within the abbreviated area destined to form the bathcabin.

Lunch she discovered to feature baked eel stuffed with onion-flavored, breadlike filling that she strongly suspected to contain duckweed. Accustomed now to eating eel-meat, she musingly recalled that on Old Earth, steaks came directly from the dead bodies of cattle: large mammals. Assailed by repugnance, she shivered.

Imagine killing a cow, and cutting off flesh! Brr. I doubt if could ever have gotten hungry enough to take on that chore. I much prefer to think of steaks as coming from an immaculate food-chemistry lab, even when I know what they're synthesized from: tar-like inorganic solids from carbonaceous chondrite-type planetoids, and the excess organisms from the photosynthetic tanks. I guess the rearranging of the molecules in the lab—a process that produces protein no different in its complicated structure from that which the cow's body manufactured—seems somehow more clean and efficient. I suspect that my reaction arises from our conditioning. If someone fed me a steak from a cow, I wouldn't know the difference.

To her considerable relief, the social misfit made an appearance at lunch. Seated next to Michael, diagonally across from her, he ate silently, until she inquired brightly, "How's your work going, Marvin?"

Startled, the normally taciturn diner stammered as he fielded the question. "It...it's coming along, Cleo. Slowly. I've gathered most of the components I need." "You must be highly skilled, to be able to put a board together from scratch." Flushing, Marvin responded, "I'm all there is to do it, so they're stuck with me."

"They seem to trust your skill," the Gaean shot back.

On beholding the man's acute embarrassment at her direct praise, she turned to Michael, and remarked on the food, fearing that Marvin might bolt from the table, abandoning his lunch. *He must be worried about what I think of his performance in bed*, she conjectured wryly. *Well, he has reason to wonder, but I hope I've convinced him that I don't hold his ineptness against him.* 

The job of positioning the head, connecting that unit to the waste tank below, moving and reconnecting the shower cylinder Nigel had appropriated from the original facility, attaching the sink to one of the two remaining walls, and installing the two urinals, one of which was designed for use by either a man or a woman, took the entire afternoon. The exacting work failed to tax Cleo's strength, prompting her to conclude that the good night's sleep she had obtained on the prior sleep-shift did her good.

After supper, she eyed the sadly diminished water-ration. Shrugging, she decided to wash her hair for Justin, even if it meant facing Nigel with greasy locks. Feeling refreshed by the shampoo, she sat down in the lone chair, untroubled by the least apprehension. On assessing her feelings, she acknowledged with shock that she looked forward with pleasure to spending the night in Justin's arms.

His entry prompted her to jump up and face him.

Advancing, he took her firmly by the shoulders, and spoke with decisive force. "Cleo, please don't think I expect you to couple with me. You've got enough weighing on your mind, without that. Just slip into bed and get a good night's sleep, girl. I won't bother you."

Appreciation of the man's gallantry contended with a reaction that astonished the archetypical Gaean: disappointment. "I owe you just as much as I do the others, Justin," she countered softly.

That observation produced a vehement outburst. "You don't owe any of us, Cleo! That's utter nonsense! You did what any spacer-fighter from your world would have done, if he could match your guts. You managed what any of us would have tried to do, in similar circumstances. I don't know what possessed Michael, to lay this outrageous demand on you!"

Suffused with affection for this decent, personable man possessed of so compassionate a nature, Cleo made an admission wholly unprecedented in a woman culturally programmed by a society that rigorously repressed sexual impulses other than those arising between married partners. "Justin...since he has...and since I've done what I said I'd do, so far...may I tell you that I'd as leave do it for you, as for any of the others?"

Reading an ominous meaning into her confidence, Justin drew her against his chest. Worriedly, he asked, "Have they been hard on you, Cleo?"

"No. Not especially. Although..." He watched the face so animated a moment

ago cloud with fear. "I haven't spent a night with all of them, yet."

"Nigel's the only one left?"

"Yes."

Sensing the fear which the Gaean valiantly kept off her face, Justin silently cursed Norman, Michael, and Nigel in that order, but he kept his inner wrath off his face. Striving to put the best possible slant on the situation, he remarked with perfect truthfulness, "Nigel's a staunch friend, to those he accepts as such, Cleo."

"And a dangerous enemy."

That quick rejoinder emerged in a whisper. Regarding her quizzically, Justin weighed her words, striving to assess the magnitude of the danger. Unaware of Nigel's overt hostility during the work-shifts, he nonetheless vividly recalled the Lieutenant's reaction to the captive's failure to break under neurostimulation. His anxiety deepened, but he likewise remembered other aspects of his long association with Michael's second officer.

"As much as Nigel enjoys the company of women, Cleo, I can't imagine his staying your enemy for long," he stated judiciously.

That revelation startled the hearer. The last thing she had envisioned regarding the enemy she so feared was that he might be easily attracted to women. *With that face?* she silently dissented. Intuitively sensing the danger inherent in her discussing one man with another, she smiled warmly at her partner for this night. "And you're left," she reminded him.

"You don't have to worry about me."

"I never have. I want to give you what I've given the others, Justin. Unless...you don't wish me to do so."

Strong arms tightened forcefully around her. "A man would have to be dead, not to want to take you to bed, Cleo," Justin observed ironically. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes." That admission couched in a whisper nonetheless conveyed vehemence. No whit loath to believe her assertion, Justin succumbed not to lust, but to a longing for intimacy with a woman he both liked and admired. Deftly, he slipped off her tunic, baring her shapely upper body to his view. Curving an arm around her, he gently caressed each of her breasts in turn, inwardly exulting as the nipples hardened almost instantly. Having led her to the bed, he sat her down. Dropping to one knee, he removed her boots. Smiling into the piquant face flushed as much with desire as by qualms produced by her culturally programmed concern for modesty, he pulled her to her feet.

Her flush deepened as he stripped off her pants. Gauging accurately that her husband must never have undressed her, Justin lifted her, and laid her in the bed. Her heart racing, Cleo smiled tremulously up at him, a rosy flush mantling her cheeks. Having shed his uniform, he stretched out beside her, and gathered her into his arms.

Seeing this widow of thirty-six as an ingenuous girl, much as Leonard had perceived her, the experienced Columbian employed all the tenderness and care he would have shown a twenty-year-old virgin bride. He caressed her gently, but with sure skill, knowing exactly what he was doing.

Liking the compassionate medical technician, trusting him, Cleo flowed against him like warm gel spilled on a slanting surface. Her desire to be held, to be comforted, transmuted swiftly into hot carnal need. Responding with fierce ardor, she caressed her partner in her turn. When at length he slid his shaft into her, raising himself on his hands to keep his weight off her, she closed her eyes, and moved in time with his thrusts.

*I could almost imagine that I'm in Max's arms again*, she caught herself thinking. Disturbed, she sought to banish the image flooding her inner awareness. *Let Justin be himself!* she admonished her alter ego.

Gauging accurately when his partner lay poised on the brink of climax, her skilled lover gave full play to his own passion. Pride surged when he divined that she experienced a climax. Purposefully, he relaxed the guard he had maintained over his now all but intolerable need. With a few more thrusts, he achieved fulfillment. Spent, he enjoyed the ebbing wash of pleasure, his cheek pillowed on a firm, ample breast. At length, he pulled the bedcover over both of them. Slipping an arm under his partner, he kissed her gently before settling her against him. Cleo fell asleep congealed against his compact brown torso, her arm clasped around his chest. Not a single pang of guilt gained entry into her mind.

## WEEK ONE: SATURDAY

Following a night of dreamless, deep, undisturbed sleep, Cleo came slowly awake, growing conscious first of the warmth of her bedmate's back against her own. Enjoying the contact, she lay still, savoring their closeness until Justin stirred. A glance at the clock prompted him to sigh audibly. Slipping an arm under his partner, he declared reluctantly, "It's time we heaved out." Her only response was to thrust her arms around him, and tip her face up. His mouth closed over hers in a long, satisfying, intimate kiss.

When he reluctantly freed her lips, she murmured, "I'm glad I talked you into making love to me, Justin."

"So am I, Cleo," he admitted, well aware that trauma and captivity had combined to override the widow's culturally induced inhibitions. Moved to solicitude, he hoped that his efforts to generate carnal pleasure had mitigated rather than intensified the emotional damage inflicted on this courageous captive by Michael's handling of the entire situation.

The entrance of the pair into the dining hall drew all eyes. Striding in with a tray of hot fishcakes, Conrad observed the spring in Justin's step, and the tranquility of his teammate's expression. Smugly, he congratulated himself, recalling that on the prior day, during the extended lunch break both cooks took to compensate for their working a longer span of hours than their fellows, he had volunteered to warm the food and set out the utensils on Saturday morning, without mentioning any reason why Justin might want to sleep in.

Supremely unembarrassed by his assistant's offer, Justin had graciously accepted. Deeply fond of the older man, the blonde spacer smiled warmly at the head cook, who passed a cheery remark before disappearing with unwonted jauntiness into their improvised food-chemistry laboratory.

Covertly observing the entrants, Michael detected the same signs in Justin's bearing that Conrad noted. Glancing at Cleo, he saw them reflected in hers. A stab of chagrin surprised him with its force, without moving a muscle of his face.

The morning saw the life-support crew installing the two remaining walls enclosing the bathcabin. Marvin and Nigel conferred for a considerable time, discussing each other's need for space, making detailed measurements, and reaching an accommodation on where each would run certain necessary circuits and other lines directly beneath the portion of deck on which the board would be built. Michael joined them, ostensibly to make notes and careful diagrams drawn to scale on a datapad, but actually to mediate a conflict, should one arise. Leonard and Cleo tightened the myriad bolts securing the dividers Nigel had helped them lift into place.

Devoting only a part of her mind to the tasks, the Gaean worked mechanically, her focus narrowed to the ordeal facing her at the end of this day. When the team leader returned briefly to make certain measurements, she shivered with dread. As he strode out of sight, the peaceful contentment that had suffused her upon awakening seemed remote as an ephemeral sweet dream. Fear she failed utterly to suppress colored her thinking, and knotted her gut.

Valiantly striving to believe that if Nigel's smoldering hatred drove him to assault her so brutally that he caused physical injury, he would be forced to account for his act to Michael, the captive pondered possibilities, and succumbed to a new onslaught of fright.

*If the bastard harms me, what action could the Captain take?* she reflected despairingly. *Lock Nigel up? He can't do that. He needs his life-support specialist!* 

In a burst of enlightenment, Cleo realized that Michael had maintained his dominance over the others by the sheer force of his personality, and the power of his inflexible will.

He has no backup, she fretted. He lacks a higher authority on which he can rely to reinforce his right to make decisions. He has preserved the outward semblance of normality by acting as though they're still part of their military corps, but they're living in a vacuum. If Nigel were openly to challenge Michael to a duel, and the Captain refused to accept his challenge, Michael would forfeit that dominance over the others. He can't go about all the time armed with a massive, bulky electronic handweapon, nor could he keep Nigel working by any such means. He has to sleep. If he enlists help, he'll split the crew, unless every man of them backs him. I'm not sure they all would. If he accepts a challenge...fights a duel...Nigel will kill him. Michael's in a bind, no doubt about it!

Growing conscious that Leonard's eyes remained fixed on her, she saw the anxiety mirrored in them. Gamely, she smiled reassuringly at the youthful spacer, nowise wishful of involving him in her own problems.

Leonard has to get along with the Lieutenant, whatever happens, she acknowledged bleakly. I surely don't want the vindictive rotter to develop the least suspicion that Leonard might be taking sides. The poor lad has met with trouble enough during his enlistment. He doesn't need any more!

What if Nigel doesn't break bones or bash me bloody? What if he does what Conrad was too decent to do...assaults me sexually? If he injures me internally, so that I have to seek help...if I'm able, afterwards...surely Justin would be outraged. But what could he do? Perhaps an act of callous brutality would shift the allegiance of all the others firmly onto Michael's side, not that such a development would be any help to me at that point!

Cleo sighed inaudibly. I see why Michael demanded that I give my word. Was he willing to throw me to a sadistic bastard the way people on Earth used to throw bones to dogs, for his own ends? Not caring particularly what the foul brute might do? If so...why care whether I get a break? If he really did anything about that. Maybe he has reason to assume that Nigel won't be any more than unpleasant to me. Bleak, unutterably bitter reflections chased across the screen of the woman's consciousness. Whatever...I gave my word. Better plan how to act when the arrogant bastard appears in your bedcabin tonight.

Somberly, the Gaean pondered that problem. I'll just await him, dressed, as I did with the others. A new worry surfaced. What if he tears my clothes? I have no spares. The station stocks none, and no one else's would come close to fitting. The captive's gut knotted convulsively. I won't need clothes, if he batters me! she cried distractedly to her alter ego. I'll space myself!

Fighting off visualizations growing steadily more lurid, Cleo pulled herself together. You're letting your imagination run completely away with you, she chided herself stoutly. Michae has given you no reason to think that he'd stand back and let Nigel abuse you physically. The others all turned out to be decent and ordinary. Keep your mind on your work.

One last certainty forcibly struck the woman gifted with her full share of feminine intuition. Whatever Nigel does, there's one thing you'd better not do. You absolutely cannot let him see that you're afraid of him. Do what he demands as long as you can. Control your anger.

A surreally clear vision of the brother she had lost rose to fill the screen of Cleo's inner awareness. *Oh, Glendon. If it weren't for what you taught me…helped me do for myself…whatever would have become of me this week? I miss you so…* Forcing the image almost hallucinatory in its vividness from her consciousness, she forced herself to make a pleasant remark to Leonard.

The morning wore away, minute by minute, hour by hour. The Gaean took the break Nigel gave her. At lunch, she managed to meet Michael's glance across the table with a composed face. She smiled warmly at Justin as she washed her utensils, though after she left the hall, she could not remember what she had eaten.

Chancing to pass Marvin in the wide, uncluttered space of the rim-corridor on her way back to the bathcabin being installed in Eleven, she greeted him pleasantly, noting that he had cut out the four walls and ceiling of a tent, and sat cloth-welding the pieces together. Pausing briefly to watch, she saw that the nervous hands had calmed. The man worked deftly, sure of what he was doing.

Now, where did a computer expert learn to weld cloth? she wondered. Maybe he's skilled at any manual task he undertakes, and blunders only during social interactions.

"Nice work, Marvin," she commended him in parting, never looking around to see that the social misfit sat back, startled, agitated, and stared forlornly after her as she vanished out of sight.

Shortly before 1800, the team finished the bathcabin. Having earlier ransacked various others for lockers, a shaving cabinet, and a commodious adjuster, Nigel issued crisp directives as three teammates built the collection of items into the area above sink and head, along the wall opposite, and in the space between the shower cylinder and the curving exterior wall. As the Gaean bolted the lockers to brackets on the walls, Nigel and Leonard completed the tedious task of reconnecting the pressure sensors in the repositioned dividers. By the end of the workday, the compact facility rested complete, needing only to be stocked with the items normally stored there.

Cleo endured supper, moving as in a dream. Hard as she strove to hide her fear, she failed to conceal its severity from the shrewd observer seated opposite. Grimly, Michael ingested food he scarcely tasted, knowing without looking that Nigel's face betrayed no trace whatsoever of any emotion.

Having left the hall as soon as was reasonably possible, the Gaean washed with the remaining quantity of water that barely sufficed to dampen a cloth. Desperately, she clung to the resolution she had made earlier. Lying tensely on the bed, she tried to relax. Her thoughts again focused on her brother.

Mittens, Glendon. Oh, how I wish you were here to whisper that code word to me again!

Five minutes before the appointed time, the door slid sideways. Nigel entered on silent feet, his aspect predatory, in the fevered perception of the captive. Rearing up, she sat frozen for a moment, staring at him through dilated eyes. Regaining control of her limbs, she leaped to her feet, and faced him, hoping her expression appeared as calm as she had resolved to keep it.

Slowly, Nigel advanced towards her. Her face maintained its composure, but she retreated. Purposefully, her partner for the night interposed his tall frame between her and the doubled bunks. Backing against the wall, Cleo stood tautly still, warily watching him. Neither adversary spoke.

Airily acting as if he owned the cabin, Nigel sat down on the bed. Raising one leg, he hooked the heel of his boot over the edge of the bedframe, and with both arms, clasped the bent knee as he leaned back, wholly at ease. Appraising eyes traveled insolently down, and then back up, the woman garbed in a suit tailored so as to de-emphasize the curvaceousness of her body. Seeming to the extraordinarily well read Gaean as if he were an ancient Roman inspecting a slave offered for sale, the aggressor issued an order in the sibilant voice she had grown to hate. "Take off your uniform, Cleo."

Mutely, the woman obeyed, feeling violated as she strove to ignore the distress arising from offended modesty. She tried to undress as she would if he were not there, but his impudent scrutiny rendered his presence all too vivid. Willing her hands not to shake, she laid her tunic over the chair. The ripping sound of interlocking strips convulsively pulled apart assaulted her ear, rendering the silence the more ominous. Thrusting the band downward, she let the opened pants drop around her ankles. Exerting a new effort of will, she picked up the garment, and laid it over the tunic. Standing erect, nude, painfully conscious of her vulnerability, she riveted wary eyes to the man patently enjoying baiting her.

Nigel left her standing there. Rising with lithe grace, he undressed, facing her, his movements unhurried, casual. Observing him as minutely as he had her, Cleo noted the powerful muscles that rippled beneath coppery skin, the ample breadth of shoulders, the muscular torso that tapered in towards narrow hips. Corded arms bespoke iron strength, as did the beautifully shaped hands that had impinged on her notice earlier.

Shivers assailed her as Nigel dropped his tunic on the bed, and reached down to pull off his boots. Nonchalantly, he stepped out of his pants, picked up both garments, and laid them over hers. Regarding him through a haze of fear, she grew acutely conscious that his shaft reared erect. His hard member she viewed as an outsized weapon of assault.

For a time, her partner for the night stood raking her nude body with merciless eyes, while standing motionless. The palpable force of that brazen glance sent color flooding into her cheeks, but she never moved.

When he acted, his attack came without warning. With blurred speed, his lithe body closed the distance between them. Iron fingers gripped Cleo's upper left arm. Swinging her around, her adversary threw her with brutal force on her back, across the bed. In a continuation of the same fluid motion, he dropped on top of her, thrusting both of her arms back, beyond her head.

Raising his upper body, he bent the knees that pressed against the mattress on either side of her as he sat on her hips. His hands drove her wrists together. With his left hand, he pinned both wrists to the mattress, holding her immobilized beneath him. Cupping one of her breasts in the hand thus freed, he squeezed her nipple between forefinger and thumb. From there, the hand slid slowly over her upper body, palm-down.

Cleo made no sound, nor did she struggle. Lying supine, inert, she felt Nigel's hand move over quivering flesh. His maneuver bore no semblance of a caress. The victim experiencing his touch as a calculated exploration of her body divined his intent: to force on her awareness her helplessness against his strength, and to demonstrate that he could take what liberties he pleased.

Having driven that point home, the aggressor shifted his position. Backing away, he moved so that his knees rested between his unresisting partner's legs. With savage force, he spread his knees outwards, thrusting her legs wide apart. Both hands slid downwards over her stomach, targeting her genital area. Two long fingers insinuated themselves deeply into her feminine orifice. Moments later, they withdrew, to toy insolently with her organ of pleasure.

His manipulations caused no pain, but they aroused no emotion but outrage in the mind of the woman enduring what she perceived as an assault. As always, Nigel knew exactly what he was doing. Cleo's body, independently of her mind, reacted physiologically with warmth, and wetness. Seething with hot ire, the Gaean controlled a fierce urge to struggle: to strike out with hands now free, at the man so expertly stimulating the center of her femininity.

He hasn't caused you injury, she reminded herself desperately. Don't goad him into hurting you! Accept the studied insult. Show him you're not resisting!

Feeling his partner's unwilling readiness, Nigel moved. Penetrating her roughly with force that stopped just short of causing physical damage, he made himself free of her loins. When she sought to react, he moved so as to thwart any response. His hands gripped her shoulders, and moved along her arms, thrusting them outwards, pinning her wrists to the bed.

Now I truly know what it means to be raped! his victim railed in impotent fury. Michael didn't so much as try! But I'll damned well make clear to Nigel that I'm keeping my end of the bargain I made with Michael. I'll rob this sadistic bastard of the satisfaction of thinking that he forced me to endure what I wouldn't willingly have let him do. Damn him to eternal fire!

At that juncture, Nigel achieved a climax. His lithe body relaxed, as he took time to savor his pleasure. At length, he let go of wrists aching from the pressure. Disdaining to move, he let his full weight continue to rest on the fine-boned body of his victim.

Suddenly, Cleo's arms encircled his torso, to clasp him fiercely.

Rising on his hands, he fixed glittering eyes on the face she managed to keep composed. "Like it rough, do you?" he inquired in a sardonic drawl.

Refusing to take the bait, she replied evenly, "Not especially, but I consented to engage in sexual intercourse with each of you. I wasn't fighting you, Nigel."

"Trying to buy *my* pardon the way you did Michael's? With your body?"

Those hissing words, dripping contempt, jarred the widow to the core. *Is that what I did?* she asked herself, wondering in horror whether the unnerving accusation might be true. *Is that what I'm trying to do?* As she stared in consternation at the ugly face, the cruel mouth, the glinting eyes of her enemy, her gut clenched in a new accession of fear. Fighting desperately to master near-terror, she succeeded in controlling herself.

A chilling smile accompanied her tormentor's next words. "I'll just see how far you're willing to go to achieve that result," he sardonically informed the woman lying supine beneath him. With insolent ease, he rolled off to recline next to her, with his head on the pillow. "Sit up."

Having obeyed that order, Cleo eyed him apprehensively. "Take my cock in your mouth," he ordered.

Shrinking into herself, Cleo raged inwardly, *No! No way could I do that!* Repelled by the very idea, she conjectured that the Columbian issued the order so as to elicit a refusal, until a fact committed only recently to memory occurred to the woman fighting revulsion, anger, fear, and rigid social conditioning. *But he's* used *to that!* she reminded herself in dismay. *Courtesans do that first, if the encounter Leonard described was typical! Nigel thinks that's ordinary!* 

Mastering violent aversion by a sheer effort of will, Cleo moved to lie next to him, and hesitantly closed her mouth around the tip of his male organ. Her heart hammering, she hesitated, having no idea what to do next.

Resting a hand on the back of her hair, Nigel shoved her head down. His shaft filled her mouth, and penetrated her throat, prompting her to withdraw in haste. The insistent hand pushed her head down again, and again. Having belatedly divined what he wanted, Cleo gave it to him. After a few endless minutes of offering the stimulation he craved, she grew aware that his shaft, flaccid when she started, engorged swiftly. Visualizing an outcome she simply could not bear to contemplate, she sat up, flushing darkly red.

Nigel lay watching her, patently amused, his eyes cruel.

With cool insolence, he now levied a new demand so unspeakably outrageous that Cleo recoiled in shock. "No!" she snarled. "I won't do that!"

That vituperative outburst prompted Nigel to laugh. He saw that his mockery transmuted his victim's shock into incandescent fury. "So much for your vaunted willingness to please!" he jeered.

Cleo's voice shrilled across the intervening space. "I'll do anything I'd do for a husband! But I wouldn't do that for anybody alive!"

Quick as a pouncing cat, Nigel moved. Grasping his nude victim's right arm, he twisted it behind her, and applied pressure. As intense pain radiated up the limb, the sibilant voice hissed in her ear, "You'll do it for me."

Enveloped in agony, Cleo verged on the limit of her mastery over her anger. Swiveling her head around to glare at her assailant over her shoulder, *she* laughed, her mockery as pointed as his. She saw that her response jarred him.

With impassioned vehemence, she rasped derisively, "Do you really think that you'll enjoy better success than Michael did, when he sought to coerce me into doing what he wanted, by inflicting pain? You bastard! I gave this whole idea a week! I *did* think I owed you all! But if this is how you act, I'll space myself! I'm not afraid to die!" Her shrill voice dropped to a menacing, low, intense whisper. Even as the pain grew excruciating, she hissed, "If you break that arm, Nigel, the others will know who drove me to take my own life!"

Clenching her teeth, Cleo waited for the bone to snap. For a few surreally stretched seconds, the two protagonists in the drama formed a rigid tableau. Before the sufferer succumbed to the faintness threatening to rob her of consciousness, Nigel released the arm.

Her breath coming in gasps, her chest heaving, Cleo gingerly flexed her stillintact limb. Stabbing her enemy with her eyes, she lay back, grasping the hurting right arm with her left hand.

On Nigel's habitually inscrutable features, a single emotion showed plainly. Admiration: unwilling, unwonted, but unmistakable. Cocking his head, he inquired in a tone reflecting more wonder than sarcasm, "Have you ever been known to cry?"

Virulent anger overwhelmed the Gaean. "Yes, I've cried," she retorted acidly, her body quivering with passion. "I cried when I learned that my five-year-old son died annihilated when Yancey attacked Davis Station...when the thrice-damned mass murderer loosed that series of pulses that killed my sister, my brother, my cousins, and my uncle, along with my son. I cried again when my husband got cut down in combat an Earthyear later, and died surrounded by the bodies of the three Columbian bastards he took with him. Yes, I cried!" Her voice infused with unutterable bitterness, she added scathingly, "But *you'll* never see me cry, you sadistic rotter. Never!"

Nigel's face went rigid. The eyes burning into hers seemed to the woman shaking uncontrollably from the force of her rage, to presage escalated violence.

No such reaction occurred. After a span of seconds that stretched in the Gaean's mind like a decade of Earthyears, her nemesis suggested in an even tone, "Let's start over."

Cleo maintained a smoldering silence.

No whit daunted, Nigel reclined next to her, and slipped an arm under her shoulders. When she flinched, and stiffened, he ignored her reaction. Drawing her back against his chest, he thrust both arms around her from behind. Curling his fingers under her breasts, he massaged her nipples into hardness, using his thumbs. His hands slid down her ribs, returning to toy with her nipples. Having laid her flat on her back, he set both hands tracing much the same path they had taken earlier.

The object of his ministrations grew exquisitely aware of a subtle difference between this act of intercourse and the last. Nowise gentle, his caresses she discovered to be expert. With some subtle change in his posture, his expression, the very touch of those two beautifully shaped hands moving with such assurance over trembling flesh, he projected no hint of invasion, or of insult. His actions could have served as an exercise taken from a manual designed to illustrate techniques of erotic arousal. Cleo lay back, not relaxed, not tranquil, but unable to prevent her body from generating instinctive physical reactions to this despised foe's manipulations.

Pleasure muted her fear. Nigel's hands parted her legs. His probing fingers sent delicious sensations coursing along quivering nerves. Involuntarily, his partner arched against his invading fingers. Lying with her eyes closed, she felt him shift position, so that she bore the pressure of his torso over one hip.

*What is he doing?* she wondered confusedly. At that moment, his mouth closed over the tiny organ gone erect, full. His tongue caressed soft folds, and traced the protruding tip. Intense, prolonged waves of exquisite delight radiated through the woman wholly unused to such behavior.

How dare he do that! she expostulated to her alter ego, even as pleasure so great as to border pain attended his expert oral caress of her most intimate bodyparts. Deft fingers assisted. She felt one slide inside her, and massage a most responsive site. Her head arched back, and her torso strained upwards. Her awareness narrowed as she focused solely on her sensations. For the first time in her life, Cleo experienced sexual ecstasy.

Nigel judged her ready. Moving again, he positioned her pliant frame with his hands. Employing no undue force, he slid his hard shaft into her warm, wet, feminine depth. Intense pleasure surged through the woman thus delicately penetrated. He moved in her, every subtle motion designed to satisfy his partner before himself. The bemused Gaean felt each separate thrust as a heightening step towards a fulfillment she now craved. Shivers that escalated into delicious shudders presaged the onset of culmination. As her partner's skill lifted her into the final trance-like state of exaltation, she cried aloud.

Nigel's thrusts continued until he achieved his own culmination. Spent, limp, emotionally drained, Cleo lay supine beneath him. Having rolled off her, Nigel propped himself on one elbow. Minutely, he observed his satiated partner, gratified to behold the rosy flush spreading across her chest. Satisfaction blended with amusement on his unprepossessing face.

At length, the Gaean opened her eyes, and gazed in wonder at the prime cause

of her astonishing ascent to rapture. When he spoke, no slightest trace of mockery infused the sibilant voice.

"Cleo, you boast unbelievable courage," he conceded, his sincerity evident. "Grudgingly as I've come to feel it, I have to admit to harboring profound admiration for that courage. I can't go on hating what I've grown to admire. Let's call a truce, hm?"

Relief surged up from bottomless depths of a direly stressed psyche. Her voice husky with strain, the Gaean replied, "I'm willing."

An arm slipped under her. Nigel's lips found hers. Feeling her tongue inexorably drawn into his mouth as he indulged in an oral caress more intimate than any in her prior experience, Cleo quivered palpably as a new surge of pleasure loosened her loins. His tongue moved, as he sucked on hers as if to tear it loose from its root. Bemusedly, the captive gave herself up to enjoyment of his passionate, possessive, utterly erotic kiss.

Subtly, it changed, and she experienced the first gentleness ever shown her by this man. When his lips finally freed hers, he drew her head into the hollow of his shoulder, and settled her unresisting body against his. Reaching around for the rumpled bedcover, he drew it over them both. His lithe torso relaxed against hers. No further word did he say.

Cleo lay still, scarcely able to think. Out of a confused tangle of conflicting reactions to what had just transpired, one emotion rose to dominate the rest. Relief. Stark, profound relief. Thankfulness that somehow she had persuaded this fearsome enemy to abandon the hatred that had driven him so nearly to an act guaranteed to produce a fatal consequence.

I don't need to space myself now, she concluded, savoring a new lease on life. I'll live...for a while, at least...and see what happens. I survived this encounter. At the end...I even felt...

Words failed her. Shame, embarrassment, wonder, disbelief, the glow of warm physical satisfaction still pervading the body which had borne ongoing emotional

trauma with such unflagging fortitude during that interminable time since she first aimed a weapon at the enemy: all combined to overload the premier survivor's churning brain. Buffeted by a welter of sharply conflicting emotions, Cleo experienced a suspension of time: a retreat of her mind from the physical reality of her naked body entwined with Nigel's. Within the circle of strong arms, held close to the powerful physique of the man she had so feared, she let her consciousness submerge beneath the encroaching blackness.

## WEEK ONE: SUNDAY

Roused out of nebulous dreams by the pressure of Nigel's arms around her, Cleo sought groggily to focus her mind on reality. The pain throbbing through her right arm resurrected in lurid detail the events of the prior night. As her unpredictable lover kissed her under one ear, his hand moved under the bedcover, arousing pleasurable sensations.

Savoring relief at the change in him—relief no less profound now than when she first experienced it—she lay curled on her side, her back to him, enjoying that sensuous touch. His hands became more insistent, more demanding that she respond. The languor of sleep departed, to be replaced by sensual arousal. Her shoulders arched back against her partner's chest, as both of his hands caressed her breasts.

Bending her forward, Nigel drove into her feminine depth from behind. A muffled cry escaped the woman not expecting to be penetrated thus. Intrigued by her discovery of a subtle difference in the pleasure generated in that unwonted position, she moaned softly, consumed now by fierce need. Grasping her shoulder in a firm grip, her partner found sensitive places to stimulate with his free hand, even as his hard thrusts lifted her to rapture. With an intensity approaching that which she had experienced on the previous night, Cleo achieved a climax.

Despite experiencing a diminished awareness, she divined that her lover reached culmination. He said nothing, but kept her clasped in strong arms as he savored his sensations. Awash in bliss, the Gaean lay slackly in his embrace, her mind adrift.

At length, Nigel turned his companion towards him, and smiled sardonically. Two v-shaped creases framed the wide, thin mouth that now seemed to the carnally satiated viewer to be less cruel. The mockery lurking in the man's dark eyes reflected no underlying anger.

"Whatever sort of life we manage to build for ourselves out here, Cleo, I have to confess that I'll look forward to Saturday nights," he declared, his statement charged with only a trace of ironic humor.

Amazed at the admission, the captive replied with utter frankness, "So will I, Nigel...now."

As she walked side-by-side with her escort into the dining area, Cleo grew aware that every eye in the hall stole a guarded look in their direction. Intuitively divining that concern, not curiosity, drove those covert glances, she preceded Nigel along the counter, striving to maintain her composure. Offering a wordless reply to an unspoken question, she bestowed an unconstrained smile on the head cook.

From a vantage point farther down the counter, Conrad stared narrowly at each newcomer in turn. Cleo he saw to radiate gladness that he accurately surmised to arise from relief. Nigel's ill-favored face, as inscrutable as ever, gave nothing away.

Michael's seat faced the door. At the instant his glance rested on the Gaean, he knew past all doubt that his dangerous gamble just paid off handsomely. He noted the relaxed set of her features, and observed the warmth animating the brown eyes. Profound relief gave way to a sharp stab of pain.

Seating herself opposite the Captain, Cleo serenely wished those seated a good morning. Leonard's open countenance plainly expressed relief. Marvin stared searchingly at her for a split second, his fork poised in midair. When she nodded amiably at him, he dropped his eyes to his plate. Michael's demeanor remained perfectly natural, and his voice sounded utterly casual. "Well, Marvin will become your near neighbor today, Nigel," he remarked with commendable nonchalance. "He just built himself a tent." "So I noticed yesterday. I own to feeling relieved. Our being able to build at the same time will make things easier for both of us, Marvin, hm?"

In a low, strained voice, the social misfit replied, "That's so."

If Nigel noticed the glances, in no least way did he show it. Relaxed, assured, he ate serenely.

Cleo unobtrusively studied the man opposite, blandly forking down baked stuffed fish cooked with the skin intact.

Justin's becoming bolder in his offerings, she noted absently as she sought to penetrate the Captain's armor. Michael knows that everything's all right, she concluded accurately, even though I'd never be able to tell that from his face. What made him so sure it would be? Or was he? Did he lose any sleep last night, worrying? Or does he consider me expendable...an enemy who brought Nigel's anger on herself?

After breakfast, she strode beside the Lieutenant as he led the way to Thirteen, feeling liberated of a heavy burden. Having descended through the hatch to the lower deck, the team leader bypassed pump and comminutor, and stopped at the primary tank. Three people stared into the cylindrical vessel mounted on an intricately constructed base allowing movement designed to reduce shear on the organisms during launch. Constructed of a strong, clear, composite material, the container holding the large pseudo-pond gaped open. The watertight lid capable of rendering the receptacle completely cylindrical—a covering used only during launch—had been slid downwards around the side opposite the viewers. Complex equipment in the base provided essential connections to the secondary tank, which the viewers ignored, at this juncture.

Seven-eighths full of murky water, the primary tank teemed with life. Green scum covered the sides. A bloom of dark green unicellular algae clouded the interior. Small, blood-red, tubifex worms coiled and wriggled. Thick, bushy, naiad pondweeds waved in the sluggish current, their fronds alive with fresh-water shrimp. The busy crustaceans, some measuring fifteen millimeters in length, fed on microscopic organisms crowding the recesses of the fronds. Leeches hung from the scummy green sides of the tank, at times contracting slowly into bulging fatness, at others stretching to long, thin lengths. Snails made their infinitesimally slow patrols up the transparent walls, grazing on the scum. Bubbles rose slowly to the surface, there to burst.

At the bottom, thick, black, slick ooze covered gray sand. From layers in the ooze, other leeches arose, undulating in the current. Tiny organisms flitted along the bottom, and darted through the plants. On the surface of the water floated a thick blanket of bright green duckweed, trailing rootlets to which shrimp clung. Streams of bubbles arose from the aerators: rising currents in which shrimp swooped upwards, seemingly drunk on air. Above the miniature pond, a bank of powerful lights—fluorescent alternating with incandescent—hung suspended, shining down through filters onto the surface, aping the sun of a planet so distant in time and space as to seem mythical to the three representatives of its dominant species peering through the film of green on the clear, curving wall.

The viewers stared silently for a time, rethinking a familiar sight in the light of new knowledge. Leonard queried suspiciously, "Do you suppose Justin discards the leeches?"

Frowning, Nigel reminded him, "He eats what he serves us."

Cleo observed thoughtfully, "The leeches would be easy to pick out, but the worms wouldn't."

Three dubious recent diners exchanged queasy glances. Nigel declared emphatically, "In any case, he cooks what he serves."

His cohorts instantly chorused, "Yuck!"

All three people laughed, heartily and infectiously: a landmark event in their relationship.

"Well, we're going to move this tank to Eleven," Nigel declared, regarding it with an air of proprietorship. "Algae, duckweed, leeches: the works. This system has stayed in perfect balance for space knows how long. That'll be a plus, when we interfere to trade surplus organisms for...fecal matter, Cleo, hm?"

"Shit, Nigel." A purely girlish giggle erupted from the highly trained specialist thirty-six Earthyears old, prompting Leonard to flash an impish grin at the female teammate in whose presence he kept a strict watch on his own tongue.

Smiling appreciatively, Nigel announced, "By whatever name, we're going to start collecting it in our pristinely clean tank. So when the four of us have any fecal matter to contribute, we'll use our new facility, thereby lessening the amount we'll be obliged to haul from Central, eventually. I'll tell Marvin."

Thank the Powers Nigel didn't delegate that chore to me! the Gaean spluttered within the privacy of her mind.

Stroking his chin reflectively, the team leader studied the artificial pond. Musing aloud, he observed, "Eleven's one of four sections lacking a set of photosynthetic tanks. Its air remains breathable, because a wealth of equipment housed in Central keeps the air circulating throughout the station. That air is plentifully supplied with oxygen by the ample number of tanks in the remaining sections. The lower deck in Eleven seems originally to have been devoted to cryogenic research. There's a set of massive, vacuum-walled reservoirs and other equipment taking up space normally occupied by the photosynthetic unit, and a reserve of liquefied nitrogen stored in tanks on the outside of the hull.

"We'll lay on the moving crew the job of lifting out that cryogenic gear, using the same tackle we employ to move the photosynthetic tanks." Frowning, he added, "I agonized for quite some time as to the wisdom of moving the photosynthetic units, but I concluded that in the long run, we'd find doing so easier than we would tackling the chore of stripping down an entire cluttered, specialized section. We'd have had to switch the waste components in any case. We need a disproportionately large exchanger for the size of waste-management system suited to our needs, given our food requirement."

Nodding in agreement, Cleo observed, "I saw at once why you chose Eleven. The organisms will survive the move, if we're really careful." "Transporting the contents will disturb the balance considerably. That can't be helped. If we get the bulk of the organisms there alive, the primary tank will stabilize, even though it'll be detached from the secondary tank temporarily. The faster we get both moved, the less damage we'll cause."

"And the less we disturb the ooze, while we remove the organisms above it." Worriedly, Cleo eyed the slick layer at the bottom.

"Right. We'll need to transfer the contents into canisters we close to carry. Until we actually move them, they'll have to stay open under the lights to keep the photosynthesis going. If we divide the naiads equally among the canisters, and aerate, we should keep almost everything alive. Moving the tank will constitute our major problem."

Foreseeing another, Cleo unhesitatingly stated it. "Carried lengthwise, the primary tank will fit through the doors from the rim to the sections, Nigel, but it won't go through either hatch."

"Right. So we remove a plate from the deck: the one above the site where the tank will rest. In Eleven, that won't pose a problem. Here, it will. We're going to have to move the best part of what was once a facility devoted to research on meteoroids. Benches, sinks, cabinets, lockers, not to mention the doorframe. I'll enlist Michael's help."

Galvanized into eagerness to begin, the trio climbed back up the ladder, and located the plate, only to stare in dismay at the solidity of the built-in furniture covering most of its surface.

"Shades of the ancients, Nigel," Leonard remarked as he scratched his dark head in perplexity, "that furniture looks as if it were meant to stay put!"

"Well, it isn't going to stay put. I've studied it. The bases of those benches are bolted to braces along the walls, and to the deck. The hoods and upper cabinets are bolted to braces welded to the interior plates of the hull. So are the lockers. We can get everything undone."

Waxing loquacious, Nigel added, "Unfortunately, the lockers are full of massive

specimens. It's a mystery to me how the researchers captured those. The fields of the hull would vaporize any meteoroids approaching this station, so perhaps the scientists employed a remote-controlled vehicle to sweep them in. We'll be obliged to carry every kilogram of what we remove, to the biochemistry laboratory next door, to give us room to maneuver. Well. Let's begin by clearing out the specimens. I'll lift them down. Leonard, dump the bin I load, next door. Cleo, disconnect the lines running through the plate to the sinks."

As three people worked steadily, the Gaean marveled at Nigel's endurance. Having thrown open four wide, tall lockers crammed with metallic meteoroids, he lowered the pitted objects into the bin with graceful ease, his lithe body falling into a rhythmic, swinging motion that made his chore seem easy. Cleo knew it to be severely taxing. Lifting down a smaller specimen had shaved the limit of her strength.

Her mind harked back to the prior night, as she recalled the pressure of Nigel's grip. When she dressed that morning, she saw the black-and-blue imprints of his fingers on the arm he had grasped to hurl her onto the bed, and larger bruised areas disfiguring the arm he had twisted. Shuddering, the prisoner savored a renewed upwelling of relief at the change in the man.

If I had allowed rage to master me while betraying the extent of my fear...if what courage I managed to muster failed to impress a spacer-fighter who evidently holds courage in high regard...only Michael's tying me hard and fast would have prevented my killing myself Monday night, she acknowledged somberly. But he couldn't have kept me immobilized forever.

Nigel turned out to possess more decency than I ever believed he could harbor. But ordinary? Hardly. Where in the name of all the Powers did he learn what he knows about... I can't call it lovemaking. The generation of purely hedonistic, erotic sensation: that's what he accomplished.

A faint blush overspread pale cheeks as the Gaean recalled the heady pleasure produced by his final efforts.

Where did he learn that sort of skill? I'd have thought that any woman he courted would have considered him unattractive, given his ugliness. He visits courtesans, but so do the others. Michael and Justin didn't employ those...techniques. Do they know how, but refrained from shocking me? Given Michael's frame of mind, he wouldn't have cared in the least if what he did shocked me. Justin...so gentle. Skilled, but superlatively decent. Certainly Marvin hasn't learned anything from his visits to courtesans! Does he patronize the same ones Nigel does? Are such women all alike? How little I know about such matters. Good thing, that. If I'd known anything I've learned this week before I lived through it, I'd have been utterly unable to face it.

Lunch proved to be a thick stew full of vegetables, potatoes and fish, strongly but pleasantly flavored. *Oil of mustard*, the engineer categorized the scent. *A pungent, irritating oil that originally came from the seeds of an herb. He mixed it with onion. Damned if it doesn't taste good!* 

Shortly before everyone finished eating, Michael rose and addressed his crew. "Today, we're knocking off early," he announced. "At 1600. Conrad will deliver extra spare bedding to your quarters."

The men must rotate bedspace, the Gaean conjectured. What will they do on Sundays? One of them will lack a bed tonight.

Forcing her attention back to the speaker, she heard, "Knocking off early wouldn't do Justin and Conrad any good if they had to prepare supper, so we're going to eat cold sandwiches we make ourselves at 1600, and not soil any dishes. We'll take an extended recreation afterwards, until 2000."

Pausing, the Captain swept a penetrating glance over six faces. "I'm impressed by what each of you accomplished this past week. I'm also pleased by the way each of you handled the stress of adapting to new conditions." His eye rested fleetingly on Cleo. "Accept my thanks for your hard work."

Having seated himself, Michael sipped his juice. He kept his face perfectly composed, but every nerve-ending, every subtle sense with which he had learned to

gauge the morale of men whose lives in the best of times fell far short of easy, sampled the unspoken currents in the hall. What he sensed, what he saw and heard, what he read from the way his crewmembers carried their bodies as they rose to go, encouraged him.

What a week! he expostulated wryly. We skirted the edge of disaster, but we've stayed civilized.

After four hours of working with her body wedged first under sinks, and then into the cramped space between the shelves of the lockers, loosening bolts with her arms raised over her head, Cleo appreciated Michael's willingness to curb the rigor with which he had driven them, for one day.

Tonight I rate a shower, she recalled with satisfaction. What sybaritic luxury! And no worry about whom I have to face. I can catch up on my sleep. Marvelous!

In laying those plans, Cleo failed to factor the perversity of human nature into her cogitations, and most particularly, that of her own nature. Having eaten two large slabs of what she still called bread, covered with a thick, amorphous paste of something also redolent of onion and mustard, she read Michael's posted map of quarters and facilities in Central, and made her way to the only bathcabin in which he had not shut off the water.

Standing naked within the cramped confines of the facility, she dropped her uniform into the adjuster in the wall.

Now that I know better what to expect each night, I'll need to get used to letting each of them see me walk naked into the bathcabin each morning, to retrieve my uniform from the adjuster, she decided. I've got to take care of the only clothes I own!

After stepping into the cylinder, the Gaean savored her sensations as fine spray misted her body with warm water. Finding to her joy that the shampoo-dispenser functioned, she worked a glob of gel into her hair, and vigorously massaged her scalp. With soapy palms, she scrubbed the rest of herself.

Reaching out, she touched the switch for the second cycle. Warm water

sprayed forcefully over her body from the jets in the wall. While it lasted, the brief, hard barrage conferred pleasure almost sensual in nature, but no temptation to repeat the rinse-cycle troubled a woman conditioned by a lifetime of cultural programming to conserve water almost as precious on either Gaea or Columbia as here. Touching the switch, she stood amid the jets of warm air that dried her skin and fluffed her short hair, feeling rejuvenated.

The walls of the cabin, which she perceived all week as a private sanctum in which she could take refuge during the time allotted for recreation, seemed at this juncture to close in on her. Dropping into the chair, she weighed her options.

It's only 1710, she reminded herself glumly. If I fall asleep now, I'll wake at 0200 and toss. I know the books available on the terminal almost by heart. I'd better not access my notes, or so much as think of my research, she ruminated bitterly. That work's postponed indefinitely, and reviewing what I'd have done next would only make me angry. So what to do, for three hours? Should I join the others?

All that trying week, the captive had generated no desire whatsoever to see what the Columbian spacers did for recreation, concluding that the stress of the burden Michael had laid on her, coupled with twelve-hour stretches of hard work, constituted enough trauma with which to contend.

But I know them better now, she reflected. I shouldn't sit here brooding. I'll go. I'll talk to Justin, or Leonard...or Michael. Worry Marvin. See how Conrad reacts...how Nigel behaves. Those six men could well be the only human beings I'll ever see for the rest of my life.

Resolutely, the Gaean combed her hair, straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin, and strode out into the corridor.

At the instant that she stepped through the open door of the recreation hall, every eye riveted itself to her person. Unaccountably nervous despite the physical intimacy she had shared with each of these men—or possibly because of that circumstance—she stood hesitantly for a few seconds just inside the door, before slowly advancing. The scene imprinted itself on her awareness. Justin and Marvin faced each other over a chessboard. The older man looked up with a smile. Marvin's eyes met hers briefly, but quickly dropped. Michael, Conrad and Nigel, each holding a hand of cards, lounged in seats around a large circular table. Leonard, who had been lying prone on a couch, chin propped on hands, feet in the air, reading a book scrolling down the terminal, rose swiftly to a sitting position as his teammate entered.

His tone provocative, Nigel drawled, "Shall I deal you in, Cleo?"

Flashing the newcomer a grin, Leonard warned, "Better ask what stakes they're playing for, before he does, woman."

Intrigued, the Gaean stopped by their table. A pile of bolts lay before each player. Conrad's she saw to be the smallest. Michael's and Nigel's seemed approximately equal. An aggregation of steel in the center formed the pot.

"What do your counters represent?" she asked.

His grin purely friendly, Conrad undertook to explain. "Twenty-five milliliters of the only bottle of whisky any of us packed off the ship: a liter I still can't believe I'd hoarded. We've divided it into forty portions. I haven't lost it all yet, but I expect I will, to one of these sharpers. Somebody's got to win all of it before we open it. I'm trusting in their honor as gentlemen, and figuring that the winner will offer me a drink."

Smiling, the Gaean observed wryly, "If you shared part of your stake with me, Conrad, I'd make you lose it faster. I'll pass."

"Canny woman," Justin flung over his shoulder. "No telling what they might decide to gamble for next."

Charging the barricade head-on, the youngest spacer cannily outflanked his more experienced fellows. "How about a nice, non-stressful game of checkers with me?" he coaxed.

"That sounds far more appealing."

Eagerly fetching a set from a locker, the youth set up the board as his teammate sat down opposite him. Michael's chair chanced to face Cleo's. His glance

strayed from his hand often enough during the next half hour that he lost two pots in quick succession to Nigel, who deliberately allowed his sardonic amusement to show. Grown aware of displaying weakness, Michael determinedly concentrated, and retrieved half of his loss at Conrad's expense. Cleo's laugh at some joke of Leonard's fell pleasantly on the Captain's ear, but he kept his eyes on the cards.

Conrad's stake grew smaller. Marvin executed a capture that elicited a mock groan from Justin. No tension, except that generated by the games of skill, touched off any warning signals in the senior officer's still-alert sensory system.

The evening passed peacefully. At 1950, far later than she had intended to stay, Cleo jumped a king over Leonard's last remaining monarch to win the final game. Rising, she bid everyone goodnight. Curled on her side under the bedcover, grateful for solitude, she drifted off to sleep, clean, relaxed, and more tranquil in her mind than at any time since the advent of the ship that had wrought so drastic a change in her life.

## WEEK TWO: MONDAY

Waking of her own accord at the proper time, Cleo recalled that on Sunday evening, fearful that she might oversleep, she had set the alarm on the digital clock built into the wall next to the bed. Well aware that she normally woke automatically, once her system became accustomed to a rigid daily schedule, she grimaced as she remembered fearing to rely on that inner time sense, after the stress of the week. *I'm adjusting*, she concluded wryly. *To some things*.

Attacking fishcakes and grated browned potatoes with gusto, she glanced guardedly at the faces of the four men seated at the table. *That extended recreation yesterday did everyone good*, she decided. *Michael looks more rested than he has all week. Marvin seems more relaxed*.

Glancing up from his plate to find her studying him, Leonard shot her a mischievous grin. "You're quite a checker champion, woman," he commended her. "I'll need to hone my skill."

Nigel's drawling tone held no malice, as he declared, "I'll stake you to my winnings of last night, if you'd care to engage in a game more challenging to your mental powers."

That offer evoked a brisk shake of the head. "I'd promptly lose your stake. Poker's not a game I've ever played. I'd need to build up my nerve considerably, before sitting down to gamble with the three of you."

"Your nerve's more than adequate for any venture, I'd judge." Exhibiting impulsiveness unusual for him, Michael spoke his immediate thought aloud.

After turning an ironic eye on the Captain, Nigel rested a bold glance on the ultrafeminine possessor of nerve unique in his experience of women. "I'll leave my offer open," he assured her. "Michael's assessment falls dead on the mark."

"Well, thank you both!" the astonished woman responded.

"Now, don't let them sweet-talk you into losing your tunic, Cleo," Leonard warned blandly.

"I should say not!" The vehemence attending that expostulation prompted even Marvin to laugh.

"You just stick to beating me at checkers for a while," the lad urged smugly, confident that he could maintain his strategic superiority.

"That strikes me as a far safer course." *My blistered soul, as if I didn't have enough to contend with!* the captive expostulated silently. *I surely don't need to take up gambling. Especially not with Michael and Nigel!* Stealing a glance at the Captain, she caught him regarding her thoughtfully. *He meant what he said*, she acknowledged musingly. *Perhaps he* did *realize how deeply I dreaded Saturday night. Did he worry? I wonder.* 

That thought again crossed Cleo's mind as she and her teammates spent the day dismantling furniture in Thirteen, given that Michael joined them. Watching the Captain pair with Nigel to support the heavy upper cabinets while she and Leonard hastily loosened the last bolts holding the items in place, she judged his strength comparable to that of his second officer. The two muscular athletes, having disposed of the cabinets, lifted the massive upper halves of the four lockers off the lower ones, and carried them away.

A shiver coursed down the spine of the observer who still bore on her body the blue-black reminders of Nigel's iron fingers, and who vividly recalled the paralyzing grip Michael exerted when he dropped on her with intent to take her by force.

"I'll rig a block and tackle to shift the bases," Nigel offered, as the pair returned from transporting the last of the four upper sections.

"Are the bases unbolted?"

"Yes."

"Then let's heave the blasted things up and move them."

Kneeling inside one of two hoods, unfastening bolts, Cleo watched the duo out of the corner of her eye. Michael's compact, broad shouldered, stocky frame contrasted sharply with Nigel's taller, leaner, more limber body, but both men's commanding aspect she saw to be subtly enhanced by superb (and undoubtedly costly) tailoring.

How well their uniforms fit! she marveled. Especially Nigel's. Columbians must attach far more importance to the styling of their clothes than do we.

Absently, she glanced down at her own strictly utilitarian suit of dull gray-green: one that conformed to the Gaean norm, allowing freedom of movement while downplaying the effect of the wearer's shapeliness. Culturally programmed never to give any undue thought to her appearance, beyond a desire to appear clean and neatly groomed, the archetypical Gaean gave none now. Her observation merely represented an idle thought arising during a tedious task.

The day passed uneventfully. After supper, Cleo experienced no difficulty in relaxing, given that she harbored no fear on this night of Michael's repeating his initial offense.

He didn't spend an easy week either, she conceded bleakly, and despite all he has done to me, I have to admit that he has stayed firmly in charge. He has kept his men hard at work. I shudder to think of what could have happened to me had he lost control. Or, for that matter, what could have happened to his crewmen. Every decision he enforced, he made with the good of those men in mind. Their welfare constituted his primary responsibility, not that of the enemy blocking their one avenue of escape.

And if Michael cared nothing about what happened to me, why demand that I give him my word not to space myself? Bad effect on the morale of his men if I did? I'm sure that entered in, but perhaps didn't form the whole of his reason.

Promptly at 2000, her captor strode through the door. Rising from her chair,

Cleo faced him warily. With no pause, he walked straight up to her. Folding her in his arms, he pressed her against his chest. She again grew exquisitely aware of strength: of will, as much as of physique.

Having hugged her for a span of seconds, he held her away, and stared intently into eyes that met his squarely. "Tough week?" he inquired quizzically.

"That's a bit of an understatement," the captive retorted sardonically, as anger flared.

His hands still gripping her upper arms, Michael studied the face mirroring far less strain now than on Friday. "Any problems that I need to know about?"

"None that I couldn't handle."

"Will you give me your word to bring any you can't, to me? That you won't end your life, whatever happens, for one more week?"

The Gaean read genuine concern in the set of the rugged face, and in the tone of the query. Nodding, she offered a limited assent. "You have my word, Michael. For one more week."

"I'm glad, Cleo."

*He sounds sincere*, the prisoner admitted, heartened by that realization. Again clasped firmly against her captor's muscular chest, she all at once developed an unaccountable sense of having reached a safe refuge. Her arms stole around him, and she hugged him back, acting without volition.

That ready assent generated profound relief in the man unsure when he entered whether he would obtain it. The unexpected hug awakened a sense of protectiveness, which added a new dimension to the urgent physical need that had clawed at the man's consciousness all day. Sliding his hands between the bands of the Gaean's tunic, he parted them. Thrusting an arm around her inside the loosened garment, he caressed her breast with his free hand. His touch proved gentle.

At length, he slid her tunic down over her shoulders. Instantly, he caught sight of the black imprints of fingers on her left arm, and the extensive bruised areas on her right. His eyes narrowed, and grew glacial. "Who did that?" he demanded vehemently. "Nigel?"

Braced to address that question, Cleo met her interrogator's glance squarely and composedly. "One of them did it," she conceded levelly. "You have no need to know which one."

"I'll make damned certain that whoever did, won't repeat it!" Blue fire shot from the eyes raking the incontrovertible evidence of assault.

*Oh, my soul*. Burgeoning fear constricted the chest of the woman who shot out both hands, and exerted a convulsive grip on two black-sheathed arms. "Michael, don't say anything! To anyone! Don't!" Cleo's fingers dug into his flesh. "I told you, I handled the problem! It won't happen again. If you make an issue of it, you'll undo the good that came out of it. Please, don't!"

Scalded by his certainty that she must have defused Nigel's anger exactly as she had his own, Michael battled an onslaught of shame, of self-castigation, even of jealousy: emotion intensified by virulent anger at Nigel. Grasping her right wrist, he held the bruised arm out from her body, and inspected it minutely. "The bastard came within a centimeter of breaking that arm, I'd judge," he grated, accurately assessing the evidence. Sensing the desperation prompting the appeal, he grudgingly agreed. "All right. I won't take any action...this time. It had better *not* happen again."

"It won't." Driven by the intensity of her relief to make an overture that she once would have categorized as the act of a brazen hussy, Cleo slipped her fingers into the bands of Michael's tunic. Sliding her arms around him, she whispered, "Take me to bed."

His anger subsiding beneath a fierce onslaught of lust, the Captain shrugged out of the tunic. Lifting the Gaean in strong arms, he laid her in the bed, and with a few deft movements, stripped her of her remaining clothing. He kept his eyes on her as shed his own. As he gazed on her nude, bruised body, guilt rose to smite him.

A fervent desire to avoid generating a vivid memory of his behavior on the prior occasion of this nature prompted him to resist the temptation of dropping on her.

Reclining at her side, he drew her into his arms, and kissed her gently, if intimately, on the mouth. Elated by his discovery that she responded in kind, deeply aroused by the tactile sensation of her pliant flesh molding itself to his, he kissed each breast in turn, caressing her with deliberate, reassuring languor.

Observing the perfect control her partner seemed to be maintaining over what she sensed to be hot need, Cleo relaxed. To her surprise, she discovered that she enjoyed his efforts, as he held her against his side, and parted her legs with his free hand. A soft sigh escaped her as he expertly teased her into warmth, and wetness.

Aroused to a degree equaling that of a week ago, responding to some physical cue she could neither identify nor explain, she yielded to its irresistible force. With the same unwonted abandonment she had displayed during their first sexual encounter, she drew Michael down on top of her, when he mounted her. Her hands slid down his back, and her nails dug into his flesh. Her legs encircled him. The act in which the partners engaged seemed to both to set a seal on the compact they had just renewed. The bereaved widow gave herself freely, passionately, and fiercely to this enemy who had taken her by force only a week earlier.

Having passed into euphoria, Cleo lay back spent. Michael slid off her, to sprawl against her side with an arm flung across her, savoring the glow induced by carnal pleasure. At length, he turned her so that he could see her face. His own expression more than a little bleak, he confided softly, "About Wednesday, Cleo, I wished to hell I could have kept you for myself."

"Around Thursday, I would have experienced profound relief if you had changed your mind. But it wouldn't have worked." Gazing ruminatively at the author of her predicament, the captive pictured the consequences of Michael's claiming her for his own use. In a low, strained voice she added adamantly, "No. I can see where keeping me for yourself would have produced far worse consequences...and not only to me."

Heartened on hearing that unexpected vindication of his wholly unorthodox decision, the man still troubled by frequent stabs of guilt volunteered a further

confidence. "Late last night, I had to battle with myself to keep from infringing on my own rules, and knocking on your door," he confessed, his nerves tingling as he sought to assess whether the captive might prove amenable to such an infringement.

Rising abruptly on an elbow, Cleo fixed the autocrat with glinting eyes, her whole body projecting unshakable determination. "Michael, during the course of an endless week, I've made two rules for myself that I intend to keep. The first is that I'll never discuss what passes between any one of you and my own self in my cabin at night with any other one of you. The second is that I won't play any favorites. If you want more time with me in a week, rearrange the schedule so that each of you gets the same extra amount." As she drove those points home, the Gaean's eyes fairly snapped.

His granite features contorting in anger, Michael managed to bite back the hot words contending for expression. Reluctant admiration slowly acted to cool that sudden onslaught of regal wrath.

"You're right, of course," he admitted grudgingly, but resignedly. "Dead right. I won't lay any more on you than I already have." All of his sensors straining for input, he watched delicate features cease projecting hot ire, and saw the fine-boned, shapely body lose its rigidity. Reviewing the woman's words, he recalled earlier fears that he now knew to have been totally unfounded. Prompted by relief to offer a further confidence, he remarked, "You know, I took almost as big a chance making the decision I did, as I would have done if I *had* kept you for myself."

Puzzled, the woman whose own anger now subsided asked, "What do you mean?"

Her captor replied evenly, "If you had not only chosen to favor certain individuals...but also played us off, one against the other...if you had brought those tensions into the workday...I'd have been faced with a dire problem."

Curiosity mastered the captive impressed by this professional spacer-fighter's ability to lead. "What would you have done if I had acted in that fashion?"

The face that had gone pensive now set like stone. With no hesitation

whatsoever, Michael replied bluntly, "I'd have driven the edge of my hand with such force against your larynx, that I'd have killed you instantly." His fingertip touched a spot on the Gaean's suddenly constricted throat. "Then I'd have tried my damnedest to control what transpired as a result of that decision."

Ice crystallized in the blood of the hearer, as she divined that he spoke the exact truth.

Observing her shock, Michael hastily qualified his statement. "I gambled that a woman endowed with your courage, your intelligence, and your self-possession would know better than to try that, and my gamble paid off. You've handled what I laid on you even better than I'd hoped. In my capacity as Captain, I'm delighted by that outcome."

Catching the bleak note that crept into the assured voice, Cleo inquired softly, "And as Michael?"

"I'm resigned to the necessity of enjoying you only one night a week." Mustering a wry smile, the Captain coaxed, "And that being the case, Cleo, would you take me on again?"

Silently, the still-shaken Gaean slipped both arms around the officer prepared to go to such a length to remain in control. With sudden clarity, she perceived the distance from his men that Michael's rank—his status as leader—required him to maintain. Intuitively, she sensed the loneliness that would always parallel that need.

In a flash of insight she recalled that he had no peers, here. Despite the geniality that he habitually exhibited in his relations with his subordinates, and despite his dispensing, long ago, with demanding that his closely-knit crew of scientific experts address either officer as 'sir,' in what she accurately judged to represent an unusual departure from the traditional norm for the Columbian military system, she realized that there would always be a line drawn over which the Captain could not allow his crewmen to step. Michael had accepted the price men pay for dominance: a costly one.

That burst of enlightenment produced an upwelling of sympathy, which

translated into passion. Cleo gave herself not only out of the desire her partner worked successfully to arouse, but also out of her awareness of the loneliness that passion of itself could not ease. Wordlessly, her body communicated a womanly wish to comfort him.

Michael's sensitivity to such nonverbal messages enabled him to receive that welcome transmission. When the two lay spent in each other's arms, the Captain savored his cognizance that she not only understood, she also sympathized, despite his having compounded his original offence by multiplying it five-fold. The admiration he had conceived for her buttressed rapidly escalating affection: emotion that deepened and enhanced physical release intensely satisfying of its own self.

## **WEEK TWO: TUESDAY**

Having wakened early, Michael roused his sleeping bedmate by gathering her into his arms, and kissing her on the mouth. When she responded, he requested, and received, a final favor from the woman intuitively aware of the toll taken on this man, in this situation, by the burden of command. Unhesitatingly, she gave him what she sensed he needed, and sent him off primed for another week likely to try his fortitude as much or more than it would hers.

A residual euphoria buoyed Cleo as the life-support crew spent the morning in Thirteen, clearing out the remainder of the furniture from the plate they intended to remove from the deck. At midmorning, when Nigel dismissed her for her break, he directed that she stop in Eleven on her way back, to pick up a tool.

Heartened by that fresh evidence of being accepted by the man she had so feared, the Gaean ran at a brisk pace down the rim-corridor, but as she drew near to Eleven, the realization drove home to her that if she ran all the way to the dining hall and back, she would lack the time to sit down for a drink. Shrugging, she slowed, resolving to locate the tool and stroll back at a leisurely pace.

A few minutes later, with the item in hand, she stopped to gaze at the black tent occupying a considerable area of the main deck. Observing that a slit formed the door to the neatly fashioned structure, with the two sides of the entry overlapped to exclude dust, she impulsively parted the two halves, and stepped inside.

Startled to behold the Gaean, the creator of the unique enclosure rose in haste from a battered metal bench, still holding an electronic component he had been repairing.

"Hard at it, Marvin?" the visitor inquired in friendly fashion.

"Yes. No. I...I mean...I keep at it, but I don't need to rush. I...I'll be finished long before Nigel will." Marvin stammered noticeably, as he usually did when drawn into conversation with the lone woman.

"Your tent's efficiently put together. No wrinkles even!"

"No...no wrinkles." Pride in his creation served to override the man's embarrassment. Having gestured the visitor into the second of two metal chairs, he sat down opposite her. "This material stretches a bit, so I built a wire framework that keeps the cloth from sagging," he explained. "I had to hang lights, and I couldn't have the fabric drooping to touch those. I'd hate to have it ignite, or melt down over my head, if its heat-regulating property turned out not to equal that of our uniforms."

"What a ghastly thought! Does it keep out the dust?"

"With all of you gone, dust ceased to be a problem."

"Well, brace yourself for an assault by dust and moisture both, when we remove the plate over the section of lower deck where we'll install the tank."

"I'd better hurry, then, and take advantage of the lull." His initial agitation abating—perhaps out of a sense that he stood on his own turf, here—Marvin flashed his guest the same engaging smile that Cleo recalled seeing only once, prior to now. "Thank you for warning me," he added with evident sincerity.

Beaming at him, the visitor asked, "Mind if I spend the last half of my break here? It's too far to walk to Central."

"Not at all—if you can stand talking just to me." A vivid memory of this woman's strolling at Michael's side into the dining hall, laughing at some remark of the Captain's, prompted that self-deprecatory comment on the part of a man wholly convinced of his total lack of masculine appeal.

"Marvin, don't belittle yourself that way! I enjoy talking to you." A hint of tartness freighted that rejoinder. Having surveyed the enclosure, the guest cast about for a congenial topic of conversation. Hitting upon one that she suspected

might satisfy her curiosity as well as initiate pleasant discourse, she remarked, "I gather that your ship suffered a disaster that wiped its memory. Will you be able to locate enough undamaged components to enable you to build a board that isn't missing any vital functions?"

"Yes, other than those for downlink with Columbia. I've repaired some components. Ships carry a considerable stock of spare units, and luckily, the most crucial bodies of data needed for navigation—prediction and data-reduction algorithms, and data on galactic bodies—aren't part of the bank. Those are separate: integrated into the ship's autonomous navigation and guidance system, along with remote sensing equipment and the programs into which we feed data to generate lift and descent sequences, and trajectories: programs that do reside in the bank. We didn't lose those crucial separate functions.

"I haven't dismantled any of the part involving the bank, yet. I still may be able to retrieve more fragments besides the two I already recovered. I've concentrated on reassembling the section leading directly to the ship's propulsion system, and fuel tanks. Between what I retrieved and what I remembered, I've rewritten the program into which we feed data, so as to allow the ship to lift or descend automatically, and also the one that integrates with the functions we didn't lose, to keep the vessel on the calculated trajectory."

Staring in shock at the man casually offering that astonishing explanation, Cleo gasped, "You *remembered* the code for those programs?"

"In good part, yes."

"Shades of Old Earth, Marvin, that's incredible. Aren't they drastically complicated?"

Flushing, the programmer nodded. "They are, rather. But that wasn't too difficult a task for a man trained to design on-board computer systems for remote-controlled space vehicles used in research, and then program those."

"And you possess such training?"

"Yes. But I'm lower on the seniority list than Harmon, who's the man Michael

likely wishes he had drawn."

Acutely conscious of the unfeigned admiration generated by the visitor upon hearing of his qualifications, the socially inept expert perversely driven to add that final self-denigrating observation flushed an even deeper shade of crimson.

Moved to pity at the acute distress which shyness combined with low selfesteem habitually caused him, Cleo declared emphatically, and a trifle reprovingly, "Marvin, seniority doesn't always equate with superiority. Michael emphatically stated a while back that he felt glad to have you." Smiling with infectious warmth that softened the reproof, she glanced at her watch, sighing as she noted the time. "Well, I'd better go. Nice talking to you." Ducking through the slit, she headed towards the rim at a trot, leaving the expert sitting lost in bleak thoughts while absently turning the damaged component over and over in his hands.

I'll wager Marvin is bright, the engineer mused as she ran effortlessly down the wide, curving corridor. Extremely! But he certainly does suffer from an inferiority complex! Or has he just fallen into bad habits, out of shyness? Developed an inability—or uncertainty that he has the ability—to communicate well with people? He makes life dreadfully hard for himself.

At 1100, Cleo shared her teammates' relief that the task of clearing the required items of furniture off the plate, and unbolting it, rested complete. After downing the midday meal with positive relish—*fried eel: Justin's repeating his menus*, the Gaean noticed—she watched Nigel rig two blocks and tackle to lift the plate, and pull it over the adjoining one. Ordered to operate the vertical hoist, she lifted the plate.

Succumbing to curiosity, the Columbian engineer ran a finger along the edge of the metal slab slowly rising into the air. "Amazing, the variety of strange alloys utilized in these sections," he muttered, half to himself. "Incredibly strong without being dense. They must include non-metallic substances. No wonder the place holds together. I'd have wagered it would tear apart when set spinning."

Cleo, pulling a long span of chain through the block causing the ascent, while Leonard utilized the second block and tackle to shift the plate sidewise, overheard his remark. "Gaeans are master metallurgists," she informed the team leader, failing to suppress an overtone of asperity. "Our dense metallic planetoids yield ores that were unknown on Earth, and that don't occur on the rocky planetoids of the Columbian Group, either. Our ancestors learned early on to exploit that wealth of strange new materials."

"I knew your people excelled in metalcraft," Nigel replied without visible rancor. "But I didn't realize that they utilize truly unique naturally occurring substances. Amazing, I find that."

You should know, she castigated the speaker acidly, if silently. Norman plundered our world's reserve of metals, forced the miners trying desperately to survive his brutal occupation to part with an outrageous percentage of their annual output, and shipped that loot to Columbia. Seething, she glared at the man refraining from passing further comment.

Suppressing a host of bitter memories, Cleo stared down through the opening in the deck at the framework of lights stretched over the primary tank.

"We'll leave the lights there for now, and start emptying the tank," Nigel directed. "We'll need to work as fast as is consistent with care. Cleo, rig a temporary aerating line. Leonard, fetch the canisters Michael collected for us in Central. Use the wheeled bin. I'll disconnect the tanks from each other."

Nigel's order lifted the captive's spirits enough to banish the resentment generated by his earlier remark.

Perhaps he'll start trusting my training, she surmised hopefully. Simple as this job is, it's no real test, but he didn't tell me how to do it. And Leonard drew the shit detail this time. Figuratively—not literally, as I did—but Nigel actually joked about my circumventing that order to use buckets. Things are looking up. Applying herself to the task at hand, the experienced researcher worked quickly and efficiently.

Forty-five minutes later, Nigel watched like the mythical eagle as a pump lowered the water level in the tank, delivering the cloudy fluid to the canisters that Leonard filled a third full. Switching off the device, he helped his crew ladle out duckweed. Three people distributed the wealth of small, bright green, floating plants among the canisters.

Dipping an improvised scoop into the opposite end of the tank, Cleo carefully extracted the rooted naiads that teemed with shrimp. Those bushy pondweeds, bathed in a quantity of water, she distributed equally among the canisters. When the water level fell by two-thirds, Nigel again shut off the pump. Using a bucket, he scooped up water and dashed it against the walls, sluicing snails, leeches and a considerable quantity of algae from the exposed sides of the tank. Both he and the Gaean took pains to disturb the ooze as little as possible.

In a smooth exercise of teamwork, Nigel pumped murky water, which Leonard used to fill the canisters nearly full while Cleo arranged the aerating lines. Sluicing the sides once more, Nigel washed down more organisms. Having switched the line from the pump to an array of empty canisters, Leonard awaited the next step. Nigel stirred the ooze to form a dark slurry with the remaining water. Swiftly, he dropped the line into the reeking liquid, thereby removing most of the organic layer into empty canisters. Switching off the pump, he surveyed the remaining mixture of sand and ooze, wrinkling his nose.

"Stinks, hm?" he remarked superfluously. "We'll trash the pump if we try to run sand through it. I'd sacrifice it, but it won't last long enough to be worth the loss. We'll remove the sand manually. The tank's too tall for us to be able to reach down, and I don't fancy standing barefooted in that muck. Cleo, you're the smallest of us. I'll hold you over the edge while you scoop it into buckets that Leonard lifts out with a line."

Shit detail again, the captive groused. But he's right. I am the lightest. Certainly neither of us could hold him. At least he didn't order me to stand barefooted in the muck. Last week he'd have enjoyed doing that, woman, so don't complain.

Nigel's method worked smoothly. Standing on the platform extending around the tank, the limber athlete held Cleo's thighs in a firm grip as she filled bucket after bucket with sand, using the scoop. Leonard lifted the buckets out of the tank by lines attached to the handles. The more the gagging Gaean disturbed the muck, the worse it stank. Bearing stoically with the stench, she offered no complaint.

The magnitude of Nigel's strength again impinged on her consciousness. *Surely his hands and arms ought to be growing tired!* she marveled. *I don't mass a great deal, but he's hefting fifty-six kilograms as if he held ten!* 

Driven by fear of causing irreparable damage, the team took no breaks that afternoon. By the time they finished transferring all the contents of the tank, rinsing the vessel with water from the canisters, and pumping that back out, the hour approached at which supper would be served. Nervously, Cleo checked the aerators, relaxing a trifle as she beheld shrimp moving within the thick layer of duckweed floating on the surface of the water. Leonard added water from the first canisters filled, to those containing the ooze and sand, after which Cleo aerated those. Slowly, the stench grew less breathtaking.

Hands clasped behind his back, legs apart, Nigel frowningly surveyed the array of vessels. "The light's less intense," he observed to no one in particular. "It'll be off most of tomorrow. On Earth, the ponds could have suffered a cloudy spell, so I expect that they'll survive the gloom. For part of the time when the tank's drained, it'll be simulated night. In any case, light intensity isn't as crucial as the amount of dissolved oxygen. We can't let the canisters warm up too much. Well. Tomorrow we'll press everyone into service. Let's knock off for supper."

*Conrad's turn*, Cleo reminded herself as she accompanied her teammates back to Central. *Will he have rethought his feelings enough to trust himself to take advantage of his privilege? I find myself hoping that he will...hoping that he has conquered his lingering enmity. One more sexual partner won't make any difference now.* 

Nigel's accusation echoed in the captive's mind, sending guilt surging through her still-stressed psyche.

Trying to buy Conrad's pardon with your body, are you? But I didn't. Not his. He evidently succumbed to pity for my loss. I never set out to tell him about that. Whatever instinctive, split-second reasoning drove me to agree when Michael forced his decision on me, agreeing proved a wise choice. If I'd refused my consent...displayed hatred for all six men...struggled, bit, and kicked if anyone sought to couple with me...two of them, at least, would have done what Conrad was too decent to do.

Well, resisting wouldn't have preserved my honor. I'd have died to expiate its loss, not to prevent my losing it. If I had fought Michael, I'd be locked in a cabin now. Or...dead by his hand, after he'd vented his initial rage on me...assaulted me brutally. Or...dead by Nigel's. Or...wishing I were. I tried to retain what control I could, over what happened to me...to stay able to get to a lock, and space myself. I didn't consciously try to buy Michael's pardon. But evidently my response produced that effect. I won Nigel's respect, grudgingly as he gave it.

Do I hate both of them, underneath? No. I never generated virulent hatred for Michael. I understood his motive in subjecting me to neurostimulation. I didn't even fully condemn his unpremeditated lapse into violence, even while he engaged in the act of raping me. I'm not sure just why that should be so. Perhaps at that moment, we both succumbed to some sort of mad irrationality born of intolerable stress. And on the next day I saw the reasoning prompting his decision to share me as logical, even while I deplored its consequences to me. But I hated Nigel unreservedly.

Do I still? Not...actively. Truce...describes our current relationship. I've suspended my hatred. I guess I'm waiting to see what happens. Hatred does more harm to the one hating than it does to the person hated. I hate Norman and Yancey, but that fierce, overpowering desire to see both of those callous murderers of innocent civilians exterminated...annihilated...obliterated...hasn't done the perpetrators the harm it did me. Was doing me, until Wallace so kindly made a place for me on his team. He refocused my mind and my energy on research. And these Second Corpsmen belong to a military outfit not actively involved in the invasion.

Well...I've done the best I could to handle my failure to keep them at bay until I could use that pill Leroy gave me. Michael must have found that, realized what I

planned to do, and forestalled any attempt on my part to resort to other means. He kept me alive until I felt that I could face surviving. I'll just have to go on doing my best, whatever happens tonight. But I do hope that Conrad's over his resentment!

Supper proved to be one of Justin's thick stews. Using up leftover eel, no doubt, Cleo conjectured. Don't think about what's in it. Just keep on forking it down. You need to regain the mass you've lost.

Michael, sitting opposite, shot the woman doing exactly that, a broad grin. "Knowing what you three did all day, I'll wager I can read your mind. Care to bet?"

"Not with you," the Gaean retorted swiftly, the vehemence of her response softened by a smile. "Or Nigel, either. I expect my mind wouldn't be all that hard to read, right now."

Chuckling, Michael went on eating, as did the captive.

While awaiting her partner for the night, Cleo considered throwing her uniform into the adjuster, and slipping under the bedcover, but she decided in the negative, suspecting that Conrad might still harbor mixed feelings. Lying supine, vaguely apprehensive, she recalled that the hard-bitten spacer had seemed friendly enough all week. Glancing at the clock, she noticed that he should have appeared five minutes ago. By 2025, she surmised that her assigned cabinmate must have declined to come. Depressed by her conclusion that he preferred a night of discomfort to one spent in her company, she undressed, tossed her uniform into the adjuster, and slipped into bed to lie hunched under the thin cover, thinking bleak thoughts.

Five minutes later, Conrad strode in. Seating himself on the side of the bed, he smiled down at the occupant. His corn-yellow hair shone with cleanliness, and his lean, tough face wore a scrubbed look.

"Think I wasn't coming?" he inquired.

"I wondered," Cleo admitted.

"Well, let me explain. Justin and I both worked late. I decided to relax until 1940, and shower last. When that time arrived, I shed my uniform, stepped into the shower, and remembered that I'd turned off the water for Michael, who's been rerigging lines to store water for fuel. Muttering a few choice expressions, I climbed back into my suit, opened the hatch, went below, wriggled behind the tank, and turned on the cold. Naturally, the valve for hot turned out to be on the far end of the deck, high up above the water heater. After climbing up and opening that, I went back and showered. Cursing aloud, I figured that if I didn't turn both back off, Michael would likely start a flood tomorrow, and peel some of my clean hide off me. So, I clambered back down, turning the air blue, and shut the damned valves off. The shower didn't relax me all that much, but I smell better."

A peal of hearty laughter greeted that lugubrious final statement. *He's over his anger*, the Gaean rejoiced, her visceral tension vanishing.

A shade anxiously, her partner for the night asked, "Is that offer you made me last week still good?"

"Of course it is." Moving to give him room, she turned back the cover.

Rising, the spacer swiftly peeled off his uniform. Stretching out beside the woman the sight of whose shapely breasts roused him to raw lust, he slipped an arm under her, and worked to arouse her.

This partner, Cleo discovered, possessed neither Justin's gentleness, nor Nigel's expert knowledge. He touched off no accession of fierce passion, as did Michael, nor did he command the deep affection Leonard had won from her. He nonetheless tried to please her before himself, acting with gentleness enough to reassure her, and skill enough to succeed in waking desire.

Cleo responded, finding that no hard chore. At one point, she tipped her head back, and drew his downwards, inviting a kiss. She caught the brief flicker of surprise that crossed his lean face before his lips closed over hers. Accurately assessing her readiness, Conrad slid his hard manhood into her with no roughness, no undue force. Her response intensified his passion.

Sensing the man's urgent need for release, the Gaean moved with him, pressing her hands into the small of his back. At length, she divined that he achieved a climax. If he realized that his partner failed to do so, the Columbian gave no sign. Wordlessly, he lay for a time, enjoying his sensations. At length, he slid off her supine body to lie beside her. Cleo curled on her side, lying with her back touching his. Turning, he drew her firmly against his chest, and held her, as he had done on his first night in her bed.

Conrad's taking no chances on my leaping up screaming out of another dream, the widow surmised accurately. Amused, she grew conscious of burgeoning affection. He's likeable, when you get to know him, she conceded. Decent. Very ordinary. No problem to a woman plagued with a superfluity of lovers. A comrade. Each one of them, now, in his own way, has made me feel that I've become his comrade. Even Nigel.

All except Marvin. If he could ever master that paralyzing shyness—that painful embarrassment—I'd feel that way about him. Perhaps I do anyway. Strange, this life. Never in my wildest imagining did I ever suppose I'd adjust to it, but I am. I'm reacting to the comradeship. I can't seem to feel shame...or at least...not all the time. Was Nigel's assessment of my motives correct? That accusation hurt, but I didn't consciously think of what I did as that. That man still baffles me.

Sharply conflicting feelings contended for expression in the mind of the woman recalling the prior Saturday. In no way did she make the mistake of assuming that she no longer need fear Nigel. She had experienced violence the more terrifying for the deliberateness with which it was committed.

*Nigel doesn't lose his temper*, she reflected, shuddering. *He regards cruelty as an acceptable way of responding to certain circumstances, and coolly selects it as an option. But when he abandoned that tactic...* 

The memory of Nigel's other actions returned in vivid detail, disturbing the Gaean almost as much as did her recollection of his violence.

Whatever might he ask of me next Saturday? she wondered uneasily. With what sort of women is he used to associating? Surely he has enjoyed no different opportunities than Michael or the rest of the crew. I wonder if he'll ever be anything but an enigma to me. Comfortable in the warmth of her current bedmate's embrace, Cleo ceased racking her mind with critical self-analysis. Forcing her doubts and fears from her consciousness, she sank into a sleep that proved to hold no further shocks for Conrad.

# WEEK TWO: WEDNESDAY

Cleo awoke to find Conrad lying prone, his chin propped on his hands, his eyes fixed quizzically on her. "I was beginning to think I'd have to shake you awake," he announced. "I was tempted to do that anyway, earlier, but the thought occurred to me that last week you likely got drastically shorted on sleep. You looked bone-weary, last night, and I got here late, so I waited until the last minute."

Gratitude blended with the realization that this tough spacer-fighter possessed a far higher degree of sensitivity than she had originally suspected. Reaching out, Cleo thrust both arms around him. Tipping her face up to his, she invited a kiss. Having discovered that she harbored no reservations regarding kisses on the mouth, her partner enthusiastically obliged.

Lying back in his arms, the still-tired woman sighed as she admitted frankly, "I'd been wondering lately if I'd ever again feel caught up on sleep. Thank you, Conrad. I'll make it up to you next Tuesday."

That assurance elicited a shake of the head. "Better not make promises that stretch that far ahead, woman," the veteran spacer warned with a grin. Rising, he dressed, and made the bed while his companion used the bathcabin. While accompanying him to breakfast, Cleo savored the welcome thought that barring new complications, she could abandon her fears of being forced to face anyone's lingering animosity again.

Studying his female crewmember covertly over his breakfast, Michael observed the tranquility mirrored in long-lashed brown eyes, and noted the rosy color blooming in a face that had seemed haunted throughout the previous week. Savoring satisfaction, he drew precisely the same conclusion. One nagging worry vanished from his mind, to be supplanted by worse apprehensions that left him with no lessening of overall disquietude.

Take it one day at a time, he chided himself caustically. No sense fretting this far in advance of events that none of us might live to face.

Well aware that however diligently he strove to follow that excellent advice, he would continue to mull over those and other depressing projections, he sipped his orange juice, still craving the psychological lift to his spirits his first cup of coffee of the day provided.

Amazing, the things we miss most, in a jackpot like this, he brooded dourly.

"Suffering a slump of the spirits, Michael?" Cleo inquired, smiling. "Or just lost in contemplation of the work facing you?"

Suddenly certain that his usually perfect composure must have slipped, Michael mustered a smile. "To tell the truth, I find myself missing my morning coffee," he replied easily, if incompletely.

"Really!" Surprised, the Gaean responded, "I can't say that I miss what our Ministry of Food Resources calls coffee. Tea, yes, but I rather suspect that the bitter brown brew our food-chemists produce bears no resemblance to the extract of roasted seeds of an evergreen shrub that they think they've synthesized."

"That's where coffee came from originally? Roasted seeds?"

"It did. The shrub must not have been one which our ancestors included in the reserve of plants they brought with them on the Gaea or the Columbia. To my knowledge, no coffee seeds exist in either world, and of course we'll likely never know what plants Johann might have carried on the *Flagship*."

"Too true." Or where that mercenary-captain-turned-colony-founder might have hidden the fabulous warship he wrested forever out of the possession of our Columbian ancestors, the Columbian reflected, afflicted by a sense of loss. It didn't take long for the militant Columbians among Johann's colonists to develop an urge to subjugate their pacifistic Gaean allies. When Johann thwarted their plan, the Gaeans fled to a group of dense planetoids occupying the second of the two stable libration points in the orbit of the gas giant. Their leaders relied on isolation as a safeguard against attack.

Wishful thinking, that. Less than an Earthcentury and a half later, Norman managed to overrun Main World of Gaea using only standard military ships. Damn his savage soul! That power-mad bastard cast a new blot on Columbia's honor, by countenancing atrocities against civilians.

Aware of having let the conversation lag, the Captain forced his mind back onto the topic under discussion. "Columbian coffee isn't bitter," he informed the Gaean equably. "It's fragrant, and tasty."

"Hmmm." An idea surfaced, as Cleo recalled the results of the research she had pursued on the station: results driven from her mind by the succession of disasters she was just now beginning to feel she had survived. *Tonight, at recreation, I'll look that up*, she resolved. *It seems to me that I'm right, but I won't say anything, until I'm sure I am*.

"Your Ministry's chemists must have synthesized something closer to the real article," she observed with a smile. "Coffee was a beverage highly prized all over Earth. It didn't grow just anywhere. Coffee beans had to be imported, at considerable expense, by countries unsuited to cultivation of the shrub."

Michael returned the engineer a wry grin. "I suspect that the men of Old Earth were just as psychologically addicted to their eye-opener as I am." At that juncture, Nigel turned to the Captain with a comment on the problems posed by the project facing them, which banished coffee from Michael's mind.

Ninety minutes later, Cleo looked up from her check on the aerators in the canisters to see the primary tank rise slowly though the aperture in the deck. The huge receptacle hung suspended in a sling of webbing fastened to the tackle, and steadied by four pairs of hands on lines stretching from the four sides. Cleo and Leonard had taken down the lights, after Conrad turned off the power. Judging that

the shrimp seemed as lively as on the previous evening, the relieved engineer hefted one of the long light fixtures, and followed the youth, who bore another, up the ladder and down the corridor to Eleven. Having stashed the items well out of the way of the crew moving the tank, the pair hastily retraced their steps.

Flattening themselves against the curving wall of the corridor, Cleo and Leonard waited until Michael, Nigel, Conrad and Justin strode by packing the empty cylindrical tank. Marvin walked ahead, opening doors, and moving furniture farther aside, where necessary. Webbing still clung to the massive burden, although Marvin carried the line. Nigel, Cleo knew, had arranged a second block and tackle over the opening in the deck of Eleven.

Upon arriving back at Eleven, bearing a second pair of fixtures, Cleo and Leonard watched as the tank slowly descended below the level of the main deck. Nigel, playing out chain through the block, allowed the clear-walled vessel to come gently to rest on the framework below. Leaving Marvin holding the links, the lifesupport engineer dropped nimbly down the ladder, followed by Michael, Justin and Conrad, who grasped the net of webbing, and nudged the tank exactly into position so that it could be bolted into the intricate mechanism that Nigel had mounted on his improvised base.

"Lift it a bit," the overseer directed, prompting Marvin to pull a length of chain through the block, thereby causing the tank to rise a few centimeters higher. Two pairs of hands aligned bolt holes while two others thrust strategically located bolts into place, and tightened nuts. When the four men tugging at the webbing succeeded in pulling it free of the tank, Michael and Justin tightened nuts on additional bolts. Nigel and Conrad then replaced the electrical connections to the gear that raised the cover into place and provided the motion that prevented damage to the organisms from shear arising during launches.

Having checked the plugged-off connection points to the secondary tank and the nutrient stream, the instigator of the chancy venture surveyed the accomplishment.

"So far, so good," he muttered, standing with legs apart and hands on hips,

observing how smoothly the lid rose from its place and slid back around the far side of the tank as Conrad tested the electrical connections. "Let's get the outfit filled, before we suffer a die-off. Michael, I've collected all the carts and wheeled bins available. Once we shut off the aerators and cover the canisters, every second will count. If Cleo covers canisters, and hooks the sling I've rigged for them, and Marvin lifts, the four of you can transport them. I'll stay down here, and empty them as they arrive. Cleo knows which ones come first."

"Suits me." Collecting his crew, Michael did as his expert directed. Closing each canister with care, the Gaean hooked the sling to the tackle, and watched as four canisters rose at a time to the deck above.

Leaning as far as he could over the side of the tank, Nigel emptied the containers of sand, spreading the thick slurry with a long rod tipped with a crossmember. Over the wet sand, he poured the ooze, wrinkling his nose against the overpowering smell. Having finished that unpleasant chore, he set up the aerating lines, and activated them. Leaning once again over the side, he dumped in canister after canister of algae, naiads, shrimp, and other organisms. When the water level reached halfway to the top of the tank, he called up to the man assisting, "If you'll simply empty each canister as it arrives, now, Marvin, I'll push the roots of the naiads into the ooze, so that they'll re-attach themselves. Swirl the last of the water, to wash down the shrimp."

As the tank filled, Nigel thrust at the bushy naiads with a rod, forcing the roots into the ooze while straining to peer through water murky with disturbed sediment.

An hour before the midday meal, the human manipulators left the primary tank now filled, aerated, and once again bathed in its filtered light, to recover from its disturbance. As five people stored equipment, sparingly rinsed canisters, and reestablished order, Nigel summarized for Michael the problems confronting them.

"Primary tanks resemble cool fresh-water ponds found on Earth," the expert explained. "Their algae provide the bulk of the oxygen needed to replace what we utilize for respiration. They remove from the air the carbon dioxide we exhale. They can recover from disruption, and stand brief fluctuations in dissolved oxygen content, temperature, light, and even pH. If all we had to worry about was breathing, we could get by with this tank alone. Unfortunately, we also need to eat. While the growth yield of the algae and duckweed might keep us alive if we could bring ourselves to feed off it exclusively, we'd likely decide that life wasn't worth living, if we tried.

"We therefore need the exquisitely balanced, complex ecosystem the three-part secondary tank represents. There's no way we're going to do a crude job of draining and re-filling that unit. We'd wreak havoc. Disconnecting the tiers from each other will inflict enough disruption. We'll move each section entire: a chore that'll strain our resources.

"So. After lunch, your crew will remove the plate I've marked in Eleven's deck. My team will disconnect the top third of the tank, and ready it to be lifted through the hole in Thirteen's deck. That small section of tank, full, masses more than a thousand kilograms. Luckily, I located one of the wheeled frames the men who built the station used to set in place the secondary tanks they brought aboard intact. We'll move all three sections as fast as is consistent with care. We'll likely not finish by suppertime. That can't be helped. We've got to reconnect the three sections of the secondary tank, and re-join that unit to the primary tank with no delay, to avoid irreversible damage."

"We'll work till you're sure that we've done the job right, Nigel," Michael stated flatly. "I told Justin we'd break out some of the standard meals the Gaeans left, for tonight. We'll eat sandwiches for lunch."

"So it won't matter if we're early for lunch, hm?"

"No."

"Then let's eat now, and come back as soon as we can gulp the food down." "Suits me."

Enjoying a thick sandwich of fish in a creamy sweet-sour dressing—Justin took pains yesterday to make even this hurried meal tasty, Cleo acknowledged

admiringly—she kept an eye on the team leader, sensing his impatience to get the next challenging task behind him. Rising simultaneously with him, Cleo and Leonard followed as he stalked out on silent feet ahead of Michael and his crew.

With painstaking care, the trio closed valves to the connection between the top and middle sections of the tank, as well as those leading to the delicate monitoring apparatus, aeration lines, nutrient stream, and water-circulating system.

"Light isn't as crucial as oxygen and circulation," Nigel muttered, half to himself. "We can't let this section warm up, and we can't let the bottom one cool down. We need to move all three with dispatch."

Agreeing whole-heartedly, Cleo surveyed the highly specialized hybrid fish darting about in the top tank, amid plants not too unlike those of the primary tank.

They've come a long way down a contrived and accelerated evolutionary path since their ancestors provided sport along with food for the men of Earth, she mused, fascinated as always by the sight. Salmo hybrids live mostly in cool fresh water, but they're tolerant of salinity. These fish are engineered to breed in conditions as cramped for them as our habitats would have seemed to the men who ranged freely over the vast, air-endowed surface of Earth. They're adapted to eating the algae, crustaceans, and small fry of the Carpio and Chichlid hybrids that inhabit the middle section. They die, to be scavenged by genetically engineered eels.

Of all the organisms I've ever seen, those drastically altered descendants of the old Anguillidae have to represent the crowning achievement of human genetic manipulation. I'd have selected something not so frightfully complicated in its life cycle, but our ancestors must have loved the rich meat of the eels. Terrestrial animals just didn't work out as suppliers of staple protein in space stations. Recycling hoofs, horns, hair, hide and feathers proved unfeasible.

Until our recent ancestors took to synthesizing food so routinely, they must have eaten meals similar to those Justin's serving. Having gotten used to the idea of downing eel, I must say I'd miss it if we got served nothing but fish and vegetables, and I simply loathe the thought of forcing down duckweed, algae and fresh-water

#### shrimp three times a day!

Driven out of her reverie by the arrival of Michael's crew, Cleo observed as they rigged both blocks so as to raise the massive load. Watching like the mythical hawk as the receptacle slowly rose, Nigel sprang up the ladder to oversee the massive object's descent onto the adjustable wheeled frame built to transport such tanks. After a tortuous trip through narrow passageways, the wide corridor in the rim, and the open space of Eleven's upper deck, the movers left the tank reposing close to the opening in the deck.

The crew returned for the middle section. Cleo and Leonard remained in Thirteen, unfastening connections to the tanks.

"We need to leave the aerators running until the very last minute, Leonard," Cleo cautioned. "Less oxygen dissolves in the warmer water, although these fish can tolerate a lack better than the hybrid trout can."

"They look crowded, but I guess they're used to it," Leonard remarked, watching the darting inhabitants of the tank.

"These systems are a highly artificial balance of predator, prey, scavenger, and intermediate life-forms all eat," Cleo replied. "Ocean, brackish river mouth, river, and cold fresh water lake are all represented, but they're vastly smaller, and different from any natural Earthly habitat. Their life forms have been engineered to fit the conditions, and to stay in balance. Amazing accomplishment, this system."

"Damned if it isn't!"

Having seen the middle section depart on its way, Cleo and Leonard readied the last component: the warm, salty "ocean" in which the eels spawned and died, leaving transparent *leptocephali* to drift among tropic vegetation in the sluggish current. These would later metamorphose into transparent glass eels, and then into pigmented elvers, which would ascend the "river" of the middle section. Having traveled a tiny fraction of the vast distances their *Anguillid* forebears traversed on Earth, the elvers would in turn develop into a dwarfed but meatier adult form in far less time than it took for their ancestors to mature. "Cleo," Leonard asked, driven by curiosity, "why does the cold water stay above the warm bottom water? I'd think the warm water would rise to displace it. Even with complicated separate circulation patterns in each tank, shouldn't it eventually mix?"

"It would, except that the density of the salt water's so much greater than that of the fresh water. Even though it's warmer, it stays on the bottom."

"Introducing the salty water must have been a complication to the originators."

"I'd guess this whole setup was one gripping challenge to perfect. Salt poses a problem, but it's also a vital requirement for human bodies. The quantity of sodium chloride excreted daily in the urine each person produces would be toxic to the algae on which the whole system depends, so the salt is removed when the urine passes through the ion-exchange resins. These oceans form a handy reserve of salt. Besides, despite their being genetically altered, the eels need an ocean. Earth-sea water is an extremely complex substance containing sixty-seven chemical elements, and it's so corrosive that no metal parts can be used anywhere in contact with it. Those factors constituted a major challenge to the designers of the system."

"Amazing, what our ancestors succeeded in doing: adapting species to such drastically different surroundings, and conditioning themselves almost as rigorously to live aboard ships and space colonies."

"Too bad they didn't alter our propensity to resort to violence when faced with conflicts, while they were evolving the conditioning that allows us to live in the cramped environments these tanks regulate." That rejoinder emerged in a voice gone suddenly bleak.

Offering no immediate comment, Leonard pondered that notion as he deftly detached apparatus housed in the space under the framework that had supported the primary tank: apparatus supplemental to the photosynthetic unit as a whole.

"Perhaps if they had conditioned that tendency out of us, we'd have lost our courage and resiliency as well," he opined gravely. "Johann's colonists survived the space wars through sheer grit. Today's Columbians descended from a radical technological elite: misfits too independent-minded to blend back into the bureaucratically controlled, densely populated society of Earth itself. Those technologists teamed up with the remnants of the corps of mercenary spacer-fighters who managed to survive the wars that decimated the space colonies. If those two sets of adventurers hadn't dared to make the Jump with Johann, that's where you and I would be, now."

"Gaeans descend from a tightly-knit body of pacifists who maintained a queasy alliance with Johann's other two groups of colonists in order to achieve the freedom to be resilient without resorting to violence," Cleo shot back. "And they succeeded, until Norman invaded a people who still abided by the Convention—people who built no weapons that could kill at a distance. Or even swords, that can't—until the Gaeans forged those in self-defense, and learned to use them on rapacious invaders."

"But that's my point," Leonard countered equably. "As long as people willing to resort to violence exist somewhere, a world, or even a space colony, had better not lose its ability to fight. Not that the majority of us in any way approved of Norman's invading Gaea...believe me. Most Columbians boast a keen personal sense of honor, despite their readiness to use violence as a means of preserving it. Norman sullied our national honor. That bastard we all know to be motivated chiefly by a lust for power."

Visibly ruffled, Cleo glanced resentfully at the youth whose gentleness had so captivated her. "But almost a fifth of Columbian men of fighting age followed Norman readily enough!" she countered vehemently.

"The worst fifth."

Unable to grow angry with an opponent who debated reasonably and dispassionately, she nodded, conceding glumly, "I've no doubt that's true." Having worked as they talked, the pair sat back to survey the last of the components awaiting transport. "What's the Commander of Second Corps like?" Cleo asked, determined to allay the curiosity gnawing at her as certain daunting implications of her situation impacted her mind.

"Galt's as tough as Norman, but more suave," came the ready answer. "More genial. Whether he'd be as openly brutal to a subjugated populace as Norman has been to your people, I don't know. I rather doubt that he would. He generates fanatical loyalty among his officers and men. The Commander appreciates Michael's accomplishments, and hasn't been backwards in showing that. We've had no complaint. But Galt hates Norman. In fact, each of the five commanders sees the other four as rivals to be outmaneuvered, but Galt's eminently fair in his dealings with his subordinates."

I wonder how fair he'll be to me, if we make it to Columbia, when he learns what I did? Cleo wondered uneasily. But if he values Michael, perhaps he'll take into account Michael's report of the part I played in the work of getting back. If we do. No sense in worrying yet.

Having seen the last of the three sections of the secondary tank rise out of the lower deck of Thirteen, Cleo and Leonard made numerous trips, conveying the delicate apparatus that regulated and monitored the balance in all the tanks. The two thus burdened passed and re-passed the crew slowly nudging the massive load along the corridors. Casting an anxious glance at the wildly darting inhabitants of the two upper tanks, Cleo noted the effect produced by the disturbance.

There's bound to be some lingering effects of the stress, she fretted. I hope not too devastating!

His normally inscrutable face mirroring similar anxiety, Nigel directed that Michael oversee the lowering of the bottom tank to its place abutting the primary tank, while he and his team installed the supporting apparatus located beneath the primary tank. Having guided the middle section to its resting place above the bottom one, they reattached it, and restored its umbilical connections to the supportive equipment, while the topmost section slowly descended.

Once all three had been joined, and the necessary lines restored, Nigel and Cleo anxiously made readings, while currents re-established themselves, and bubbles ascended. "We couldn't have done the job in less time," Nigel remarked to no one in particular. "The effects of the stress will be temporary. We'll watch the exchanger closely. We'll let it regain its balance fully, before we interfere again, to put us into the cycle with it."

By 1850, the work had been finished to Nigel's satisfaction. Seven people, most especially the four who had borne the brunt of the lifting, looked forward eagerly to consuming the first standard meals Justin had served in more than a week. Having lost fifty minutes of their recreation period, they took their time over supper, chatting animatedly.

Belatedly, Cleo recalled what she had planned to look up in the bank. *No* opportunity this evening, she reflected wearily. *Tomorrow will do. Leonard, tonight. No stress at that thought. So gentle...yet he believes strongly that violence has its value. Could he be right? Or could the rigors of a struggle to survive in a harsh environment alone suffice to keep human courage honed to a razor edge? Surely Sigurd lacked none, nor do our rebel fighters. Nor Signe, premier warrior that she is! Max died a hero.* 

A wave of guilt washed over the widow, as she realized how long a time had passed since she communed with Max.

I've been concerned with surviving, she excused herself, albeit guiltily. Just why that has suddenly become important, I don't know, except that self-destruction other than to preserve one's self from intolerable degradation seems the essence of cowardice. If I knew that I faced constant gang rape, or unspeakable brutality, or both, I'd have killed myself. As things stand, I'm more comrade now than victim. Oh, Max. Thank the Powers you'll never know what I've done!

Feeling no undue embarrassment at the thought of Leonard's seeing her walk nude into the bathcabin to retrieve her clothes from the adjuster in the morning, Cleo relaxed under the cover, awaiting him. He arrived exactly on time, to greet her in warm, friendly fashion, but she saw the hot desire mirrored in his eyes.

Stripping with precipitate haste, he slid in next to her. His eagerness apparent to her, he yet exerted rigorous control over his fierce need. "Cleo," he whispered

gently, "I want to satisfy you. Show me how."

Touched, won to an affection so deep as to require a new designation, the Gaean guided his hands. In a burst of clarity, she realized that her experiences of the preceding week had enlarged her perception of what stirred her to react.

"Leonard," she asked hesitantly, as his fingers sent pleasurable sensations thrilling down her nerves, "if I do that to you...will it bother you...make you remember...?"

A finger pressed against her lips as her partner assured her vehemently, "Cleo, no touch of your hands could ever bother me. Please, don't think about what's past. That doesn't compare at all with going to bed with you."

Reassured, the amateur therapist caressed him in intimate fashion, gratified to see that his shaft hardened further. Out of the increased scope of her feelings for this youthful comrade, the widow responded with a depth of passion far exceeding that which she had achieved in her previous encounter with him. Breathlessly, she yielded to its force. When she achieved a climax, she cried out his name, making certain he knew that he had given her fulfillment.

Exultant, the youth relaxed the mastery he had maintained over his own potent urge to attain release. Moments later, he experienced a culmination even more satisfying than his accomplishment of a week earlier. Spent, he lay motionless for a time, floating in a state of bliss.

Pleased, but amazed at the change in him, his partner commented, "Leonard, you're a fast learner."

His unabashed, infectious chuckle delighted her. "You're a master teacher," he shot back. Propping himself on an elbow, smiling down into a face radiating affectionate warmth, he spoke, the truth of his words evident to his companion's every sense. "I love you, Cleo."

"I love *you*." The bereaved Gaean answered without hesitation, knowing her response to be no lie.

Deeply moved, but cognizant of what he perceived as a significant factor,

Leonard stared searchingly into guileless brown eyes, and smiled a shade resignedly. "I know you wouldn't say that if you didn't mean it, Cleo," he declared with utter gentleness. "But I think there's room in your heart for more than one of us."

Suddenly knowing his observation to represent the stark truth, the captive shared by six spacer-fighters asked wonderingly, "Can you accept that, Leonard?"

"I already have." No regret, no rancor, tinged the lad's steady voice. With infinite tenderness, he closed his mouth over that of the woman overwhelmed by an accession of powerful if mixed emotions. Stirred to wonder, Cleo returned his kiss, amazed at his mature understanding of his own mind, and of hers.

He's so young to be so clear in his perception of so complex a relationship as love! she marveled. So wise, and so accepting. Never has he displayed the slightest bitterness over the cruel trick chance played on him. At least the others possess a broader experience of life to sustain them in their handling of confinement. Has he parents he misses? Sisters and brothers he may never see again—who think he's dead?

Swiftly suppressing the temptation to ask, she resolved not to spoil this moment for him, given that their relationship could turn out to be the only experience of loving a woman the marooned youth might ever know. *Make each night you spend in Leonard's arms as memorable for him as you can!* she urged her alter ego. Flowing against him, her head on his shoulder, she let her hand slide slowly over his chest. "You're developing into a marvelous lover," she murmured, meaning every word.

Leonard said nothing for a time. He merely lay ruffling her hair, while enjoying her touch, and the warmth of her body nestled against his. Eventually, he turned to meet her eyes, his classic face wreathed in his impish grin. "Then you wouldn't object if I review what I learned tonight?"

Laughing even as her arms went round him, the widow abandoned her role of mentor, and gave herself up to enjoyment of this fledgling lover's newly gained skill. Leonard developed a few touches of his own. In her burgeoning awareness of the depth of her feeling for this partner, Cleo managed to give him once again the satisfaction of knowing that he had brought her to fulfillment. The last thought crossing her mind before the two of them fell asleep, was a profound wish that for the sake of this boy standing on the threshold of life and career, Michael's incredibly chancy venture might succeed.

## **WEEK TWO: THURSDAY**

Waking before the other occupant of the bed, Cleo slid her hand across his chest. Snuggling close to him, she roused him from sleep, prompting him to murmur an appreciative "Mmmm...that feels good." Nothing averse to accepting what he took to be an invitation, Leonard responded with such vigor as to leave them a bare minimum of time in which to dress, laughing, and make the bed before hastening into the dining hall not blatantly late.

As she seated herself in her accustomed place, next to Nigel and opposite Michael, Cleo grew exquisitely aware of their combined appraising glances. "Good morning," she greeted the three men already seated at the table, acutely conscious of the crimson tide flooding her cheeks.

Leonard took his place with unabashed nonchalance, prompting the dual, penetrating stares to rest on him. That circumstance disconcerted him no whit.

*Oh, my soul, I can read both their minds!* Cleo wailed inwardly. *I wish that I boasted Michael's unflappable composure, or Nigel's unreadable face.* 

Striving for calm, the Gaean smiled at the computer expert, whose eyes after one glance had dropped to his plate. "Did your tent keep out excess water vapor, Marvin?" she inquired brightly.

The man's flush rivaled hers. "Why, I...I never checked, yesterday. Too busy. But I...I'm sure it did," he replied agitatedly, averting his eyes again after one sidelong glance at the woman directly addressing him. He, too, had noticed the precipitate tardy arrival of the pair. His mind evidently focused now on the work facing him, Nigel remarked, "The first thing we'll do today, Marvin, will be to replace the plate." The ensuing conversation diverted the diners' minds into other channels.

Having followed her team leader down the ladder to the lower deck of Eleven, Cleo hurried in his wake to the secondary tank. "Nigel, I don't see any dead fish," she exclaimed in relief.

"No." Studying the monitoring apparatus while stroking his chin with his hand, the engineer declared ruminatively, "Not bad, for the upheaval we caused. Well. Once we replace the plate, we'll survey the rank growth in Thirteen's tertiary tank. I did no more than assure myself that the spiral still contained living plants. It amazed me that any of the sections did."

"Every three Earthyears, for over an Earthcentury now, Gaean scientific teams have spent six fourweeks here. The teams always included someone with knowledge of botany, who tended all the tanks in which plants still survived. Those specialists generally planted far more exotic sorts of hardy, tenacious specimens than the varieties normally found in the tertiary tanks of municipal units. These tanks now sport extremely self-sufficient growth." Exerting herself, the Gaean managed to keep her voice neutral.

"And this time, they enlisted you as their botanical expert."

"Yes." Cleo's eyes met those of her fellow engineer squarely. *And I'm your equal in qualification, though not old enough to have gained your experience,* she added tartly, under her breath.

Habitual arrogance notwithstanding, Nigel allowed his face to crease into a smile. "So you've already formed a detailed list in your mind of what's available here, hm?"

"Not only in my mind. I've filed reports in the station's bank, identified plants unfamiliar to me, and researched their direct food value. That's been a specialty of mine—delving into the way Earthmen used each variety. On Gaea, the tertiary harvest gets added to the growth yield of the other two tanks, and employed as raw material for the synthesis of the meat, dairy, and cereal-based foods included in standard meals. Only the vegetables and potatoes get used unaltered."

"A fortunate coincidence, your possessing that knowledge." No mockery tinged the sibilant voice, as its owner made that observation. On the contrary, Nigel's normally inscrutable face betrayed keen interest. "I'm far more an algal specialist than one familiar with terrestrial plants. I have to be, given that I work mostly with the regenerative systems employed in ships, which use nothing else. I'll utilize your special expertise," he declared in a matter-of-fact tone.

Surprised that the Columbian engineer would accept her knowledge as expert on her statement alone, Cleo's frostiness thawed. Well aware that women who qualified as professionals formed a rarity in Columbia's business and scientific community, she marveled that this military officer failed to resent her possessing expertise similar to his. "I'm glad of that, Nigel," she assured him forthrightly, smiling into the face the ugliness of which no longer startled, having become familiar.

Warmed by the smile her former nemesis returned her, Cleo nodded as he directed, "Well, let's replace the plate, and make life easier for Marvin, hm? Then we'll see what we've inherited as tertiary growth."

An hour later, having painstakingly tightened the myriad bolts securing the plate, the team descended to Thirteen's lower deck, and entered the tall, conical, translucent structure built of highly reflective, creamy-white laminate: the enclosure which housed the terrestrial plants.

Standing within the rising spiral of lightweight, continuous "tertiary tank" crafted in interlocking sections from a composite material formed of high-strength glass and carbon fibers, three people gazed upon the tangled growth crowding every loop of the spiral. Nourished by the nutrient stream that circulated through the primary and secondary tanks as well, the organisms of Thirteen's three-phase photosynthetic exchanger maintained a perfect ecological balance.

That balance, Cleo well knew, would be subtly altered when the human manipulators withdrew what they utilized for food, and replaced that organic material with their own treated waste. Aerated as well as nourished from below, the plants normally grew hydroponically. Delicate, automated mechanical contrivances pollinated them artificially. Tertiary tanks, the Gaean fully realized, were not designed to achieve the lasting balance on their own which the primary and secondary tanks routinely attained, but she experienced prideful satisfaction on reflecting that the plants that had overgrown a considerable number of the spirals in the sections had managed that feat on their own.

"The early settlers who built this station selected plants with long-term growth in mind," the Gaean informed her companions. "Hardy perennials and prolific, seedscattering annuals they propagated from the original stock they brought with them. Plants show up here that I've never seen elsewhere."

"All this place needs to qualify as a bona-fide jungle is snakes," Leonard remarked ruminatively, viewing the rank growth crowding the space.

"Good thing it lacks those, hm? Or Justin would be serving snake steaks," Nigel countered sardonically.

"Yuck!" His teammates chorused in perfect unison. "Although I've read that some of the most poisonous ones, such as rattlesnakes, were considered delicacies," Cleo admitted.

"Actually, the ones I've seen in copies of old films taken on Earth didn't look all that different from eels," Leonard remarked. "I don't know why snakes seen on a screen give me far worse chills than do eels in a tank."

"Perhaps that response arises from some faint racial memory imbedded in our cells by the consciousness of danger," Cleo averred, smiling, her remark made half in jest.

"No scientific basis for assuming that, although they give me the same chills," Nigel pointed out, rejecting the fanciful hypothesis. "Cultural hand-me-down, more likely. Well. Lush growth, if wild. Good for photosynthesis. What have we here to eat, Cleo? Besides *Medicago sativa* and *Basella alba*, neither of which stimulates my salivary glands?" "You don't like alfalfa or malabar spinach, Nigel?" Cleo drawled, employing the ancient folk names.

"Only as an alternative to raw duckweed: Lemna or Spirodela."

"Well, those broad-leaved plants are a *Brassica*: collards. Tastier than *Basella*, Nigel. These climbers someone wisely isolated from the other plants are hop vines. They'd smother the other vegetation if they got a chance to spread. Those are *Glycine max*—soybeans—and these are *Helianthus tuberosus*. They used to be called Jerusalem artichokes: a wild misnomer, given that they're a sunflower with edible roots. These are *Beta vulgaris*: Swiss chard, or leaf beet. Good cooked or raw. Here, the usual potatoes. They're surviving, but they need work.

Turning, the specialist exulted, "And here's a prize. Asparagus! The stalks are delicious. This bed's about to produce what I'll bet is its first harvestable crop of stalks. Not a plant boasting high photosynthetic value, *Asparagus officinalis*. Some hopeful gourmet must have planted this here during the last occupation."

"What's this stuff that reminds me vaguely of duckweed?" asked Leonard, who had climbed the ladder to peer into the top of the spiral.

"Watercress. Nasturtium officinale. Delicious in salads."

"Beats duckweed, I'll wager."

"Well, we've a thriving unit, from the point of view of photosynthetic potential," Nigel declared in a satisfied tone. "Let's get to work taking it apart, and moving it. While I disconnect the flow of water, you two take down the panels. That won't take long. Then we'll remove the lights from the underside of the spiral, and disconnect the pollinators. We'll try to get that far by lunch time."

Working with a will, three people exceeded Nigel's estimate, having begun to dismantle the top of the spiral by 1100. Late in the day, they stood amid concentric rings of containers awaiting transport, surveying their accomplishment.

"Well, that does it," their leader declared. "Let's carry the panels to Eleven. Tomorrow we'll start assembling the cone."

Gingerly, Cleo maneuvered a tall sheet of laminate through the hatch. Marvin

tonight, she recollected. The work today wasn't too strenuous, and if he repeats his last performance, I'll get a good night's sleep. I feel better this week, owing to experiencing far less stress. I'm going to need a haircut soon. How do I manage that, I wonder? I can trim the front and sides, but I can't layer it, nor can I cut the back. I'll have to ask if anyone knows how. Justin might be willing to try.

Over dinner, Cleo tactfully took pains not to single out her painfully shy partner for the night, by addressing him pointedly. Instead, she joined in a general conversation with Michael and Nigel concerning the power required by the life-support system they were installing in Eleven. As familiar as was Nigel with the amount of power drawn by photosynthetic exchangers, waste-management systems, and condensing units, the Gaean engineer added her comments matter-of-factly, taking care not to challenge Nigel's authority deriving from his rank as team leader.

To her amusement, the lone woman detected a gleam of surprise in the eyes of the Captain.

Michael finds it harder to accept that I qualify as an engineer than does Nigel, she reflected. Or at least, he finds it more difficult to believe that a woman could equal a man in professional knowledge. He doesn't appear to resent that circumstance, though. On the contrary, he seems to admire it. I must be somewhat of an enigma to Michael, just as Nigel and Marvin are to me.

Stealing a glance at the latter, she caught him stealing one at her. Her flush matched his, and each dropped his eyes. Between one thing and another, the resolve the Gaean had made at breakfast never reentered her mind.

Having debated whether or not to adjust her uniform, Cleo decided that Marvin might find her readiness reassuring. Lying naked beneath the cover, she again pondered his problem.

Even Leonard, after his nightmarish experience of homosexual rape, and never having engaged in intercourse with a woman, could control his need to ejaculate, she mused. Conrad experienced no difficulty either, nor did Michael, that first night, despite his intention. Marvin baffles me. Remembering how he had skipped breakfast, she wondered if he would even show up, but promptly at 2000, he walked through the door.

Seeing that his partner lay abed, the newcomer hesitantly approached. His voice hoarse with a combination of anxiety and need, he rasped, "Cleo...are you still willing...?"

"Of course, Marvin." Folding back the bedcover, as she had done for Conrad, the widow strove not to seem glumly resigned to putting up with an inept partner. As she expected, his performance varied no whit from that of the first night. Wishful of investing the coupling with the semblance of an act engaged in by friends, Cleo embraced him, and tried to respond. When he again achieved an almost immediate climax, she held him firmly. "Kiss me," she urged, tipping her face up to his.

The author of that unexpected invitation watched amazement contend with the near-despair again plainly visible on her partner's thin, agitated face. When he hesitated, she drew his head down, and kissed *him*. Marvin seemed not to know what to do. Cleo demonstrated, holding his head firmly in place until she finished. Releasing him, she smiled up at him, and beheld shock. Hastily, he rose off of her. Turning his back, he curled on his side as before, but he at least refrained from retreating to the far edge of the bed. Smiling to herself, the amateur therapist lay with her back to her companion.

For a time, neither person moved. At length, the woman heard Marvin slide closer, and felt the pressure of his back against hers. "Good night, Cleo," he whispered.

Touched by his double response, she replied warmly, "Good night, Marvin. Pleasant dreams." Sure that she had gained ground, she fell asleep wondering once again at the vagaries of human nature.

### **WEEK TWO: FRIDAY**

Having indeed caught up on sleep, Cleo woke before Marvin did. Propping herself on an elbow, she studied the thin, pale face on the pillow beside her. Lank, straight, black hair swept down across a high forehead from which sleep had smoothed all signs of care. The sensitive mouth, parted slightly, lacked the petulant cast it sometimes exhibited. The man looked younger, almost boyish, in the peace of utter relaxation.

Recalling his undignified retreat of a week ago, Cleo smiled wryly. Acting on impulse, she lay across her companion's chest, grasped his shoulders, and shook him. Marvin's eyes flew open. His partner detected a start, but she saw that he sank back in shock upon beholding who had awakened him. Leaning down, Cleo kissed him. As he instinctively folded his arms around her, she took her time, demonstrating in detail what she thought a kiss should be.

Bemusedly, Marvin responded. Stupefaction melted into a sudden onslaught of desire. When she raised her head, he gasped, "Cleo...would you...?" not certain just how much of an invitation her kiss represented.

"On one condition," she declared firmly, even as she smiled with friendly warmth. "That you'll accompany me to breakfast."

The man's crimson blush reflected embarrassment so severe as to threaten to squelch the surge of passion evoked by the kiss. Determined not to lose ground, the Gaean kissed her bedmate again before sliding off him to lie expectantly supine. Roused to raw lust, Marvin responded in the manner she had come to expect. Clasping him firmly, striving with the touch of her hands to reassure him that she in no way held his performance against him, Cleo waited until he again lay beside her. Smiling, she asked pleasantly, "Would you be so kind as to fetch my uniform out of the adjuster?"

"Of...of course." Rising in haste, the man reassured to a degree by his partner's initiatives, turned his back, donned his pants, and did as she requested.

Smiling to herself, Cleo dressed with her back to him, before withdrawing into the bathcabin. When she emerged, she found her inept lover perched uneasily on the edge of the chair. He had made the bed. On seeing her, he rose to his feet, two spots of color flaring in his cheeks.

Again favoring him with a warm, friendly smile, she inquired, "Shall we see what's for breakfast?"

Walking composedly into the dining hall beside her escort, Cleo sensed the curiosity that prompted the three guarded and two bold stares greeting their entrance. Her head held high, she walked serenely through the line, and sat down opposite Michael. *Oh, my soul, I forgot to look up what I'd meant to check*, she chided herself in annoyance. *I'm turning scatterbrained—among other things.* 

Her thoughts turned more than once to the conundrum Marvin's performance posed to her, as Nigel's crew spent the morning erecting the translucent dome in Eleven. The work went slowly, as the team leader expanded the chore to include installation of the ductwork and fans of the ventilating system that connected to the conical enclosure, and also the diffuser membranes, which would cleanse the nutrient stream of certain undesirable contaminants contained in human waste, before the flow reached the three tanks. The team also installed the equipment designed to irradiate the treated waste with ultraviolet light before it joined the nutrient stream. As the Gaean engineer explained in reply to a question of Leonard's, that process served to kill the bulk of the bacteria that teemed in the fecal matter: bacteria which, dead, formed a source of nourishment for the algae.

On her break, Cleo headed for Marvin's tent. Poking her head inside, she noted

the delight her entry produced in the man obviously not expecting to see her. "Marvin, have you a terminal in here that connects to the station's bank?" the guest inquired.

"Yes, I do," he answered, patently crestfallen by his realization that she entered for another reason besides paying a visit.

Noticing the telltale change in expression, the entrant smiled warmly as she spoke the truth. "I'd intended to spend my breaks here anyway, Marvin, seeing as it's such a long way to Central, but this morning I'd really appreciate your letting me access my research records. Something has been nagging at my mind that I need to check."

To her relief, the expert's face brightened. Gesturing to the terminal he had installed opposite the board slowly taking form down the length of the tent, he invited, "Carry on."

Seating herself, Cleo first accessed her own work, and later delved into the repository of information left by the succession of Gaean researchers who had visited the station periodically for over an Earthcentury.

Aha, I thought so, she exulted silently. Earthmen did use it that way! My memory hasn't crashed despite the strains my poor brain has suffered lately. That ought to cheer Michael considerably, though it's likely a poor substitute.

Swiveling around in the chair, she asked, "Marvin, may I borrow a datapad?" After connecting to the terminal the electronic item he handed her, she copied certain information. "I'll return this to you tomorrow," she assured him as she unplugged the device.

"Keep it as long as you need it, Cleo. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I did. I'm going to see whether Justin and I together can ring a surprise over breakfast one of these days!" Eyes twinkling, she tucked the flat, rectangular device under one arm.

Judging her unwilling to divulge her finding, Marvin shyly engaged his visitor in conversation until her break ended.

By noon, the translucent enclosure stood ready to receive the spiral. Over a tasty baked casserole, full of unidentifiable fragments tasting of tomato and onion, Cleo's thoughts strayed back to plants.

I wonder why we don't grow tomatoes, she mused. Too hard to package in frozen meals, and too easily synthesized—at least as flavoring that adds a lovely crimson color? Too hard to harvest, and keep fresh to be delivered non-bruised to food-chemistry labs for inclusion unaltered in standard frozen offerings? Or hybridized back on Earth into forms the seeds of which wouldn't reproduce anything like the parent plant?

Probably all of those reasons. Neither Gaea nor Columbia can afford the luxury of setting aside space in which to raise plants grown only for seeds. The species in our planetoid-wide system of photosynthetic tanks have to be hardy, tough, vigorous producers of oyygen, she reflected resignedly, not bearers of gourmet treats. I'd surely like to taste a fresh tomato some time, though. I wish I could have located tomato seeds when I chose the exotic sorts I brought along!

Sipping dark, sweet juice—*Grape,* she correctly identified the new flavor—she listened as Nigel informed Marvin that the life-support crew would soon run ventilating ductwork, fans, and other equipment on Eleven's main deck. He bluntly warned that the new undertaking would raise dust, and cause inconvenience. Visibly perturbed, the expert engaged in constructing a complex array of delicate, vulnerable electronic components agitatedly asked a flurry of questions, which Nigel answered calmly, exhibiting no asperity. Cleo noted that Michael listened intently, but passed no comment.

Nigel seems to harbor a special reserve of patience he only employs with Marvin, the Gaean observed, intrigued by her finding. I wonder why? I can sense that Marvin rasps on his nerves. Is it because Columbian laws prohibit a premier duelist from challenging a man who isn't a swordsman? Why wouldn't someone as arrogant—as cruel—as Nigel enjoy making cutting remarks to a social misfit unable to demand satisfaction from such a tormentor? Or does Nigel admire intellectual brilliance as much as he does courage? Nigel's highly intelligent himself, I'm coming to realize more each day. Probably they all make certain allowances for a man whose expertise could well be the asset most crucial to the success of Michael's plan.

Those questions remained unanswered, as Cleo's power of logic failed to shed any definite light on the puzzle Nigel's personality still posed.

During the long afternoon that followed, three workers painstakingly hauled section after section of the tertiary tank in wheeled bins from Thirteen to Eleven, carefully avoiding damage to the rank growth. Having set the sections in ascending order all along the curving exterior wall of the lower deck, they began the tedious chore of reassembling the spiral. Each joint had to be sealed at the openings for the nutrient-laden water that circulated beneath the fibrous mat, which had originally formed a sterile, spongy, absorbent medium in which the root systems could spread.

Over decades of continuous growth, dead leaves, stems and flowers had decayed to form an organic compost that Cleo felt certain qualified as soil. The dark, friable substance, teeming with bacteria, gave off a tantalizingly, satisfying odor. Aerating lines also had to be sealed. The work proceeded at a lethargic creep.

Having again spent her break visiting with Marvin, whose face lit with genuine pleasure at her reappearance at mid-afternoon, Cleo returned to the slowly ascending spiral. By suppertime, the two top loops still rested on the deck, and the vegetation remained deprived of its special lighting.

"Our plants have been reintroduced to the obsolete concept of weather," Nigel joked grimly. "I hope they remember how to handle that. Storm clouds plus drought. Strange combination."

"They'll handle it," Cleo maintained stoutly. "The growth medium retains enough moisture. See, they're displaying no signs of wilting. Better a little drought than an addition of water when they've no air reaching the roots."

"Confident that our jungle's tough, hm?"

"Absolutely."

Frowning, Leonard gazed at a section close to the bottom. "I've never tasted

asparagus," he remarked. "Be a new experience, that."

"I have." Sighing, Cleo explained, "It's a taste that truly grows on you. Our department at the University grew a bed. My major professor—a connoisseur of edible plants—cooked a batch of asparagus for his class every term. I brought some home, and my brother and I developed a real liking for it."

Sadness clouded the speaker's eyes: a lapse both men noticed. Impulsively, Leonard squeezed his comrade's shoulder, bringing a return of the sunny smile her teammates had seen more often of late. Joking among themselves, the trio collected Marvin in a burst of comradeship, and repaired to the dining hall.

Having ingested a most satisfying meal of baked stuffed eel, baked sweet potato, and a salad that demonstrated to Leonard the tastiness of watercress—*Justin's using acetic acid in his salad dressing*, Cleo observed, *and it tastes good*—she lingered until everyone left the dining hall. Erupting into the inner sanctum, beaming with pleasure, she accosted the startled cooks.

"Justin!" she exclaimed. "Would you like to be able to serve coffee?"

Pure astonishment registered on the chemist's seamed brown face. "Coffee? You've found the beans growing?"

"No, I'm sorry to say that my news isn't that good," the enthusiast admitted ruefully. "But I did find chicory established!"

"What's that?" Justin inquired, hearing a name new to him.

*"Chicorium intybus.* It used to be cultivated on Earth for the roots, which people buried to force a growth of leaves they ate in salads. They also used the leaves as greens, but where coffee was in short supply, or too expensive, they roasted chicory roots and made an extract they used as a substitute for coffee. I'm no coffeelover. Our food-chemists missed the ship there—the Gaean brew's strong, bitter, and useful only for keeping you awake when you need to study. Michael says the Columbian sort is delicious, so maybe a substitute would prove a disappointment, but I thought preparing an extract would be worth a try."

Conrad, who listened, all ears, as he sorted flatware, plaintively addressed the

head cook. "Justin, for a cup of something that remotely resembled coffee, I'd trade the last eight drinks those card sharps have yet to win off me!"

"Help me figure out how to use what Cleo found, and I'll leave you your stake," replied his partner, chuckling.

Handing Justin the datapad on which she had copied the reference, Cleo told him which tertiary tank contained chicory. "It's mature, so the roots ought to be big enough, Justin. I couldn't find any information on how long you roast them, or how old they're supposed to be when you do. You'll have to experiment." Smiling, she added, "If the trial flops, you can blame the disaster on me."

Conrad growled, "If the trial flops, you can tell the mob to drink the blasted experiment or wear it. Or better yet, take over as cook, there being two vacancies."

Sardonically, Justin shot back, "You figure on telling Michael that you're resigning?"

"Having a fancy to keep my hide on my butt, no," came the instant rejoinder. "But I'll be damned if I'll stand for any criticism from our victims!"

Bursting into laughter, Cleo protested, "Dinner tonight was delicious! You two improve with practice. Oh, and there's something else you should know. The tertiary tank we're installing in Eleven boasts a bed of asparagus!"

"Sounds like a disease," Conrad growled.

"It's stalks from a deep-rooted perennial plant. They're delicious boiled, though you have to acquire a taste for them. But you'll have at least one delighted customer. Me!"

Smiling broadly at the gourmet, Justin asserted vigorously, "Cleo, if that's the case, the others will just have to learn to like it. I'll serve asparagus, if you'll smile at two cranky cooks over it."

Snorting, Conrad clapped his associate resoundingly on the back. "One cranky cook, Cleo. Justin boasts phenomenal patience. And if you'll smile at me, I'll slurp up the novelty regardless."

Laughing, Cleo turned to the older man. "Justin, while I was going over my

records today to find chicory, I noticed rhubarb. Earthmen cut the stems into small pieces, sweetened them with sugar, and baked them in pies. I once sampled the flavor. It's awful, raw, but baked with lots of sucrose, the stems are supposed to be both tasty and nutritious. I added all I learned about pie plant, as well. Most especially, a caution: not only are the leaves inedible, they're poisonous."

After the visitor left, buoyed by the hearty thanks of both cooks, Conrad urged, "Knock off early, Justin, and shower. I'll heat up that batch of spacer's sludge in the morning, hear? You sleep in."

"One of these days, you're going to make a slip, and blurt out one of those graphic nicknames at the wrong time," the chemist warned, chuckling. "And given that you've got me doing it, we'll both likely land in the head." Taking leave of the partner regarding him with an unrepentant grin, Justin strode away towards the bathcabin, filled with a most pleasurable glow of anticipation.

Lying relaxed, nude, beneath the bedcover, Cleo smiled to herself as she awaited her partner for the night. The liking she had felt for the medical technician from the start remained uncomplicated by any undercurrents of worry about his feelings regarding her, or fears of repercussions those feelings might produce in his relations with the others.

Justin's the most solidly comfortable soul of the six, she reflected contentedly. He's as restful as a night to myself. More so!

When her partner walked in, Cleo noticed the same spring in his step as that observed by Conrad a week earlier. His seamed face lit with a smile of pure affection.

"If you're not a redeeming end to a long dismal day, Cleo, I'll eat tomorrow's dinner raw," he remarked, stripping off his tunic.

"Tired of calculating permutations on a limited source of raw materials, are you?"

"That, and worrying about whether my offerings approximate the perfectly balanced diet the processed meals provide. However, I'm keeping records, and making a stab at calculating what chemical supplements I need to include. Luckily, the station's bank contained some comprehensive stores of data on food-chemistry."

"Justin, you're too conscientious for belief. Slide in here and let me take your mind off food. Sometimes I wonder how you can face eating it, after producing it from scratch."

"Sometimes I wonder that myself."

Gathering the Gaean into his arms, Justin made love to her in the assured but gentle fashion that aroused her while it deepened the already considerable force of her feeling for this man. After attaining fulfillment, her mind full of peace, she lay idly tracing patterns on his brown-skinned chest with the fingers of one hand.

"Justin, have you ever been married?" she inquired softly.

"Once. Quite a time ago...for a while. I'd gone to space long before meeting Lori. She left me, because of being too lonely, for too many long stretches. I didn't get home often enough to make a marriage work.

"That's one of the bitter drawbacks to a life otherwise compelling in its appeal. I didn't blame her, but I missed her badly, for a long while. I'd have given up my military career to keep her, but you can't resign from a Columbian military corps in the middle of a six-year enlistment, unless you're disabled. Since then, I've done as the others do, but with less satisfaction in the doing."

Cleo's arm tightened around her partner's chest. "How sad, Justin." His hand sifted through her hair. Wistfully, she confided, "You know...one of the happiest marriages I've seen, is that of the man who led our team on this station: Wallace. His wife's a scientist, too—a fine one. So is their daughter, a researcher who also teaches in our University. Partners, Wallace and Marva are, in work, and in a union that has grown ever more deeply satisfying over a long span of Earthyears. I used to envy them, at times, while we collaborated here."

That confidence produced a thoughtful pause, and a startling admission. "I'm beginning to develop a profound respect for the customs of your countrymen, Cleo. If you're typical of Gaean women, we've missed the ship somewhere—drastically underutilized ours. I must say, though, that I can't imagine women's serving aboard

military vessels...fighting."

"I can. One, at least." A vivid memory of an intense, commanding, youthful, oval face, framed by startling silver hair, and of compelling blue eyes piercing her visitor, rose to fill the screen of Cleo's inner awareness. She had only met the warrior-woman face to face once, but that brief encounter had etched itself indelibly into her memory. "And in time, all of you might meet a reality you never dreamed possible."

"Signe?"

"Yes."

"I realize that your people don't cavil at letting a woman fight, hard as I find it to understand their reasoning."

"From the start, Signe commanded the rebel fighting force. She leads her fighters on strikes, and excels in hand-to-hand combat. Sigurd was a statesman, not a warrior. When he died, our people unhesitatingly conferred on his daughter dictatorial emergency power that exceeds the authority Sigurd himself wielded. If you ever face Signe in battle, you'll discover that the legend woven around her exploits isn't exaggerated, Justin."

That prediction produced a vigorous response. "I hope to hell I never have to face a woman across a weapon again, Cleo. Once was plenty! What Michael did to you was enough to last me a lifetime. No. Female fighters: that's going too far. But the notion of including women in a scientific team surely offers attractive possibilities."

Nestling against her companion, the Gaean sighed audibly. "Well, you're experiencing that reality. At least Michael has accepted me as a member of your team, rather than locking me up in here to serve as a collective possession. He has also arranged things so that you're not all fighting over who gets to enjoy it next. I'll give him that."

Justin's arms tightened around the captive whose courage he so deeply admired. His voice grim, he declared, "What he did do was bad enough! And I've partaken in that injustice, Cleo." "Only because I talked you into it. I'm glad I did. Actually, Michael's decision worked out better than I ever expected it would. I've come to know you all far better than I ever would have otherwise. I feel...comradeship. I never expected to. That has helped me cope. No, Justin, you of all people have nothing with which to reproach yourself."

Having vehemently delivered that reply, Cleo raised on one elbow. Leaning down, she kissed her partner passionately on the mouth, sparking a response that outdid hers in intensity. Justin's hands aroused her, and for a time no words passed between them. When they again lay clasped in each other's arms, he whispered in a voice charged with longing, "It would be easy for me to fall in love with you, Cleo...if the very idea didn't smack of arrogant impudence, given the circumstances."

"You may find if you do, that I've met you half-way, Justin."

Shocked to the core, the man regaled with that welcome assertion stared at his companion in amazement. "Cleo...you can say that, to a Columbian spacer, after what we've done...after what happened to your family?"

"I just did say it, to a man who bears no blame for the atrocities Norman's bastards perpetrated. I meant it, Justin."

"I can see that you did. So did I, Cleo."

Sliding both hands under the woman's shapely body, her lover kissed her ardently, gripped by an emotion he had felt certain that between age and lack of opportunity, he would never generate again. His partner's response equaled his in passionate intensity. When the pair lay spent, locked in each other's arms, Cleo realized in a burst of clarity that Justin had given no thought whatsoever to the question of whether he was the only man of the six whom she had grown to love.

# **WEEK TWO: SATURDAY**

Floating languidly out of the depths of sleep, Cleo grew conscious of warmth. Justin lay curled on his side, his chest pressed against her back, one arm thrown over her. Wishing suddenly that she and he could idle away a morning in bed, alternately talking and making love, Cleo sighed aloud.

Actually, in eight Earthyears of a happy marriage, I never did that, she chided herself wryly. Am I turning into a sensualist? From experiencing an overactive sexual life? Too constant and too varied a stimulation? If affection grows to fill the need, does desire? And tonight—Nigel. Good thing he's last. I have Sunday in which to recover.

Stirring, Justin slid his hand down a shapely thigh, prompting his partner to experience warmth, and a gush of wetness. Arching back against him, she gave herself up to an intensely satisfying abbreviation of the activity for which she had pined.

Michael looked up from his plate of flat round cakes topped with thick, dark, sweet syrup, to observe the sparkle animating lively brown eyes, and the rosy color flooding smooth cheeks, as the Gaean entered while chatting with Justin. The head cook's seamed face bore a look of utter contentment.

An all-too-familiar pain knifed the observer's vitals. It took a conscious effort of his mind to keep his own face composed, but he managed that feat perfectly, greeting Cleo pleasantly as she sat down across from him.

"Leonard tells me we sport an exotic vegetable in our tertiary tank," he

commented. "Some stalk requiring a cultivated taste."

"Asparagus. Justin says he'll try it on his captive customers."

"I expect any novelty will offer appeal."

"I hope so, having stuck my nose in where it doesn't belong." Smiling, Cleo applied herself vigorously to spacer's sludge.

Nigel wasted no time before leading his crew back to the light-deprived, moisture-short plants. Two hours later, when the nutrient stream again circulated through the completed spiral, the viewers observed that certain thick growth had begun to wilt.

"They'll perk up," the Gaean affirmed briskly. "Resilient, they are."

While Cleo and Leonard set about replacing the fluorescent and incandescent lights that ran along the underside of the spiral, each loop irradiated by the fixtures on the bottom of the one above, Nigel reconnected the automatic timer that periodically shut off the illumination to simulate night.

Freed to enjoy her break, Cleo popped her head into the tent to find Marvin gone. The strength of her disappointment surprised her.

He grows on you, she admitted to herself. He's getting used to me, and he's interesting to talk to, once he's launched on a topic that absorbs him enough to banish his shyness. Oh, well. I'll take a walk, and stretch my legs, after sitting crosslegged, working over my head.

By 1100, having left the thick greenery bathed once more in light, the relieved crew departed for lunch. Returning relaxed, driven by no perception of urgent need on the part of the plants, they spent the afternoon replacing the delicate mechanisms designed to achieve pollination in the absence of insects, all the while conscious of a heightening level of humidity, as moisture rose into the air from the growth medium.

A delicate, tantalizing fragrance teased Cleo's olfactory nerves. Burying her face in a bed of flowering alfalfa, she inhaled deeply. "Mmmm," she murmured.

"Smells good, doesn't it?" Leonard remarked. He had done the same thing earlier. "Makes you wonder what it must have been like, to walk on grass, under trees."

"After a rain. Imagine, water drops just falling out of the air!" Cleo found visualizing that phenomenon all but impossible.

"Staring up at blue sky. That's hardest for me to picture," Nigel contributed, his mind shaped by half a lifetime of staring into black deeps portrayed on screens only partially able to convey the immensity of the void in which ship or world existed as a minute speck bearing a fragile alien life.

"I can't visualize that at all," Leonard admitted.

Shortly before suppertime, the workers finished setting up the tertiary tank. After leading his crew back to the delicate monitoring equipment under the artificial pond, Nigel spent five minutes silently making readings, calculating in his head, and staring at the inhabitants of the secondary tank. At length, he spoke in a tone charged with overtones of triumph.

"Well, we're well launched down the route of joining our fate irrevocably with that of these happily oblivious swimmers. Let's devour some of their cousins, hm?" Having mentally ceased work for the day, he rested bold, dark eyes on the lone woman.

Grown all at once acutely aware of that intent scrutiny, the Gaean felt heat surge into her cheeks. Preceding her partner for the night up the ladder, disconcerted by her suspicion that he was enjoying his view of her posterior, she struggled to maintain a semblance of poise as she walked down the corridor between the two men.

Just when I was beginning to feel at ease working with Nigel, he strips me naked with his glance! she complained in consternation to her alter self. I'll never get used to him! He radiates...something. Some force that attracts while it disturbs...while it scares me spitless.

Resolutely, the captive mastered her disquiet well enough to seem serene, and sound nonchalant, as she joined in the conversation over the supper she ate without remembering afterwards of what it had consisted.

Perched on the edge of her bed, after supper, contending with a renewed feeling

of trepidation, Cleo debated with herself. *Should I stay dressed?* she wondered. Remembering Nigel's insolent enjoyment of her discomfiture as he forced her to disrobe while he watched, she decided to adjust her uniform. Lying tautly beneath the bedcover, she nonetheless grew conscious of a certain tingle of what she recognized as anticipation.

Shame lanced through her. *Thank all the Powers Max can't know what I've done,* she reflected bleakly. That thought produced a sharper pang of guilt.

At 2000, Nigel glided in on noiseless feet. Gazing down at with his usual cool assurance at the occupant of the bed, he let his amusement show. "Depriving me of the pleasure of seeing you undress, hm?"

Flushing, Cleo replied evenly, "I had to adjust my uniform."

Taking his time, her partner divested himself of uniform and boots. Laying his garments over the back of the chair, he sat down on the bed, and drew the bedcover into a ball. Tossing the wadded fabric to the far side of the mattress, he cupped one of Cleo's breasts in his hand. His thumb idly massaged her nipple, which grew erect under his touch.

A thrill of pleasure coursed along tingling nerves. The hand moved, expertly as ever. The caresses grew deeply intimate. Warmth suffused the woman's loins. Wetness gushed into her feminine depth. In a swift, unexpected movement, Nigel grasped one of her legs in each hand. Turning her body, he let her legs drop over the edge of the bed, which was high, as were most beds built to accommodate storage space beneath. Standing between his partner's thighs, the Columbian caressed her tiny nodule.

Yielding to the intense surge of desire generated by that provocative touch, the Gaean closed her eyes, and threw her arms back over her head as she abandoned herself to the bliss produced by her partner's ministrations.

Nigel dropped to his knees on the deck. His mouth once again closed over his partner's small, stiffly erect organ of pleasure. Once again, Cleo experienced ecstasy. Less emotionally distraught on this occasion, she focused more intensely on the

euphoria possessing her. Long, deft fingers stimulated nerves she had not known she possessed, sending waves of delicious sensation radiating throughout her body.

Raising her legs, Nigel placed her feet on his shoulders, thereby relieving the strain caused when her legs hung down over the edge of the bed. When the premier lover entered her, standing, his fingers went on adding to the overall effect. Thrusts lifting her to a new height of passion ceased abruptly. In some inexplicable way, her partner's hands calmed her. At length, he repeated his rhythmic penetrations. Once more, he raised his euphoric partner to the brink of climax, but stopped short of giving it to her.

Her every nerve now cried out for fulfillment, signaling unsatisfied desire. Arching upwards, Cleo thrust against her partner in her turn. When he recommenced his efforts, she achieved a state of rapture bordering on trance. Her breath emerged in gasps. Her chest heaved, and her heart thudded.

His own respiration rapid, his eyes glinting, Nigel reached culmination simultaneously with the woman he had so deftly raised to so lofty a height of ecstasy. Gazing down at her erect, hard nipples, he beheld the faint flush spreading across her chest.

Lifting his satiated partner's limp form in both arms, the Columbian seated himself on the edge of the bed. Strong arms held her so that she lay with her upper body in their owner's lap. His arm supported her head. He saw that her eyes remained closed.

His features remained etched into her interior vision—the hooked nose, the high, flat cheekbones, the epicanthic fold which seemed to cause the man's dark eyes to remain perpetually narrowed, the thin, cruel mouth, the deeply cleft chin. No single feature of itself offended, but the combination forming the arrogant, deeply lined, copper-hued face conveyed to the viewer a vivid impression of ugliness. That unprepossessing visage at this moment reflected amusement. Bold eyes roamed down the captive's nude body, before returning to the still face framed by short, wavy brown hair. Opening her eyes, Cleo looked up at the man in whose arms she lay. Encountering that ironic, assured, amused glance, she closed them again, still in shock at the intensity of the passion to which this lover had just aroused her.

No whit driven by haste, Nigel allowed her time in which to recover her aplomb. After a while, he declared ruminatively, "You have lovely breasts, Cleo. Round and firm."

The woman's eyes flew open. Jolted by the explicit reference to a private part of her body—frankness that violated a rule rigidly observed in her culture—she heard him add, "And a far shapelier figure than your uniform lets show."

Nettled by the latter remark, the Gaean retorted tartly, "My uniform fits." A concept recently stored in memory belatedly occurred to her. "But not nearly as well as yours fits you," she admitted.

"Noticed that, have you?"

"Yes. Gaeans don't give much thought beyond utility," the product of highly effective cultural programming designed to instill lofty principles valued by a Spartan society readily acknowledged. "Are Columbian tailors all as skilled as yours?"

"Not all, but a good many excel. The best cost you, though." Cocking his head to one side, the connoisseur of sartorial artistry drawled, "You need a suit of deep rose-pink, tailored to show the curves."

That sally evoked a laugh. "You boast a vivid imagination, Nigel. There's no such thing."

Dark eyes sparkled. "Care to lay me a wager?"

Eyeing the inveterate card-player speculatively, Cleo retreated. "No way! As a gambler, I'm sure I'm no match for you."

Even as she voiced that refusal, curiosity overcame her. "Are there really such fabrics?" Her tone conveyed doubt engendered by experience. Never had she seen any but gray, black, brown, dark blue, slate blue, or dull gray-green. Bright, clear colors, she well knew, were hard to unite with the dust-and-moisture-repelling and heat-regulating properties of clothing. "Of course there are. They're extremely rare, and incredibly costly, but deep rose-pink would suit you admirably, Cleo."

The archetypical Gaean tried to visualize herself arrayed thus. Her imagination proving unequal to the task, she reflected that in any case, she would undoubtedly never get the chance to wear any such garment. *I'll be lucky if my uniform lasts as long as might prove necessary*, she fretted, as a perennial worry again surfaced.

Nigel's hand moved. Presently, he felt his partner's head arch back against him. "Feels good, hm?" he inquired.

"Mmmm."

"And this?"

"Mmmm!"

His laughter conveying amusement devoid of any cruel overtones, Nigel lifted the woman in his arms, and laid her lengthwise in the bed. Stretching out next to her, he reclined with his head on one of the two pillows. "Sit up," he ordered.

Recalling his demand of a week earlier, his partner rose to her knees, and sat back, eyeing him warily. Acutely aware of his erection, she grew manifestly apprehensive as to what he might demand of her.

Sensing her fear, he smiled. "Get astride me, facing me, Cleo," he commanded. "Guide my cock to where it belongs." Startled, the unworldly Gaean gazed at the issuer of that disconcerting demand, assessing the unexpected request. "Go on, do it," came the peremptory order. "You'll experience only pleasure."

Flushing with embarrassment, Cleo complied, wishful to avoid any resurgence of that cruel anger. She felt her partner's hard member thrust upwards as she sank over him. Hands traveled over her upright body, rousing her again to desire. Drawing her forward, her unpredictable lover kissed each breast in turn. Sliding his hands downwards, he caressed her focus of pleasure. "Move with me, Cleo," he whispered. Even as he spoke, she obeyed.

Certain that she could not respond a second time with an equal degree of intensity, the Gaean discovered that supposition to be pure illusion. Nigel's touch, his

upward thrusts, again stirred her to passion. Suddenly, he drew her forward and down over his chest. "Straighten your legs," he directed. Pressing firmly on the small of her back as he moved in her, he again caused her to reach a peak.

Stunned by the potent force of her second achievement, Cleo rolled over to lie beside her partner, half in trance, her mind unable to order the turbulent fragments of thought swirling out of the stream of her consciousness.

Slipping an arm under her, Nigel kissed her as intimately and possessively as he had done the week before. Having roused her to a final, strong, deeply pleasurable sensation, his salute once again turned gentle: almost tender. Brushing his lips over her ear, he murmured, "You don't lack passion, Cleo, or daring. Just experience. I'll give you that." Drawing her head into the hollow of his shoulder, he held her close while he shook out the bedcover and drew it over them. Clasped firmly in muscular arms, she felt the man's tall body relax against her.

Lying in that possessive embrace, Cleo digested his words. What does he mean, experience? she expostulated in a burst of exasperation. I was married for eight Earthyears. I've gone to bed with every one of his crewmates. I was no virgin, thank all the Powers. Experience! Damn his overweening assurance!

Fuming, the Gaean reviewed what he had done. *But he's right*, she finally admitted. *I certainly lack any experience of the things he does. Where did he learn what he knows? He's*...

Words failed Cleo. Her mind churning, she sought to judge how she felt about this man.

When he wants to please...he does, she conceded. Purely sensual, deeply erotic pleasure: that's what he delivers. Unfailingly! Does he do that out of pride—an unwillingness to do less than the best he knows how, for any woman—even one he has barely stopped hating? Or...are his feelings undergoing more change than I realized?

I wonder if he's really capable of...love. Somehow, I doubt that he is. Admiration, desire...he can generate both. But affection—love—I doubt that he can. I can't imagine any deep, unselfish emotion ever breaching that perfect control Nigel maintains over his every action, in whatever situation. Even at the height of passion, he retains perfect mastery of himself. He baffles me. I've never met anyone remotely like him!

Worn out by the strain on her emotional balance produced by the evening, the bemused Gaean sank into oblivion.

## **WEEK TWO: SUNDAY**

Cleo woke with a start. Nigel lay prone, kissing her breast. His tongue circled her nipple, causing the rosy nubbin to stand erect. Satisfied, he repeated his maneuver on the other one. Sliding downwards, he tongued her navel, eliciting a stifled gasp from the woman roused so abruptly from deep, sound sleep. His hands moved down over her hips. His tongue tickled her stomach. Thrusting his hands under her buttocks, he closed his mouth over her now erect organ of pleasure. His tongue lazily explored small folds, and teased the sensitive tip.

Wide awake now, the Gaean moaned softly, as pleasure so great as to border pain set her quivering. Her partner's hands moved under her. Inquisitive fingers explored a place where a touch would have shocked Cleo numb, had she not yielded so completely to rapturous enjoyment of the intense erotic pleasure this unorthodox lover once again succeeded in generating. Ecstatic, she writhed under him. He penetrated her, his thrusts urgent, but mutually satisfying. Raised on his hands, he brought her swiftly and surely to a climax, and moments later achieved his own. Relaxing prone on top of her, he pillowed his cheek on her breast, and lay still.

Her heart fibrillating, her chest heaving, Cleo lay unmoving beneath him. *He sports stamina enough for three men,* she marveled. *He's...insatiable!* Frowning, she pondered that last notion. *But Michael did the same,* she recalled in bemusement. *So did Justin...even Leonard. Why didn't I feel that they were insatiable? It isn't how often. It's what Nigel does, and what I feel when he does it!* 

Rolling off his partner, the Columbian drew her close, and held her as she

melted against him. For a time, he lay without speaking, savoring his sensations. At length, a sigh slid between thin lips. "Much as I hate to say it," he observed dryly, "it's time we rose." Sitting up, he tickled his still-inert partner in a vulnerable spot.

"Nigel...don't! I'll get up." Stricken with dismay as she remembered where her uniform reposed, Cleo shrank from standing naked in this man's sight. *Oh, damn*, she griped in consternation. "Nigel," she pointed out hopefully, "I left my uniform in the adjuster."

"Is that a hint?"

Conscious that he mocked her, she retorted, "No. It's an outright, plain, straightforward, urgent request."

Her lover's laugh warmed her, despite the mixed feelings agitating her mind. "All right, I'll oblige...this time." Rising, Nigel sauntered without bothering to dress into the bathcabin, where he retrieved the Gaean's suit from the adjuster. Strolling back unconcernedly naked, he dropped the garments on the bed. Dressing hurriedly under his bold, manifestly interested eye, Cleo vanished into the only available refuge, bent on regaining the composure her companion's actions just shattered. *My blistered, battered body*, she spluttered, leaning on the door. *He's*... Words failed her.

Stepping out a few minutes later, she found Nigel fully clothed, lounging in the chair. He had made the bed. Rising with languid ease, he stepped past her to throw the used bedding into the adjuster. With courtly grace, he opened the door to the corridor, and bowed her through it. Tucking her arm into his for the brief time it took him to speak, he observed with an air of practiced gallantry, "Some day in the far distant future, I'd dearly love to escort a Cleo dressed in deep rose-pink, to a dinner consisting of an honest-to-cosmos steak."

Unable to help herself, the recipient of his attentions laughed heartily, her cheeks turning the color Nigel favored. Letting go of her arm, he chuckled. The Gaean's face still bore traces of her mirth as she passed into Michael's view in the dining hall. No evidence of the pain battering his sensibilities showed. Perfectly composed, he bid the Gaean a pleasant "Good morning," as she seated herself opposite.

Over fishcakes and juice—*no sign of imitation coffee yet*, she noted—Cleo reveled in the thought of today's being Sunday. *A shower*, she exulted. *I surely need one, even though I haven't done anything exceptionally strenuous lately. I wonder whether Justin could cut my hair? I must ask him. A night to myself. What bliss!* 

Before anyone finished eating, Michael rose. "I'd like your attention," he announced, though talk ceased when his move drew all eyes. "Today, we're only working until lunch, which will be cold leftovers. Justin asked me to post a schedule of the time when each of you will report to the infirmary between 1200 and 1500 today for a check-up. With admirable devotion to duty, our medic wishes to make certain that his meals provide the exact daily nutritional balance the standard ones do. If he decides to issue separate chemical supplements, you'll take them. No sense neglecting the health he's taking pains to maintain.

"While you're awaiting your turn, you'll trim, chop, wash, blanch, package and freeze the mountains of vegetables Conrad will lay out in the dining hall, so as to lighten his load in the coming weeks. He'll be responsible for making Eleven's powergenerating components independent of the station's grid, and so he won't be a fulltime cook, much as he'll regret that circumstance."

A ripple of chuckles followed that sally. Preserving a straight face, Michael added, "At 1500, we'll assemble in the recreation hall, where I'll outline what we'll do at that time."

Resuming his seat, the seasoned officer once again utilized delicate receptors, and strove to assure himself that a satisfactory level of morale prevailed.

Two weeks, and they've adjusted well, he judged, but this harmony won't last. My nerves are fraying a bit. So are Conrad's, though he keeps a firm hold on his temper. Justin's tired...or was. His night with Cleo rejuvenated him.

Marvin's challenging task is making him even more cranky than usual. Nigel seems to be holding up. Damned if he doesn't seem to have accepted Cleo as a

professional peer! Lucky beggar. He not only rates expert help, he enjoys the pleasure of her company on a daily basis. That seems to have produced a calming effect. I hope it persists!

Or do I, really? Nigel doesn't deserve what Cleo will likely end by feeling for him.

Rage directed at uncaring fate rose of a sudden to flay the marooned officer. Damn my luck! he railed in impotent wrath. Damn this perverse twist of fate! Damn Norman! Damn Leon, whose grip on the government I've seen to be slipping drastically. Damn Galt, who's not the leader we need either. And damn my inability to figure an angle I can exploit when the time comes!

Damn! I need a day off. A day in bed with Cleo. Just talking, and making love in leisurely fashion. No worries. No strains.

A bitter inward mirth found no outward expression on the composed face. You might as well include a ship of your own, and control of your world, while you're wishing, spacer-captain. Can a man grasp power, and stay civilized? Norman hasn't. Would Galt? I entertain serious doubts. Could I? I wonder about that, too.

Concealing to perfection his grim reflections, Michael rose, and strode away to undergo the physical examination that would leave Justin marveling at the Captain's resilience.

Sitting opposite Leonard, diagonally across from Nigel and Marvin, Cleo busily trimmed and washed dandelion greens, idly reflecting that the ubiquitous plants constituted a weed in most of the tertiary tanks, having established themselves everywhere a spot of bare soil appeared. Knowing the young leaves to be tangy and nutritious, she smiled at Conrad as he collected the pile, to blanch and package them for freezing.

"What are these red stems, Cleo?" Leonard inquired. "Celery?"

"Rhubarb. Sweetened, they're supposed to taste good." Justin rushed right out and collected what I mentioned! she silently exulted. Maybe coffee will appear, one of these days. "Pretty color." Chewing a sample, the investigator observed, "Not bad, even raw."

"You must like to pucker up." Her time having arrived, Cleo rose, and proceeded to the infirmary, shuddering at the memory the cabin evoked.

"I'm a healthy specimen, Justin," she assured the man awaiting her.

"Shed your clothes," the technician directed. "I don't take anyone's word for that. Let's see what you mass."

*He knows right where to start*, the Gaean admitted ruefully. Standing on the balance, she watched as Justin sent the result into his terminal. "Fifty-three kilograms. You've lost over two, haven't you?"

"You're right on the mark. I normally mass fifty-six."

"Stand there." Taking a position before the standard monitor, Cleo stood motionless while deft hands attached a web of sensors to various locations on her body. "Never mind straining to look, girl," the technician chided her. "I'll go over any abnormal values with you later."

Swiveling her head back around to smile at him, Cleo relaxed as he sent the multiple readings into his terminal. Fifteen minutes later, he brought up his findings on the screen, while she dressed. "You *are* a healthy specimen," he admitted, "though rather a gaunt one. You work to regain that lost mass, hear? I'd rather not issue you a supplement. Stress took it off. It should go back on, now that the level of stress is less. Or is that really the case?" he demanded, as the captive's initial trauma rose on the screen of his inner vision, and the memory of her dire fear during that first week smote him.

"My level of stress dropped dramatically after last week ended," Cleo assured her interlocutor, smiling. "I'm adjusting. I'm eating heartily, and getting worlds of exercise."

Muttering an anathema under his breath, the technician frowned, evoking a laugh from his patient. "I appreciate your concern, Justin. I'll consult you, if I need to, never fear, but right now, I'm chiefly fretting over how I can get a haircut."

"Conrad cuts hair quite well. He cuts mine, even when we're stationed in a place where there's a barbershop. He'd be glad to oblige."

Having thanked the caregiver, Cleo departed, warmed by his obvious solicitude. *He's a major reason for my feeling less stressed,* she commended him silently. *Justin's his own best prescription!* 

At 1500, five workers filtered into the recreation hall, to drop negligently into chairs, or lounge on the couches, wondering the while what had prompted the summons. Tired, they welcomed the opportunity to sit, even as they braced to sit through a meeting requiring that they muster mental effort. When the Captain entered, bearing a tray on which reposed a covered bowl, they assumed that he once again intended to have them draw slips.

After setting the tray on a counter, Michael reached into a cabinet from which he withdrew a stack of recyclable glasses, a container of orange juice, and two bottles. Turning to his crew, his rugged face wreathed in a broad grin, the leader exquisitely sensitive to the state of his subordinates' morale vouchsafed an explanation.

"Rather than content myself with merely mentioning how pleased I've been by your spirit and your progress, I'm giving my satisfaction a more tangible expression. I found these in the infirmary, a while back. They're more than passable whisky. Whether they constitute medicine, or somebody's private hoard, I don't know, but we're going to drink them."

Leroy's, Cleo instantly deduced. He never drank his. He saved his ration to produce at times when everybody felt down, to cheer us up, employing his share of spirits as Michael's about to do.

Whipping the cloth off the bowl, which proved to be full of ice, the host dropped lumps into the glasses. After debating with himself for a fraction of a second, he refrained from mentioning the orange juice. Acting on impulse, or perhaps out of a finely honed sense of courtesy, he poured a generous measure of whisky into each of the seven glasses, and offered the tray first to Cleo. Expecting her to refuse, he concealed his surprise when she unhesitatingly reached for a glass. "Thank you," she responded, beaming at him.

Sipping the liquor, the Gaean accurately surmised that the Captain had never seen a woman drink whisky. She knew quite well that when a host deemed liquor appropriate in mixed gatherings of Columbians, men both served and consumed it. Women drank coffee, or tea.

Conjecturing that whereas Michael knew that Gaeans universally granted women equality in the workplace, a military officer reared in a male-dominated society would fail to guess that tightly knit Gaean scientific teams shared more than work, Cleo marveled at his action.

Michael's a gentleman, the captive admitted affectionately. He figured I'd pass, but he wouldn't offer the others a treat, and exclude the only woman here, especially as he has nothing else special to offer me. That realization generated warm appreciation for the host's gallantry.

No one refused a drink. Men warily geared to expend mental effort visibly relaxed, pleased at their leader's gesture, especially since they realized how easily he could have kept the bottles for his private consumption.

Surveying the six faces brightened by his gesture, Michael remarked jovially, "Nigel, spin us a tale arising out of your colorful past, to take our minds off work. A humorous one," he added hastily, well aware that the limber duelist's colorful past included more than the usual share of violence.

Cleo watched a sardonic smile frame the second officer's mouth in two v-shaped creases as he responded, "Let me think about that for a minute, hm?" Hooking the heel of his boot into the framework of the couch, below the cushion, Nigel clasped his bent knee in both hands, leaned back, and reviewed a store of tales generated out of a varied and turbulent experience. At forty-seven, he possessed a considerable library of anecdotes on which to draw, but few qualified as humorous.

Hitting upon a suitable topic, he commenced relating a personal experience. His eyes focused on a distant point as his thoughts returned to a time that seemed

incredibly remote, viewed from the vantage point of his present whereabouts.

"When I was a student at the University, in my final term, I'd procrastinated to an extent where if I didn't complete a certain laboratory assignment, I'd likely find the conferring of my degree postponed four more fourweeks. So one Sunday, fortified by the afterglow produced by a most lively Saturday night, I attacked the chore with such vigor as to bring it to a successful conclusion."

The sibilant voice for once vibrated pleasantly on Cleo's ear. Leaning forward in suspense to hear a narrative that might shed light on what had gone into the molding of the character of a man who seemed such an enigma to her, she listened intently.

"That was the Earthyear in which Ferrara's research team captured the comet. He donated a considerable portion to the University, provoking a scramble to see who would get access to how much. The Chancellor approved emergency funding to equip space in which to house the fragment, and mediated the arguments that ensued. As I put away equipment, after recording my final results, I was suddenly moved to step next door, and view the remains of a rare acquisition."

As the narrator paused to sip his beverage, Cleo deduced shrewdly, Nigel's cultured as well as intelligent. He habitually couches his thoughts in clear, concise, and unfailingly elegant Earth-Standard.

"The solid chunk of dirty ice—water ice, mostly, given that the frozen gases had evaporated and been condensed elsewhere—I knew to be stored in a huge refrigerated unit, which drained into a large tank. The liquid water obtained by the Department of Physics from the concentration of the inorganic and carbonaceous compounds nearly filled the tank I saw to be composed of molded laminate. That seamless receptacle, ten meters square and one-and-a-half deep, built so that its top was level with the deck, drew my intent gaze. The contents of the sunken container lay open to view, given that the glass-cloth sheet which normally covered it had been rolled up and laid along the deck at its far side.

"Standing at the edge of the tank, I gazed in amazement at a body of clear, pristinely pure, liquid water. A veritable fortune's worth of a precious commodity sparkled in the light, refracting the beams by which I viewed the bottom, so that the fixtures below seemed oddly enlarged. I knew that I gazed on a sight I'd likely never see again."

No one moved, as six listeners hung on the raconteur's words. "The professor whose rigid inflexibility regarding the due-dates of reports drove me to the lab of a Sunday habitually employed a metaphor the Earthly origins of which had grown murky in the minds of the students on whom he rang the expression. 'You'll sink or swim with what you've already absorbed, Nigel. No brain can learn all that's required the night before an exam.'

"He was right, of course. I'd absorbed what I needed to know, but he couldn't resist jabbing a man, emphasizing his severity, which was legendary. Swim. Propelling one's body through a liquid substance having roughly the same specific gravity as flesh, but less than bone. Sink is what should invariably happen, but we all knew that Earthmen routinely managed the feat.

"An overwhelming urge to experiment possessed me. Swim...in virgin water. I had never known anyone who had tried. My cabinmate, one time, after a night of indulgence in alcohol and...fascinating company," (here Nigel's eyes rested briefly on Cleo), "suffering aftereffects that temporarily slowed his normally quick reflexes, tumbled off an observation platform to plunge head-first into the Department's demonstration primary tank. I doubt if the word swim occurred to him. We extracted him, trailing naiads, and festooned with leeches interested in sampling new fare. His experience failed to generate any desire on my part to imitate it. A blue cloud of regrettable language no doubt still hovers in space over the spot where we deposited his slimy, dripping carcass."

Chuckles interrupted Nigel's narrative, prompting him to pause for effect.

"It seemed unlikely that anyone would arrive to interrupt me in the act of trying. On that afternoon, a reception was in progress: a social event at which my fellows judged it prudent to make an appearance. If someone did show up, I reasoned, he'd scarcely be able to object. No regulation forbade what I contemplated. Intrigued at the idea of enlarging my experience, I peeled off my suit, and laid boots and clothing on the deck, near the door to the refrigeration unit housing the fragment of the comet. I had peered in there, only to meet a huge wall of solid, dirty ice. That sight I judged not nearly as interesting as the water."

His eyes remote, Nigel shifted position as he recalled the past. "I slipped in. Was it cold? Fearsomely so! My body numbed. 'Should I give up?' I asked myself. 'No,' I resolved. 'I'll never meet with a chance like this again.'

"Boldly, I walked forward in slow motion, noting the strange resistance on my limbs caused by the viscosity, even as I marveled at the buoyant effect noticeable each time I bent and raised a leg. Swim. On my back, or chest? Put my face in?

"Back, I decided. Filling my lungs with air—'That's probably the secret,' I conjectured—I lay back, and tried to float. A cascade of water flowed down? Up? At any rate, into, each nostril. Another obscure, Earth-related word crossed my mind: drown. Death by immersion in water. Spluttering and gasping, I stood erect. How to prevent a nasty end to a fascinating experiment?

"Undaunted, I pinched both nostrils shut with the fingers of one hand, and tried again. After floundering a bit, I achieved success. Tipping my head back, straightening my legs, balancing by throwing one arm back over my head, I floated. The clear liquid supported my considerable mass beautifully!

"I grew elated, but I remained immobile. Swim. I had not yet propelled my body anywhere. I tried moving the free arm, and made a slow circle. Standing once more, I reviewed the possibilities. My flesh seemed to be adjusting to the cold. 'Face down?' I thought. 'My nose will be right in it. Will the water climb up?'

"I tried that posture. Having filled my lungs, I lay prone. It worked. I pushed with my arms, and achieved forward motion! Marvelous! Unfortunately, I needed to breathe, and the minute I raised my head to gulp air, my legs sank like rocks."

Nigel surveyed six rapt faces, gratified by their intentness. "As I frowningly pondered this new problem, I heard footsteps approaching through the lab next door, and voices. One of these was all too familiar, but worse, one at least, was female. "Outrage dissolved in dire apprehension. Scrambling out of the tank, I grabbed my telltale clothes and retreated into the only available refuge: the refrigeration unit. Squeezing between the ice and the door, which I left open a crack, I beheld the intruders walk in to view the tank. The Chancellor. His wife. His sister. His sister's husband, a duelist whose concern for his own honor was only outweighed by his touchiness regarding his wife's.

"Even at the age I'd reached then, I'd fought my share of duels, but with other students, not with a man of his prowess. Out of stubborn pride, I might rashly have offered so renowned a champion satisfaction for emerging naked as an eel into the view of the wife he kept sternly sheltered from the least breath of impropriety, but I concluded that if I did appear thus, my career as a scientist would come to a most undignified end. That realization chilled me worse than the ice freezing my naked and shivering butt.

"Sickeningly certain that the Chancellor would open the door to display the ice, I slithered around the corner of the massive block into the narrow space between block and wall. It was dark. Cold. Cramped.

"Fearing that the guest's curiosity might drive him to follow my route, I felt along the block. To my relief, I discovered a niche left by researchers who had cut a rectangular chunk out of the center. Stepping up into that, I stood wedged between two frigid walls. Water still dripped from my naked, quivering flesh. Dropping my suit, I stood on it, so as to protect my bare feet. I couldn't dress, owing to the narrowness of my refuge. Holding my boots in front of me, I leaned on them to avoid touching the wall of ice, but my rear enjoyed no such protection. Scarcely breathing, I stood silently cursing the sightseers.

"Through the crack in the door, the Chancellor's voice reached me, as he made interminable explanations to his guests. More long-winded even than usual, he droned on. Finally, as I'd feared, he threw open the door to my hideout, and launched into an even more rambling anecdote. A daunting realization struck me: if he locked the door on leaving, the researchers who entered the following morning would discover a most interesting specimen. Defunct. Frozen solid. Tense, straining to listen, shivering uncontrollably, I waited."

Nigel paused, so as to heighten the suspense. Surveying the grinning faces, his own creased into a smile expressive of pure fun. "As I stood mentally urging the intruders to leave, I grew conscious of noise. My teeth chattered, audibly. Fearing that the sound might reach the blasted tourers, I clenched my jaws more tightly.

"Cold? You can't imagine the chill. My flesh numbed. Bumps rose on it. Shivers, then shudders, rippled through me. The cold penetrated to my vitals...to my bones." Ceasing to speak, the storyteller let a pregnant silence follow that statement.

"Finally, the Chancellor led his guests away, leaving the door ajar, as he had found it, or I wouldn't be here telling my tale. 'Time to step out of this icy trap,' I told myself.

"Well! When I sought to move, I found that I couldn't. Both cheeks of my butt were frozen firmly to the icy wall."

Having paused to savor the laughter that rose from his audience, the raconteur forged on. "Well! I wriggled. I pulled. Exerting my full strength, I tore my abused flesh free of the ice, leaving behind a considerable expanse of skin. I've often wondered what the researchers made of that find! Gritting my jumping teeth, I emerged into the outer area, and donned my suit, unsure whether I'd ever truly feel warm again.

"On returning to my quarters, I made the final stupid error of confiding my escapade to my cabinmate. In his merriment at my expense, he paid me back twofold for my howling with laughter at his plunge into the primary tank, but worse, he told his friends, and mine. And they told theirs.

"Somehow, the story got back to my inflexible major professor. I'll say this for the martinet, he never told the Chancellor, or any of the authorities. From then on, however, every time he'd use his favorite expression, he'd say, 'Sink or swim. It's possible, you know. Ask Nigel.' I'd manage a brittle smile, there being not much else I could do, if I expected to gain my degree. For the remainder of that term, I got considerable practice in keeping my temper. Swim. I did it once. Despite the embarrassment and the discomfort, the experience was worth the pain. But once was enough!"

Cleo laughed heartily, in chorus with the others. *Nigel just revealed a lively* sense of humor, she marveled. I never thought him capable of producing chuckles at his own expense!

After the laughter died down, Leonard turned a mischievous grin on the lone woman smiling on the company. "Cleo, we've all heard a considerable number of each other's stories," he confided. "Why don't you tell us one?"

Startled, the Gaean watched eager anticipation leap into the eyes of the others. The more ready to oblige for knowing right well how isolated groups tended to hear the same stories over and over, she reviewed her own store of tales. Smiling on her audience, she commenced speaking.

"After I gained my degree, I took a position for a time as a researcher for our Ministry of Life-Support Maintenance. I was assigned a place in a lab also occupied by three other people. That bank of habitats chanced to be one of the first built on Main World of Gaea. Our lab lacked quite a few of the conveniences routinely installed in the newer ones, such as an automated washing unit for chemical glassware. Our Director of Research hired women to wash the glassware, figuring that the cost of researchers' time prohibited its being wasted on non-productive work. Even our breaks bothered him, but that tradition he knew to be too firmly entrenched to admit of change. He did glower, though, at times."

Including that statement merely because it bore upon the end of the story, Cleo yet managed to steal a glance at Nigel, only to discover that no crack appeared in the armor of the man's inscrutability.

"One morning I attempted a procedure that required a special reagent. Finding none available in our section's supply, I did some research in the national databank. The chemicals I needed for its synthesis—a fairly simple procedure—turned out to be readily available, so I made the compound. "The directions included a warning: under no circumstances allow the solution to come into contact with a base. If it did so, a mercaptan having a strong odor would form. Most carefully, I avoided any such eventuality. While my chunky, clear crystals dried on a vacuum filter, I took down the apparatus. I'd used a fifty-milliliter roundbottomed flask for the reaction vessel."

As the Gaean paused to sip her drink, she saw that six listeners waited eagerly for her to continue.

"Most of the women who washed the glassware in the labs were cheerful and friendly," she confided musingly. "Ours wasn't. An embittered, grouchy widow, she growled unpleasant remarks if you didn't rinse your glassware before setting it in her bin.

"Knowing that the poor soul had lived a rough life, I humored her. That flask looked almost clean when I took it down, but I rinsed it anyway. She saw me do it. As I walked over to a locker next to her sink, I dropped the flask into her hot, sudsy water. What a blunder! I never stopped to think that detergent is a base."

Justin's grin impinged on the tale-spinner's notice. *He's a chemist*, she reminded herself. *He knows what's coming*.

"Well, for ten seconds, nothing happened. I returned to my bench. Suddenly, like a genie escaping from a mythological bottle, like a plume ascending from the molten-sulfur-spewing volcanoes of Io, a smell arose that in all my experience I've never known equaled. Strong odor, my left foot! Hydrogen sulfide classed as perfume compared to this. A nauseous, horrible, sulfurous, ghastly stench arose from that sink, nearly prostrating my grouchy associate.

"What is it?' she gasped. I couldn't tell her. By that time, I couldn't talk. Three choking, spluttering men leaped off their stools and headed for the door. All three hit the jamb at once, nearly breaking arms and legs in their haste to escape. When the tangle rolled into the corridor, they found that they hadn't. The intake fan of the ventilator leading to the main system hung right over that sink. Other doors opened. Other gasping people emerged, to find the stench worse in the corridor. "The choking mob stampeded to the door at the far end, which, thank goodness, had been closed. Twenty-three people crammed themselves into the micro-analytical laboratory. Over them towered the tall, thin, outraged figure of my boss. 'Who in the name of all the damned caused this slime-rotted unscheduled break?' he boomed in a voice that penetrated to set my bones vibrating. And I had to stand forth and acknowledge that I had.

"Trying to achieve a record for mass murder by gassing our work force in its entirety?' he barked.

"No, sir,' I answered. 'Trying to save the time it would have taken to order a reagent from Central Supply. There was a slight residue in the reaction vessel I dropped in the wash.'

The man stood there glaring at me, speechless. I figured he was trying to frame the phrases with which he'd fire me. Finally he growled, 'Residue. Plunked into the detergent. Watch most carefully what you do with the product, girl. Another such mass exodus, and we'll move your bench to the walkway in the waste conduit under the corridor. Now, hold your noses and get back to work!'

"Well...I've never gotten a whiff of anything sulfurous since, without blushing faintly from the memory of that dreadful embarrassment." Cleo laughed, a hearty, infectious sound. "Maybe a stretch in the waste conduit would've been a good preparation for what we're going to be handling one of these days!"

The audience laughed, heartily and appreciatively. "I'm quite sure you'll find a neat way to package what we collect, Cleo," Nigel drawled, flashing his team member a smile purely mirthful.

His quip warmed her anew. *He really* does *sport a sense of humor!* she marveled. *I never expected it of him.* 

Smiling at the narrator, Justin contributed an anecdote. "I did something similar once, without thinking. I was working in a bank of habitats the Ministry of Habitat Construction and Maintenance overhauled. Our lab was so large, and the ceiling so high, that noise proved a problem. Our Director won a grudging favor from the foreman of the crew making the repairs. His men glued pale gray acoustic foam to the ceiling: reflective covering that made the area brighter.

"Never stopping to think, I set up an apparatus for a procedure that involved refluxing for two hours with iodine solution. The glue must have contained starch, because after forty minutes, the attractive new ceiling developed scrofulous, dirty, blue-black splotches reminiscent of moldy bread. My feat didn't earn me any points with my boss, let me assure you."

Rising at this juncture, Michael refilled the drinks as the conversation became general. Grins and laughs punctuated lively discussions. Straining his senses, the Captain judged morale to have reached a most satisfactory level.

This session helped, he reflected, reassured. For the time being, they're reacting almost normally. I hope this harmony lasts...hope we can avoid grating drastically on each other's nerves while living a life that provides no change of company, and no real possibility of solitude. One outlet: our limited means for recreation. Conversation. Anecdotes. Books. Games. A few videos. And Cleo: sexual relief.

A blunt, ancient, highly derogatory term bearing even worse opprobrium in his society than it did in that of Earth—a term which could be aptly applied to his action in forcing an unwilling woman to bear the whole weight of providing sexual relief to six men—rose to sully Michael's normally comfortable self-image.

What else could I have done? he railed to his alter ego once again. I barely avoided having to meet a challenge as it was! If the touchy bastard had succeeded in running me through, she'd be far worse off right now. She's handling the situation admirably. Every man of them accepts her fully. I figured they would—even Nigel. Damn his rakehell charm!

Wrenching pain knotted Michael's gut.

What malevolent Power did I piss off to land myself in this mess? he wondered bleakly. And her? All of us? There's nothing I can do but hang tough and see this business through. Launch could easily solve all my problems—permanently.

The military careerist stubbornly resolved to retain full control of a daunting situation sat back and took a long pull on his drink, forcing himself to listen as Conrad related an experience. At no time during the evening did Michael's face betray the slightest hint of his thoughts.

## WEEK THREE: MONDAY

Awakening just before her alarm sounded on Monday morning, Cleo stretched, feeling for once utterly rested. *Michael's party did us all good*, she conceded ungrudgingly. *He's firmly in control. If Nigel sparked his worry regarding mutiny, that fear's likely laid to rest...at least, for now.* 

Did Michael jump Nigel over my breaks? she wondered again. In his own way, the Captain maintains an impenetrability as complete as that of his second officer. Michael smiles, and frowns, and changes expression, but you never really know what he's thinking. He must truly be satisfied with our progress towards launch. I doubt if he'd ever say so, if he weren't.

I still wonder why I don't hate a man who raped me, but I don't. I admire him, profoundly. I'm coming to trust him...to feel safe, knowing that he's in control. Passing strange, that reaction, after all he has done to me...but what I did likely wrecked his career. Does he hold that circumstance against me, deep down? Will his commander—Galt—perhaps manage to overlook his subordinate's failure to stop Wallace's departure, in the light of Michael's returning with his entire crew safe? And what will Galt do with me?

Fear set the Gaean shivering. Whatever the Commander of Second Corps does, you'll just have to face, she reminded herself bleakly. Leonard says Galt's not as savage as Norman, and surely my voluntarily helping in the work will earn me some consideration, as will my being a noncombatant.

A pretty ineffectual fighter, I turned out to be. I never heard Nigel sneak up

behind me. Well, no sense worrying about problems eons away. A week equates with an eternity. Sometimes it seems as if I've lived this life for Earthyears.

Breakfast turned out to be a topping resembling bread, served over what Cleo recognized instantly as baked rhubarb. Sampling the tart, fruit-like chunks of stem in their own sweetened, thick, syrupy juice, she developed smug satisfaction that registered clearly on her guileless face.

"Tasty, isn't it?" Michael remarked.

"It's delicious!"

"What is it?"

"Baked rhubarb stems."

"Your idea?"

Indulging in a giggle, the engineer shot back, "I don't mind taking credit, after hearing you say it's good."

"Any other surprises you might not want to take credit for, after we try them?" "If I told you, they wouldn't be surprises."

"I'll have to try a cautious bite of anything odd-looking, before shoveling it down, I expect."

"I'd strongly recommend that precaution." Utterly unaware of the internal effect her rippling laugh produced on the man smiling pleasantly at her, Cleo made short work of what ancient Earthmen called rhubarb cobbler.

Shortly thereafter, she listened as Nigel outlined what job his team would attack next. "Now that we've painstakingly reconnected our three tanks back into the station-wide ventilating system, nutrient stream, and water lines, we're going to prepare for the day when we disconnect them from the station's system permanently. Today, we'll finish the loop from waste tank to photosynthetic exchanger and back to the pump. We'll install Y-connections where we'll remove the lines to the station, eventually. Leonard, you'll do that.

"Cleo, reactivate the ion-exchange resins in the urine-treatment apparatus and ready the components for installation. You and I'll mount the unit, when it's ready.

It'll be easier to check it before we mount it, even if from then on we'll be regenerating the resins periodically without detaching the unit. I never could see why that pernicious chore never became automated, like so much else. If I ever find time, I'll make a stab at doing so. When you're ready, fetch me. I'll be on the main deck, laying out where the ventilating ducts will go."

Gratified by the team leader's willingness to trust her with a task which, however simple, would nonetheless cause severe damage if done improperly, Cleo set to work to prepare the acid solution which would regenerate the cation exchanger, and the basic solution which would do the same for the anion exchanger. The process allowed the former to replace the sodium ions, and the latter the chloride ions. The washes would then emerge as a water solution from which the solid sodium chloride that the human beings needed to re-ingest could be recovered: salt that would kill the algae which the urea in the salt-free liquid waste would nourish.

Having obtained a quantity of salt, and thoroughly inspected the other components of the apparatus, the engineer helped Nigel mount the unit in the system. After a break spent walking, given that she discovered Marvin to be engaged in discussion with the second officer, she assisted Leonard. By 1100, the wastemanagement loop rested complete.

Upon observing at lunch that no coffee made its appearance, the originator of the idea wondered despondently whether chicory extract might have proved so dismal a drink that the cooks recycled it down the head. As she ate the man-sized portions of breaded squares of fish, sweet potatoes, and cooked greens piled on her plate by the head cook—Justin's trying to fatten me up, she surmised—she decided that disposal would be preferable to their serving a failed experiment.

After lunch, Nigel led his crew in the direction opposite the rotation, to a section Cleo had never entered.

"This is one of the four lacking a photosynthetic exchanger," he announced. "Someone removed part of its ductwork at some point in the past. That's why I decided to steal what additional ductwork we need, from this section. I see no sense in rendering a section useless unnecessarily. Unfortunately, the air circulation's rotten in here, and it's hot, as well as stuffy. The space barely qualifies as livable.

"So. I couldn't locate any breathing masks, or oxygen tanks small enough to pack on our backs. I don't fancy working in a pressure suit. I spent time in here when I inspected the ductwork, and got by. We'll work half an hour, and then carry away what we've dismantled. The trip back through the rim will revive us. If you get light-headed, say so. Don't wait until I'm obliged to pack you out."

*Nigel can't imagine himself being vanquished by any circumstance*, Cleo reflected wryly. *Well, I have to admire his unwillingness to do unnecessary damage to the station.* 

Twenty minutes later, the Gaean reeled on her feet as the walls spun around her. "Nigel, I need air," she gasped, obeying his instructions.

"Can you make it out?"

"Yes..." Turning precipitately, the giddy engineer scrambled up the ladder, and emerged on the main deck, where the air was better. Stumbling, she lurched into the rim. Slumping to the deck, she gulped in huge breaths. Sweat trickled down her face, prompting her to wipe the moisture away with her sleeve. A throbbing headache commenced.

*My wretched soul, what if they've both passed out down there?* she wondered in dismay. *I should look*. Staggering to her feet, she beheld Leonard, pale as a wraith, emerge from the hatch, followed by Nigel, who carried a load of ducts.

Collapsing next to Cleo, Leonard queried hoarsely, "Are you all right?"

"I am now." Staring in renewed dismay as Nigel dumped his load and retraced his steps, the Gaean demanded of the wilted youth, "What if he passes out down there?"

"He won't," Leonard declared stoutly. "He's indestructible."

As if to prove the truth of that judgment, Nigel reappeared, sweat channeling down his ill-favored countenance, but no hint of stagger in his stride. The prostrate pair saw that he carried a second load of long sections of ductwork. Dropping those, he surveyed his still-distressed crew.

"Have you two recovered enough to tote a load?" he demanded.

Gamely, Cleo picked up an armload. "I'm all right now," she asserted firmly. Nigel looked as if he doubted that, but he said nothing. Heaving himself to his feet, Leonard silently lifted a stack of ducts. Having tossed what remained over a shoulder, the team leader led the way to Eleven.

*Nigel's not human,* Cleo decided. *He's some kind of mutant who never tires and doesn't need air.* Her head throbbed, but the dizziness passed.

Before returning to the section, the Lieutenant opened a locker and withdrew a tall tank of pure oxygen, mounted on a specialized wheeled truck. Leading the way back into the stagnant, oxygen-poor air of the section, he wrestled the tank down the ladder. "Take a jolt of this every so often," he ordered. "Enough to keep you going. The sooner we finish this chore, the better."

Damned right, Cleo assented glumly, but silently.

Fifteen minutes of unfastening metal screws ended with her lurching to the tank. Hastily, she turned the valve, and filled her lungs with oxygen. That got her through the second fifteen minutes. After lugging what she had dismantled into the rim, she stood panting, sweat stinging her eyes where it had run down while her arms had been occupied.

Leonard joined her, lugging a pair of fans. Nigel reappeared, carrying a stack of louvered panels, topped by a bulky dust filter. "Did that get you both by?" he asked. Seeing their nods, he strode away, followed by his puffing crew.

The toll taken by two hours spent repeating that pattern of activity prompted Nigel to relent. "We'll all take a break together," he announced. "And we'll rest for a full twenty minutes in the dining hall, while drinking enough to re-hydrate ourselves. Let's go."

He's human after all, Cleo decided. He sports a buried streak of compassion. Deeply buried, and not a very rich streak. Maybe after ten glasses of orange juice, I'll last out the day. Then Michael. My blistered, suffocated soul, was it just this morning

## I thought I'd caught up on sleep?

The Captain looked up from the table where he had moments before sat down to take his own break. "Well, if you three don't look as if you've done a stretch in the devil's lair!" he remarked. "Hot where you've been?"

Nigel smiled grimly. "It wasn't the heat that got us, chief. We previewed what our departure from this life will be like if we don't achieve perfect photosynthetic balance. Definitely unattractive, that means of shuffling off the mortal coil." Striding to the cooler, he drew three tall glasses of orange juice, and set one in front of each of his two teammates who had sunk into chairs opposite the Captain.

Tipping her head back, Cleo downed her drink in four or five steady gulps, as Michael stared.

Rising, the Captain picked up the glass she drained, and fetched her a refill. Solicitously, he filled Leonard's and Nigel's. "Dehydrated as well as suffocated?" he inquired.

"Damned right." Nigel inhaled his second glass, prompting Michael to bring three more.

After her third, Cleo began to grow thankful that she had not succumbed to suffocation, an alternative she had begun to think preferable to hanging out from a precarious perch on free-fall handholds, struggling to reach metal screws with a power tool while gasping for air.

Having taken the edge off his own thirst, Nigel regarded his female crewmember with sardonic amusement through which admiration shone plainly. "I've got quite a bit more lung capacity than you do, Cleo," he informed her. "That could explain why the bad air affected me less. But you're no quitter."

Warmed to the core by the unexpected compliment from the man she had feared would be angered by her physical inability to match his stamina, or even Leonard's, the still-distressed Gaean breathed, "Well, thank you!"

"Tough as carbon-fiber laminate, you are, Cleo," Michael vouchsafed equably. Swiveling to rest wide brown eyes on the Captain, the recipient of that affirmation exclaimed, "My word, I'm overwhelmed! Thank you. I'll just float back to that hellhole buoyed up on whatever air's left!"

That sally drew a laugh from all three men. Relenting further, Nigel issued a firm directive. "We'll finish down there in the morning—alternate with a job in breathable air. Too much pure oxygen in healthy lungs isn't a good idea, and we weren't measuring our intake."

Leonard and Cleo breathed simultaneous, audible sighs of relief. Winking at the latter, Michael remarked blandly, "I'd surely hate to have you pass in your chips today of all days, woman." As he watched, a rosy blush overspread the dust-streaked face of his partner for the night.

At length, Nigel led his rested and re-hydrated crew back to Eleven, where they spent the remainder of the day in the non-taxing chore of vacuuming dust from filters and louvers, cutting metal ducts with small laser cutters to Nigel's specifications, and testing and servicing fans and blowers.

Cleo worked diligently, basking in the inner glow kindled by the two utterly unexpected compliments. *Nigel's remark will keep me going through the finish of that dismal chore tomorrow,* she assured her alter ego. *But Michael! After lifting my spirits, to say that other, right in front of Nigel and Leonard. I spend half my time red as those rhubarb stalks!* 

After a supper undistinguished by any further sexual innuendos—or any appearance of coffee—Cleo retired to use an extravagant amount of her water ration in repairing the ravages of the day. Her effort included a frugal shampoo. *We ought to rate extra water, after that chore,* she grumbled to herself. *But if I end the week with greasy hair, Nigel will know why.* 

If my hair were shorter, I could get by with less water, the Gaean reflected. Galvanized by a sudden impulse, she dove back into her uniform, and retraced her steps to the dining hall, where she again burst in upon the cooks. "Conrad," she coaxed, "would you be willing to take a bit of time at some point this week, and cut my hair? Justin says you know how." Startled, the electrical engineer eyed the wavy brown locks framing the flushed, hopeful face of the petitioner. "I'd be glad to try, Cleo," he replied dubiously, "but I've never cut a woman's. I don't guarantee success."

"I'll not complain if I end with a man's cut."

That reassurance manifestly upset the head cook. "Conrad, don't do that!" Justin exhorted.

The amateur barber scratched his head, visibly dubious, but willing to oblige. "Well, no time like the present. Justin, mind if I attack the chore now?"

"Not if you take pains to do it right!"

Opening a drawer, the barber removed a large towel, and beckoned to his client. "We'll retire to the dining hall. I'd hate to get hair in the food. Sit down here, and let me fetch my outfit." Leaving his nervous patron ensconced in the chair, draped in the towel, he strode out the door.

Wondering whether her request represented a major error in judgment, Cleo waited apprehensively until Conrad returned, bearing a hand mirror, a brush, a scissors of formidable size, and a comb.

"How much do you want to shed?" he inquired.

Thrusting his head out the door of the food-chemistry laboratory, Justin admonished, "Let the waves show! You're not shearing recruits now, you scissors-happy excuse for a barber!"

"You don't call me that when *you* need a trim, and this experiment was your idea," the amateur stylist growled. "You're stuck with the results now, after slinging your long-suffering partner into the breach!"

After combing the wavy brown hair down all around Cleo's head from the crown, Conrad deftly lifted a section with the comb, held the lock with his fingers, and snipped off a centimeter along its edge. Repeating that technique with piece after piece, he trimmed the back, and the sides. Frowning, he studied the effect. Finally, he divided the front into sections again, at a different angle, and repeated the process. Satisfied, he brushed the waves. "Not bad," he observed, breaking into a grin. "However I botched the job, I couldn't make you look ugly, Cleo. Take a look."

Breathless with suspense, the woman stared into the hand mirror he offered her. The hair fell in soft waves all about her face. The waves approached curls at the crown. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "It looks better than when my hairdresser cuts it! Conrad, you're a marvel! Thank you!" Jumping up, she embraced the astonished barber, and kissed him soundly on the mouth.

Arms promptly enfolded the enthusiast, as their owner returned her unpremeditated, hearty salute. Blue eyes twinkling, he declared after she stepped back, "Woman, any time you want a trim, you just call on me. None of these bigmouthed shaggy spacers ever rewarded me like that."

"I should hope to shout, we didn't!" Justin snorted.

The successful stylist cocked his head. Musingly, he studied the effect. "I find your hair easy to cut. The waves hide the mistakes," he opined. "Come back when it grows out, woman. I know how to handle it now."

Beaming, Cleo enthused, "You're as good a barber as you are a cook!"

"That's no compliment!" Conrad protested. "But I'll take it as you meant it." A grin split the lean face. "Hell of a fine job, if I say so myself," he announced with pardonable pride.

Departing hastily, Cleo made it back to her cabin before Michael arrived. Contentedly, she admired herself in the mirror for the minute or two before he strode through the door. On hearing him enter, she hastened out of the bathcabin, and halted, to regard him a shade warily.

Striding to where she stood, Michael folded her into strong arms, and hugged her against his chest. Immobilized in that crushing embrace, the captive relaxed against him, feeling unaccountably cherished.

Holding her away, Michael observed the change. "Who cut your hair?" Conrad."

"Not a bad job." His face sobering, he inquired gravely, "Will you give me the

same word as before? For another week?"

"Do you think that you still have to ask me that, Michael?" the captive countered, smiling wryly.

"I'm taking no chances."

"You have my word...for another week."

Granite features melted into a relieved smile. Gathering the Gaean once more into his arms, Michael kissed her, tenderness blending inevitably into passionate intensity that moved her to respond with equal fervor. His hands found their way inside her tunic. Sliding around her, they pressed her bare back towards him while he kissed her again. Lifting her with a swift, fluid movement, he settled her against his chest, burying his face for a moment in wavy brown hair.

Exulting as her arms went round his neck, he bore her to the bed, removed her boots, and stripped off her pants. Sitting on the edge of the bunk, he sent eager hands working their way down her now quivering body, controlling the fierce surge of desire his activity evoked. Turning, he pulled off his boots, wriggled out of his pants, and dropped on his partner in a heat of ardor that again stirred this normally inhibited woman to wild abandon.

Whatever indefinable stimulus this man offered, which unfailingly triggered that response in her, Cleo could not have told, but once again she yielded to its irresistible force. Wrapping her legs around her partner, she rose with him to a height of passion that left her euphoric, if spent.

Lying a few moments later in the curve of Michael's arm, facing her autocratic lover, idly tracing patterns on his muscular chest with the fingers of one hand, she savored the ebbing wash of sensual pleasure.

"Cleo," the Columbian confided a shade diffidently, unsure how she might react, "when you told that story yesterday...laughed so heartily...I could almost imagine you were happy."

Startled by that observation, the captive swiftly assessed her mental state. "I wasn't...unhappy," she admitted, stricken with wonder by her conclusion.

"And when you give yourself to me so freely...meet me more than half-way...I could almost imagine that you care about me."

"I do care about you." No hesitation preceded that vehement response. Michael sensed that brisk assertion to be the truth. A note of unmistakably bitter chagrin tinged his next question.

"As much as you would have if I had kept you for myself?"

"More." That single emphatic qualification admitted of no uncertainty.

"What does that mean?" the interrogator rasped, mystified by her answer.

Abruptly, Cleo sat up. "Michael, if you had done that, you'd have provoked challenges to your authority, bitterness, and fights. The men who hated me at first would have grown to hate me worse. I'd have felt like a piece of pirate's booty—like a bone dogs on Earth used to fight over. You'd have treated me like a possession. I'd almost certainly have grown to hate you."

The man afflicted by guilt as well as chagrin stared in astonishment at the woman he reluctantly shared with his crewmen, out of expediency. Her voice losing its adamant force, she added equably, "Shall I tell you *why* I've learned to care about you?"

Half afraid of what he might hear, the Columbian urged hoarsely, "Yes. Tell me."

"Michael, since the moment I first laid eyes on you, I watched you make impossibly difficult decisions forcefully and unhesitatingly. You voluntarily put the welfare of your men above your personal desires. You haven't just stayed in control. You've set them a goal, persuaded them to work willingly to achieve it, and kept their morale high. You exhibit a talent for leadership I've never seen exceeded. When you've held me in your arms, I've felt your strength. I've felt...safe."

Stunned by that encomium, Michael all but gasped. An indescribable look of amazement, of nascent hope, suffused his rugged face. "Cleo," he breathed, "that's the most profoundly satisfying compliment anyone has ever paid me." Staring in wonder, he turned her words over in his mind. As a bleak thought surfaced, faint

chagrin grew evident.

"You've got me feeling so good, I'm not sure I want to know the answer to the next logical question."

The intent observer watched the granite face change. "Since you've begun to try to sort out what we both feel, you'd better make the understanding complete," she warned.

Bracing himself, Michael asked evenly, "Am I the only one for whom you've come to care?"

Sitting back, the woman shared by six men chose her words with care before answering that loaded question. At length she spoke, her tone reasoned.

"Michael, I only bore the one son. But if I had borne a second, do you think I'd have halved the affection I felt for the first, to divide it with the second? Or do you think I'd have had none left over to give to the second? If I had borne three sons...or six...do you think my available store would have been spread so thin that none would have received an appreciable amount?

"My mind doesn't work that way. Affection grows to fill the need. I'm beginning to care deeply for all of you. I've never ranked the six of you in any order of how much I care for each, any more than I would the six sons I'll never have. And I never will."

For a time, the officer bearing a grievously weighty burden of responsibility seemed incapable of speech. His eyes widened in shock as he stared mutely at the woman conscious of having driven home her point. Wordlessly folding her into his arms, he hugged her tightly against his chest. In the silence broken only by the faint whirring of ventilator fans, she heard his heart pound erratically.

Her lover said nothing, for what seemed, to the woman pressed against his chest, an endless span. She found it impossible to guess what thoughts might be chasing through the man's mind.

"Michael, we've reached only half an understanding," she reminded him boldly. "I have no idea whatsoever how you feel about me." Holding her away, his hands gripping her upper arms, his glance riveted to her questioning brown eyes, he asserted forcefully, "I love you, Cleo. I'll try to keep you safe, whatever happens."

Shock coursed through the prisoner of war whom that admission caught wholly by surprise. She had not expected that answer. If her captor had merely acknowledged that he no longer considered himself her enemy, or if he had admitted to achieving a growing acceptance of her as a comrade, his assurance would have satisfied her. "Michael..." she whispered.

Drawing her close, the Captain kissed her tenderly.

Her eyes brimming with tears, Cleo fought them down. *Leonard was wiser than I knew,* she acknowledged bemusedly. Her arms tightened around the man whom she had wondered all along why she did not hate. When his lips freed hers, she whispered, "Michael...I love *you*. I do. You're not the only one of you six to whom I've said that...and meant it. I may end by saying it to more...or all...and meaning it. But I couldn't feel any more affection for you than I do right now, if suddenly you and I were the only two human beings left in the universe."

This woman's transparent honesty—her utter lack of artifice—registered with stunning force on the Columbian's mind. *Cleo's incapable of uttering a lie,* he concluded, absolutely certain of the truth of that observation. With overwhelming force, happiness surged through him. The loneliness the Gaean had sensed in him loneliness he had schooled himself to endure with no outward sign—dissolved in the warm flood of new feeling, in the mind and heart of this man who had all but given up hope of winning more than an infinitesimal fraction of his captive's regard.

Michael knew the effect Nigel had on women. He had sensed Cleo's growing affection for Leonard. Liking Justin deeply himself, he had guessed how comfortable a refuge she would have found the older man. The Captain's heart expanded in a sudden rush of emotion his face for once could not hide. The joy that possessed him utterly reflected in his eyes, growing manifest to the companion who drew his head to hers, and kissed him tenderly, rather than passionately. Clasped in each other's arms, the two erstwhile enemies lay savoring their new understanding, no thought of passion moving them.

*Oh, Michael*, Cleo addressed him in her mind. *I misjudged you, all this time. I should have known that you'd give me an equal share in the concern you felt for all in your care! You're a natural leader. I love you, spacer-captain.* 

As the two lovers drifted into oblivion, a ghostly observer would have seen that each face remained wreathed in contentment even after sleep claimed both.

## WEEK THREE: TUESDAY

Cleo woke early to find Michael lying prone, propped on both elbows, his tousled brown hair standing on end, his blue eyes drinking in the sight of her. Wordlessly, she reached out her arms to him. Passion, always easily stirred, but since that first time perfectly controlled, surged through him.

Cleo again sensed that their joining gave him more than purely physical release. Intuitively, she divined what a toll the wrenching strain he had endured over the past two weeks had taken on the man behind the composed exterior. The warmth of the Gaean's affectionate nature suffused the act by which she expressed more than a mere physical response to this partner's practiced artistry at waking desire. Michael's perceptiveness—his sensitivity to nonverbal cues—enabled him fully to appreciate what Cleo expressed by her wordless sensual message. When he lay fulfilled in her arms, he again savored the happiness flooding mind and heart.

It has been a damned long time since a woman said she loved me, he reflected musingly. The last one calculatedly weighed the disadvantages of loving an ambitious spacer-captain against the advantages of marrying an older man well launched on a career in a ministry—a man who'd be home nights. Chose with her head, not her heart, Myrna did.

Cleo's heart's bigger than Myrna's. Warmer. No coquetry to Cleo...no artifice, no cool calculation. Honest as space is deep, she is. Incapable of lying to a man. Whom did she tell, besides me? Justin, I imagine. Leonard. She'll end by loving Nigel. But if she said she loves me, she does. I can sense that she does. It's a wonder, after all I did to her. From the start, she read my motives accurately, and judged fairly, despite my...raping her...in the heat of that initial blind rage arising from my certainty that she had annihilated my career.

Face hard fact: rape is the correct term. You raped a prisoner of war you held in your custody. That insidious, dangerous mix of punitive anger, bitter resentment, and ballooning despair temporarily wiped your ability to reason. Your self-control vaporized at that juncture. And if she had fought you... Damn! Don't even think of how you might have reacted! Luckily, her courage turned out to be as phenomenal as her intelligence.

You'd better get your brain in gear, spacer-captain. Find an angle you can exploit when the time comes. You know what will happen when we reach Columbia!

Twisting so as to glance over his shoulder at the clock, he noted the time, hating the thought of having to move, to rise, to handle the thorny problems the day would bring.

"Cleo," he murmured, his lips brushing her cheek, "I can face the week a whole lot better for your having said what you did last night."

A work-roughened hand caressed his chest. "I love you, Michael," he heard her murmur.

"I love you, woman. I hate to have to heave out, but it's time."

His heart as light as his step, Michael strode at his usual brisk pace towards the dining hall, with Cleo at his side. Seated opposite the woman with whom he just achieved so heartening an understanding, he failed to hide the buoyant joy suffusing him. His rugged face glowed with warmth as he downed the bland, sweet, imitation cereal that no one particularly liked.

A shrewd observer for a man so young, Leonard noted the change in the Captain he deeply admired. His eyes lit with understanding wholly devoid of envy. Nigel's inscrutable face betrayed no easily readable reaction, but his brow knitted. Marvin took one look, and dropped his eyes to his plate.

Across the counter, Justin smiled to himself as his concern regarding the

cumulative effect of pressures for which Michael possessed no safety valve suddenly diminished. Cleo ate serenely, her own face wreathed in peaceful contentment. Her eyes projected a far-away look as her mind lingered elsewhere.

The first half of the morning proved a dreary repetition of the previous day. Cleo discovered that if she took a moderate inhalation of the oxygen as she first entered the noisome lower deck, and followed that with a deeper one fifteen minutes later, she could avoid the raging headache she so dreaded. Upon trying her method, Leonard found that it worked for him.

Gritting their teeth, the trio at length stripped the area of the fixtures Nigel indicated, in an hour that seemed an age. Mounting to the upper deck, where the air proved to be slightly better, they spent two more hours pillaging that space. Pleased with his crew's persistent, uncomplaining effort, Nigel again led his team to the dining hall for an extended break.

Vastly refreshed, the three foragers bore the last of their booty back to Eleven, where they invaded the upper deck, flushing their agitated colleague out of the tent. Michael arrived, prepared to mediate between his two team leaders.

"Nigel, I'll sketch on the deck where I intend to build the walls enclosing the bridge, the dining hall, the food-chemistry lab, and the other areas I've planned," the Captain announced. "I haven't enclosed any space yet, figuring you'd have an easier time running the ducts through the deck with the space open. The dividers sport a row of removable small plates along the top to accommodate ventilator ducts. We can raise the walls after the ductwork is in place."

"So we can. I noticed those plates," Nigel agreed. "Some of the fixtures in these sections are interchangeable, such as the brackets on the walls to which the cabinets mount."

"Right. And the hulls are identical. All these sections and countermasses must originally have been flown by remote control to a central area. The builders assembled the rim, and then moored the sections to it. The thrust-orifices of the sections were left intact, as were the lasers that heat the propellant that's expelled. The fuel capacity's fixed. The tank is located in the space between the inner and outer hulls. An inner layer of water, separate from that used for fuel, protects the occupants against cosmic radiation. Hell of an engineering feat, the construction of this station."

"Damned right. I'd have predicted that it would tear apart when they set it rotating, but they've developed light yet super-strong materials. I'll wager they've come far closer to approaching the ultimate theoretical limits of strength than have Columbian engineers." For once, Nigel's ill-favored face betrayed wonder.

"They surely have. Well. Right now, we're looking at a ventilating system for eight separate enclosed areas besides the bathcabin. Here's my plan, drawn to scale. If you'll run the vents for the bridge, and then help me erect the walls around that area, Marvin will be enclosed.

"Unfortunately, we'll be forced to leave the old ventilating system intact so that we can breathe while we install the new one. This section's equipped with only two large output vents, inadequate for nine small enclosures, and one of those damned things runs right across the top of the bridge. So we're going to have to re-route it temporarily—maybe several times—as we enclose spaces and run our new ductwork. We're looking at a mess. I'll admit that, before you say a word."

Stroking his chin as he studied the detailed drawing on the large datapad Michael handed him, the life-support engineer frowned blackly. Marvin fidgeted nervously, his eyes glued to his associate's furrowed brow.

At length, Nigel commented wryly, "You weren't exaggerating. Challenge, hm? Not much room between the tent and the curved exterior wall. It'd be more economical of space to run two input ducts up that, than to run them up a divider. It'll require more time to fit them, but save space in the end. Nuisance for you, Marvin. Dust, vibration and bustle. Too bad there's no space between the double hulls we could utilize, but the drawbacks can't be helped. So. What do you think?"

"I'll just have to brace for a mess," Marvin observed petulantly. "Bustle I'll just have to stand. Particles in the air I regard as the worst danger, but so far the tent has repelled the dust. My power lines run up that exterior wall. You'll have to take care, because Conrad will be disconnecting other power lines, and he'll tap into some of those. I wound red tape around mine. All of them are live, right now, and they carry high voltage. Vibration will affect my apparatus. You won't be dropping massive articles on the deck, will you?"

"We'll be as careful as we can. I can't absolutely guarantee that we'll cause no vibration. Well. We'll first cut two holes in the plate and run the ducts up the curving exterior wall. I'll leave my team below cutting and joining lengths of duct to fit the curve, if you'll give me a hand here, Michael."

"I'd planned on it." No subtle overtone in Michael's voice revealed that he dreaded this job, knowing his two team leaders as well as he did. The warm glow cheering him since breakfast vanished, as he gauged the extent of Marvin's perturbation, and sensed the toll two hellish sessions of working short of oxygen had taken on his second officer's iron constitution. Smudges of dust channeled by sweat streaked Nigel's lined face. His eyes looked grim.

Having departed to fetch a metal-cutting laser, Michael proceeded with haste, leaving Nigel fitting a strip of malleable metal to the curve of the wall: a length which would serve as a pattern for his crew.

Sensing the electric tension charging the air surrounding the two experts and the Captain, Cleo and Leonard had settled silently into cross-legged postures in a spot well out of the way. Summoned now by their team leader, they followed him below, where Nigel set them assembling the two long runs of ductwork for the curved wall.

Flashing his teammate a grin, the youth let a comment slide between lips barely opened. "Michael's in for a nerve-racking few days, I'd judge."

"I don't envy him the job of mediator," Cleo agreed in a whisper. "But Nigel seems to harbor a special reserve of patience he saves just for Marvin."

"He does, rather." After the Lieutenant ascended to the main deck, and walked away from the hatch, Leonard spoke in his normal tone. "Actually, Nigel isn't bad to work under, once he decides that you sport half a brain and you aren't lazy. He drove two recruits into nervous collapse, but they weren't any big loss. He routinely scares supply clerks into paralysis. He thinned Second Corps of more than one sarcastic upstart who fancied himself a duelist, after he joined.

"I've enjoyed working with him, though. He taught me a lot, before we got stranded here. He has patience for that, too, though you wouldn't expect it of him. No, he won't jump in the middle of Marvin unless Marvin says or does something that Nigel considers too outrageous to overlook. But Michael's patience frays, at times, and you don't want to be the poor sod who provokes *his* anger on one of the rare occasions where rage gets the best of him."

"No, I certainly don't!" Cleo exclaimed vehemently. *Once was enough*, she acknowledged with a shudder. "I'll keep my hide on my butt, thank you," she added, as Conrad's words surfaced in her mind.

That declaration sparked a mischievous laugh. "You look too good in your hide to want to risk losing any of it, Cleo," the lad whispered, evoking a stifled giggle.

Michael returned bearing a bulky laser generator, from which ran the tool on the end of a long fiber-optic cable. He and Nigel cut out of the deck a section of plate, which fell with a resounding clang to the deck below. The noise sent Marvin flying out of the tent in manifest annoyance.

"Before you drop the second, let me cushion where it'll fall!" he expostulated shrilly as he swung down the ladder to set the folded remnant of the black cloth out of which he had fashioned the tent, under the spot where the second slab of steel would light, protecting that padding with a thick blanket woven of heat-resistant mineral fibers. Having waited until he saw that his ploy worked, the petulant expert vanished back into the tent.

By 1100, the two runs of ductwork, fitted to the curve, rose to end directly over the tent. Five people walked together back to the dining hall, glad of the break.

As he approached the counter, Michael, grew aware of a fragrance that tantalized his olfactory nerves. Reaching in astonishment for a cup of dark liquid, the Captain inhaled the scent as the beaming author of the feat slid a portion of baked stuffed fish onto his plate. "By the liquid seas of Earth, Justin, is this coffee?" the recipient demanded of his serenely smiling head cook.

"Taste it and see whether you can stand it, before I comment," Justin urged. Spooning a helping of mixed vegetables and a baked sweet potato next to the fish, his assistant warily eyed the Captain whose face had seemed carven of stone when he entered the hall. His expression losing its severity, Michael sipped the offering. Nodded in satisfaction to the cooks, he proclaimed emphatically, "It'll beat the everlasting hell out of orange juice for an eye-opener!"

Two other eager consumers sampled the brew. Wrinkling his brow, Nigel drawled ruminatively, "It's like halitosis: better than no breath at all, hm?"

"I can get used to whatever this is!" Leonard vouchsafed heartily.

Marvin actually smiled as he opined, "It's not bad at all."

Sampling what she instantly judged to represent an improvement over the coffee produced by the Gaean Ministry of Food Resources, Cleo smiled smugly to herself.

"Is this one of those surprises you wouldn't spoil?" Michael demanded.

"The chief one."

"What is it?"

"An extract of roasted chicory roots, which Earthmen sometimes used as a substitute for coffee. I'd never tasted such a beverage, so I wasn't sure it would go over well."

"Woman, if I win Conrad's bottle, I'll treat you to a whopping slug out of the proverbial jug!"

"It's I that will extend you that reward, Cleo," Nigel interposed in a sardonic drawl. "When I deprive both these losers of the prize."

Snorting, Michael retorted sardonically, "Talk's cheap. You haven't cleaned me yet."

"Won't be long."

Judging the experiment a rousing success, Cleo contentedly applied herself to

the outsized portion of baked stuffed fish Justin's stern glance had warned her not to refuse.

I'm likely to grow too plump, she fretted, even though yesterday and this morning certainly burned up a wealth of calories.

Having considered that possibility, the captive took comfort in the thought that she had never seen an overweight individual. Silently, she reviewed the cause, proud that modern custom alleviated certain severe inequities that had still persisted on Earth when her ancestors emigrated to the environs of Jupiter. Her society issued standard meals as a ration to rich and poor alike, as did Columbia's. The ministry that produced food distributed it. No one went without, but no one received extra. Citizens either paid for their ration, or took the job the government demanded of those out of work, in exchange.

A few privately manufactured additional food items available only in limited quantities nowise promoted overindulgence, and a national passion for the exercise necessary to offset the effects of cramped living space kept the populace in general fit and trim. *And damned if I'm not getting plenty of exercise!* she reminded herself sarcastically.

During the afternoon spent in the tedious task of fitting numerous sections of duct together according to a list of lengths Nigel left them, Cleo and Leonard sensed that no clash between him and his excitable associate now seemed imminent. Relieved, they worked steadily, while Michael and Nigel rigged a section having larger diameter, which they used to reroute the duct in use. The two men next secured a ladder that slanted up alongside of the tent, enabling them to reach the end of the run curving up the wall. As Nigel worked from the ladder, a tool apron around his waist, Michael handed up sections that Leonard piled next to the hatch. The afternoon slowly wore away.

Observing when Cleo left for her break, Michael took his, and caught up to her in the corridor. "Walking back to Central?" he inquired.

"No. Too far. Just stretching my legs."

"Well, how about stretching them out from a seat against the wall, and taking my mind off ventilators?"

Smiling, the Gaean complied, glad to have company.

Seating himself cross-legged opposite the woman whose image shimmered on the fringes of his mind as he worked, Michael remarked with studied casualness, "Tomorrow, I'll have Justin package up some drinks, so we can wash down the dust on our breaks."

"That would be a treat!"

"Not nearly as welcome a treat as your coffee."

"Not my coffee. Justin's. I just researched the way Earthmen used the roots."

"Mm." Resolved to satisfy curiosity arising from professional considerations, the Columbian inquired, "How did your team leader manage to launch his section under Norman's nose?"

"Gaea's spread over thirty-nine inhabited planetoids, in a group consisting of a huge number of dense bodies," Cleo replied, seeing no reason to avoid answering, given their plight. "Not all the rocks in the Gaean Group are inhabited.

"Norman's entrenched on Main World, but the minute his invading force landed, Wallace transferred out of orbit the section our teams have always used to fly here. He set it orbiting an isolated, uninhabited rock, and returned to Main World in a lifeboat. Wallace and a trusted crew completely dismantled that craft, and hid the parts. Norman confiscated every ship and every lifeboat in Gaea, but he didn't get his bloodstained hands on Wallace's.

"Signe and the military force she leads now hold a considerable chunk of territory in the web of habitats on Main World: territory Norman's corpsmen haven't been able to regain. Wallace rebuilt the lifeboat there, and used it to ferry his team six of us—to the orbiting section. He calculated a devious flight plan that avoided the space bearing the traffic of Norman's military ships, and supply ships. We got away without encountering any vessel."

"What happened to the lifeboat?"

"Wallace left it orbiting the rock, programmed so that he could summon it to dock on the section when we returned. He figured that if Norman spotted the unarmed section, he'd annihilate it, and the lifeboat with it. So he left the boat behind, for Signe's use, should she ever capture a military ship that could be used to get her to where she could retrieve it. Besides, if the section malfunctioned far from Gaea, the six of us would prefer to die spaced than to expire of thirst in an overloaded lifeboat slowly making that long, coasting transit back home."

"I see. Making that dangerous departure took guts. And damned if I'm not forced to admire Signe's."

"Signe's a legendary warrior...a charismatic world leader. She inspires a wealth of devotion that's fanatical, almost. She fights at the forefront of the battles waged by her followers: Gaean swordsmen who've hacked their way into a position from which Norman can't dislodge them.

"That murderous bastard knows better than to try to blow a section of Main World's web of habitats the way he annihilated five isolated stations. Davis and Quinn connected to Main World's planetoid-girdling web only by tunnels through which automated vehicles ran. The other three stations he wiped were outposts on other planetoids. Neither side can risk starting the deadly sequence—cascading, catastrophic failures of interconnecting life-support systems—which annihilation of a bank of Main World's habitats would initiate. So Signe's force is slowly expanding the territory she holds, and defending it with captured electronic weapons as well as swords.

"Even so, Norman continues to strip our world of its stockpiled metals, while his men wreak savage atrocities on the populace in the occupied sectors. If the filthy brute ever stopped to think rationally, he'd realize that his countenancing rapine and murder served to send legions of once pacifistic Gaeans through all sorts of devious routes into Free Gaea, bent on learning how to fight, and doing it."

That explanation came couched in even tones, but Michael sensed the passion underlying the recital.

"Sigurd's daughter's evidently learned to fight all too well for Norman's peace of mind," he acknowledged candidly.

"The time may come when your world learns to fear what Norman's conquest unleashed in a people that would never have posed a threat to yours otherwise." The Gaean's voice at this juncture trembled with suppressed anger: emotion the observer knew to be directed elsewhere than at his own self.

"Have you ever met this warrior daughter of Sigurd's?"

"Once. I'll never forget her, either. Signe radiates all of Sigurd's charisma, and fights like ten demons. She commands a force of warriors any one of which would follow her through hell and back."

The rugged face turned deeply thoughtful. "I can't imagine a woman's doing that, although I know she has," the Second Corpsman admitted, shaking his head.

"She's taller than you," Cleo retorted, "and she's strong as any man. Her hair's silver, though she's only twenty-seven. Blue eyes pierce you to the core. She radiates a powerful aura of command. Fighters twice her age—warriors such as Conor and Eric—accept Signe as Commander, and follow where she leads. She has killed four men in duels, and space knows how many in battles. She devised the brilliant strategies that have gained the most important advances, and yet she's all woman. Every word she spoke to me lives etched in my memory. I'll never forget her."

Spellbound, Michael etched that vivid portrait into his own store of impressions: a repository of fragments of information upon which he periodically drew. *File that picture away*, he adjured himself. *You never know what might come about. That bit might help some time in the future when you once again cast your fate on a single roll of the dice. You seem to have done that a hell of a lot more often of late, spacercaptain.* 

Rising, Michael extended a hand to his erstwhile foe in a gesture more symbolic than courteous, although he seemed only to help her to her feet. Divining his wordless meaning, she returned his grip. Their hands stayed briefly clasped, even after she regained her balance. Walking side by side in companionable silence, the pair returned to Eleven.

At the instant she came into Nigel's ken, Cleo felt the man's eyes impaling her. We aren't late! she groused silently. What's bothering him? It must be the bad day he's having.

When Leonard left on his break, the team leader enlisted her help, curtly ordering her to hand him pieces while he and Michael each fastened an end of long runs of ductwork into place. As the afternoon wore away, the Gaean sensed that her serene poise in the face of her team leader's surliness had served to soothe his ruffled temper.

Suppertime arrived with no momentous clash having occurred between Nigel and Marvin. Having noticed the rather unusual lack of conversation over the stew, Cleo ascribed that circumstance to the tedium of the day, and lingering tension. Rising as soon as she could, she smiled at the assistant cook over the tub of sudsy water, and succeeded in raising a grin on the face that had not smiled once on the diners passing through the line.

Conrad walked in, looking well scrubbed, promptly at 2000. "I took pains to arrive on time tonight," he announced as he stripped off his uniform. Sliding in beside the Gaean, he gathered her into his arms, and exerted himself to please her. Whether he realized that she had failed to reach a climax the last time, or whether his liking for her had deepened, she could not determine, but she appreciated his evident wish to satisfy her.

Her regard for the hardy blonde spacer she acknowledged to have grown through the past week. After the strains of the day, she found it easy to respond, easy to give herself up to enjoyment of the man's efforts. Her arousal deepened his passion. When he achieved his own release, he knew that she had attained hers.

Having managed what he had resolved to effect, the Columbian himself enjoying release propped himself on an elbow, and studied the attractive face of the woman obviously pleased by the outcome.

"How old are you, Cleo?" he asked.

"I'm thirty-six."

"You don't look thirty."

"Well, thank you! I expect that's because I'm not very hefty," she replied, smiling. "How old are you?"

"Forty-four, but I've got a lot of wear on me."

"It doesn't show, especially."

"You don't mind kissing a man, do you?"

"No. Should I?"

"The women that I'm used to, avoid kissing, given that they don't want to risk any emotional entanglement with a customer."

A flash of enlightenment burst upon the inexperienced Gaean. So that's why courtesans do what shocks me, but won't kiss a man on the mouth! Though I'd think any intimate contact with a customer would result in some kind of emotional response!

Noticing his partner's thoughtful expression, Conrad misinterpreted it. "Cleo, please don't take what I said to mean that I think of you as being in the same class with courtesans," he urged apologetically. "I don't. I was just exercising my superb talent for letting my mouth run away with me." Anxiously, he raked the vibrantly expressive face of the only non-professional partner with whom he had ever coupled.

Touched by his concern, Cleo hastily reassured him. "I didn't take what you said that way." Struck by a daunting thought, she added, her face sobering, "Though it's hard to imagine what my people will call a woman who did what I've done, if I ever get back to Gaea."

A flush overspread the hard-bitten face of her bedmate. "I know damned well that Michael never gave you a choice, for all that you tried to tell me differently!" he growled vehemently. "You fell in with a sifted set of bastards who took out on you their failure to get by a gutsy woman who wouldn't mass fifty kilograms soaking wet. Well, if your countrymen can't appreciate raw courage wrapped in kindness, there's something wrong with their heads!" Warmth surged through the woman flayed badly, at times, by both shame and guilt. "Conrad, you never hurt me, even when you nursed bitter anger. You've been downright decent...supremely honest. I think of you now as a friend, so put that first night out of your mind." Impulsively, she reached up and drew her partner down on top of her. "Kiss me," she invited in a husky whisper.

Conrad's kiss epitomized gentleness. No prelude to a renewal of passion, his gesture proved rather a final, straightforward peace offering.

"Damned right I'm your friend," he assured her earnestly. "I've never had a female friend before, but rot me if I don't value my first one. Cleo, since you've done what we forced you to do, and we're all stuck with this life for a while, will it bother you a lot to go on doing it once a week with me? If it does, I won't ask it of you, woman."

Touched to the core, the Gaean dug her fingers into both of her partner's muscular arms. "Conrad, I'll go on asking it of *you*. You've cheered me up no end, tonight. To hell with my stiff-necked, judgmental countrymen! It's easy for people to criticize when they've never found themselves in the same fix. That first time you made love to me, you asked my consent. Well, you've got it—for every Tuesday until we get wherever this crazy adventure lands us. So stop worrying!"

Sheer amazement registered on the spacer-fighter's face. For a few seconds, Conrad stared at his bedmate, speechless. Slowly, a grin of pure delight spread from ear to ear. "If you're not the most independent-minded lady warrior I've ever encountered, I'll eat a live eel! Woman, I appreciate your offer, which cheers me enough to make me want to last long enough to see the end of this adventure. I was pretty down tonight, but you've revived me. Are you game to take me on again?"

Laughing, Cleo threw her arms around him. "See, you ask before you go for it!"

Buoyed by an accession of warm friendliness for a member of the opposite sex, a mindset that constituted a new experience for a man who did indeed have a lot of wear on him, Conrad topped his earlier performance, and fell asleep locked in the arms of the only woman who had ever called him friend.

## WEEK THREE: WEDNESDAY

Opening heavy-lidded eyes at 0350 to ascertain the time, Cleo sighed audibly. Snores issued from her slumbering bedmate. Gently, she shook his shoulder, precipitating him into rearing up abruptly. Rubbing his eyes, the man thus rudely awakened stared at the clock, and muttered a highly regrettable phrase. Smiling at his slip, Cleo admitted contritely, "You were right about not making promises ahead, Conrad. I just woke up myself."

In reply, the spacer grasped her shoulders, pulled her close, and kissed her soundly on the mouth. "Last evening put me in fine shape, woman," he assured her stoutly. "And this has been the best night's sleep I've managed all week." Rising, he pulled on his pants, retrieved Cleo's uniform from the adjuster, and made the bed before she emerged from the bathcabin.

After arriving in the dining hall in plenty of time, the man due to go on duty vanished into his workplace. Cleo favored Justin with a vivid smile as he served her, brightening the day which the head cook wished heartily he could spend in a manner other than flogging his brain in an effort to produce new ideas for disguising fish.

Savoring what everyone now called coffee, Michael smiled over his cup at the originator of the idea, and confided that the brew rendered him better able to face the day. Reflecting that he needed all the help he could get on that score, Cleo dug into banana muffins and fishcakes.

Arriving on the main deck of Eleven to sense burgeoning tension, Cleo and Leonard made themselves as inconspicuous as possible while Michael, Nigel and Marvin studied the plan Michael had drawn on the deck. Nigel outlined where he intended to run the ductwork. Marvin sketched the connections that would join the board to the propulsion system and the fuel tanks; the video cameras on the exterior, which would continuously display the view of the surrounding space on screens integral to the board; the power-generating equipment on the exterior of the hull; the flight-control and attitude-control gear which Marvin intended to install; and all the myriads of tentacles from board to section which would render Eleven a self-sufficient vessel, rather than the remote-controlled vehicle it had been before being joined to a station of which its designers had expected it to remain a part.

While Michael marked off the eight separate cabins he envisioned in addition to the finished bathcabin, Marvin studied the life-support engineer's amendments to the deck plan. Instantly, he grew upset. "Nigel, if you insist on putting an outlet plate there between the second couch and the exterior wall, I'll have to reroute the connections I just made to the fuel tank," he protested querulously.

"I don't insist, except that it can't be in the direct line of foot traffic, and most certainly not in the locker where the pressure suits will be stored. I can't put both plates on the same side, and I'm limited by what's already in place below, though I have some leeway there."

Maintaining a firm grip on his temper, Michael interjected crisply, "Instead of one on each side, Nigel, how about one close to the board, and one right in front of the end bank of tool lockers?"

"That would work, if Marvin has left any deck free of his connections anywhere close to the board."

"Anywhere close to the board's going to be in the way!" his colleague insisted petulantly.

Listening intently, Cleo heard Nigel draw in a deep breath, and watched a black frown crease his forehead. She noted with considerable amazement that his reasoned tone changed no whit. "Why not in between where the two couches will go, hm? It isn't truly essential that the two outlets be the whole length of the bridge apart." Marvin studied the plan. "That'd do, I guess," he ventured warily. "If nothing's in the way below."

"I have leeway enough below to make that work, but I'll be cutting out a piece of deck inside the tent."

"I can't have that!" That vehement objection emerged in a voice grown shrill with exasperation.

On hearing that outburst, Michael turned a pair of icy blue eyes upon the objector, but his voice remained level. "You and I will move the tent closer to the divider behind the board, and leave slack so that the space in front of the board is uncovered. That'll give Nigel the access he needs, and keep your components dust-free. The minute he's finished, you and I will move the tent back. Since you won't have room in which to work while the tent's shifted, you can help me disconnect the two couches we're going to install in here, from their mounts in the ship, and we'll build mounts to which we can attach the couches, here on the bridge."

Hearing the finality in the Captain's voice, the objector shrugged. "All right," he agreed grudgingly. Nigel's impenetrable dark eyes met Michael's briefly, before he beckoned to his crew to follow him below. The Captain and his disgruntled subordinate set about moving the tent.

To Cleo's vast relief, the morning passed peacefully enough after that initial near-altercation. She and her teammates worked on the ducts destined to run from the fans above the photosynthetic exchanger to the intake vents leading to the upper deck, leaving the fans to be connected later. After Michael and Marvin shifted the tent, Nigel cut two holes in the deck. While his crew readied more sections of duct, he installed grates over the openings, and certain fans and blowers. At 0800, Conrad showed up with a tub of drinks, which he served to the life-support crew gratefully relaxing on the deck, enjoying a communal break.

By midday, three relieved workers tightened the last fastening of the ductwork on the bridge. Well aware that Michael had kept Marvin occupied on the ship, out of Nigel's hair, if firmly entangled in his own, Cleo studied both faces over lunch. Marvin's looked upset. Michael's looked grim. Nigel ate silently, his dark eyes as impenetrable as ever. The woman and her youthful teammate did the same, sensing new and presumably dangerous currents of tension.

Upon finishing his meal, Michael sat back and surveyed his subordinates. "Nigel, Marvin and I moved the tent back, just before lunch. I've decided to rob Three of the dividers I'll use to enclose the bridge. I've moved all the furniture that used to be attached to the panels I've selected. The five of us will unbolt those, and convey them to Eleven. That task will take all afternoon. Tomorrow we'll install those panels, so that the bridge can be closed off. The work I envision will take the best part of two days. Afterwards, you can resume work on the ventilating system."

Stroking his chin with his hand, the second officer turned matters over in his mind. At length he suggested, "Michael, as long as we're enclosing the bridge, why not finish the job, hm? Use the five of us to install the storage lockers for the tools, pressure suits, spare parts, line, and whatever? Those lockers will be massive, and so will some of the contents. You'll need help, when you move those. When we finish, the bridge will be completely finished.

"Besides, I'll need to switch the area off the station-wide ventilating system the old ducts—and onto the new ones. That'll cause stuffiness on the main deck of Eleven for a while—half a day, at least. You and Marvin could spend that time moving the two couches from the ship to Eleven. Marvin could then resume work in a wholly functional bridge."

Having weighed that suggestion, the Captain brightened. Nodding, he declared, "Hell of a fine idea, that, Nigel. It'll take the two of us to lift some of that gear into place. I'll be relieved to know that one area's finished. Let's attack it."

The afternoon seemed interminable. Five people spent a goodly part of it unfastening bolts in numbers Cleo suspected to run in the millions, and taking down heavy double metal panels—double, as the doors were the kind that slid. Those doors, the Gaean engineer knew, would seal automatically in case of a drastic drop in air pressure due to a breach in the hull: the ultimate in disasters. Despite Three's close proximity to Central, Michael instructed Conrad to reappear with drinks for the break all took at the same time, reclining or sitting crosslegged on the deck.

Cleo studied the crew covertly as she relaxed with her back to a wall.

Michael looks tired, she ruminated. Marvin looks fussed. He's not used to being drafted into a labor battalion. Well, it won't kill him. Nigel has certainly pushed himself as hard as he has driven us, and he hasn't shoved all the dirty work off on his crew. I'll be glad when the bridge rests complete. I'll wager that Michael will, as well.

The break seemed short to the lone woman. After a tedious stretch of work, which left her seeing spots before her eyes, all shaped like bolts, she and Leonard teamed to carry panels. Michael paired with Marvin. Exerting prodigious strength, Nigel raised a massive if narrow panel high in the air. Balancing the weighty burden on the top of his head, he strode away in the wake of the others. By suppertime, all the dividers reposed on the deck of Eleven.

Wearily, Cleo applied herself to baked eel, noting that the stuffing represented a new addition to Justin's menu. Sampling a baked vegetable dish, she tasted cheese.

Now, how did he manage that? she wondered, impressed by the feat. No starting material here to produce casein, I'd have thought. Justin's a genius. He must have deduced that we needed a treat today.

Having washed sparingly, the weary woman eyed her water supply. *Well, Leonard won't expect me to shine with cleanliness*, she assured herself. *What a week*!

Shining himself from his weekly shower, Leonard slid into bed, and gathered his partner into his arms with an assurance and a tenderness that combined to delight her. Swiftly, he demonstrated that he had forgotten nothing of her lessons. Welcoming his now practiced efforts to please her, she used all she knew to return that favor, free of the fear that she might evoke a bitter memory.

The close comradeship engendered by their working together daily had served to deepen the two comrades' mutual affection. Still marveling at Leonard's

acceptance of his predicament, the bereaved widow considered that conundrum.

Conrad admitted to feeling down, she recalled. Justin hinted at being discouraged. Michael's composure slipped a bit tonight at supper, but never once has Leonard breathed a word of complaint.

Responding to a sudden, fierce urge to make what might be her youthful partner's only experience of loving a woman memorable, Cleo gave herself with an abandon approaching that which Michael unfailingly evoked.

Lying limply in her gentle lover's arms after achieving a rapturous climax, Cleo reveled in the sensation of his hand's stroking her hair. "Leonard," she asked softly, curiosity finally mastering her, "have you parents you miss? Brothers and sisters?"

His reply breathed wistfulness. "I've got no brothers and sisters, Cleo. I never knew my father well. He was a spacer, who didn't get home much. My mother asked my father for a termination of her marriage contract when I was nine.

"Seven Earthyears later, she married her employer: the manager of a private manufacturing firm. Likeable enough person, he is, but he found me rather an encumbrance. My mother happily set about building herself a new life. I didn't blame her. I moved out, and worked nights while I finished Ministry Third Level.

"I developed a notion to attend the University, but couldn't save enough credit while supporting myself. I saved what I could. Galt sent an eloquent recruiting officer to make a pitch to my graduating class. All through that last term, I had suffered from loneliness. I figured that enlisting might result in my finding comradeship while I learned a trade. And after my...bad start...I did find that. And more, Cleo."

As if to punctuate that final assertion, the youth pulled his companion close. His intimate kiss erased any lingering suspicions that his first love might be a passing fling: the product of a chance opportunity.

*Oh, Leonard,* the widow sympathized sadly, *what a succession of cruel tricks* fate has played on you! And what uncomplaining courage you exhibit! Surely one of these days your luck will turn. Admiration blended with pity as Cleo returned his kiss passionately, stirring him to new desire. Wishing to comfort him, she found herself lifted once more to the heights: an eminence from which she plunged into a peaceful languor that soon crossed the boundary into sleep.

## WEEK THREE: THURSDAY

Having been awakened by her youthful lover in time to enjoy a final indulgence in mutually satisfying lovemaking, Cleo accompanied him to the dining hall. Keeping a wary eye on their manifestly impatient team leader as they fortified themselves with coffee, fishcakes, and rhubarb muffins, they watched Nigel bolt his breakfast. Rising when he did, they followed in his wake. Michael arrived on the main deck of Eleven only minutes behind them, accompanied by Marvin, whom he again took as his partner. As the Captain began to raise one wall, Nigel's crew commenced work on the one opposite.

The panels Cleo discovered to be dauntingly heavy. Once set upright where they were to go, they were easy to secure with the recessed bolts, but lifting the massive objects, sliding them into position, and holding them until enough bolts had been replaced to secure them in position so that the remaining bolts could be installed, taxed the movers' strength.

As usual, the two brawny athletes bore the brunt of the lifting, although Cleo noted that Leonard gamely took as much of the strain off Nigel as he could. Observing that Marvin tried to do the same for his partner, she deduced that his strength barely exceeded Leonard's. *A lifetime of fencing must have given both Nigel and Michael arms and calves of iron,* she conjectured accurately.

A chill ran down her spine, as the memory of Nigel's hands twisting her arm returned in vivid detail. *Either officer could easily break me in two,* she reminded herself, shuddering. *Nigel almost did.* 

Working deftly, even as those unsettling thoughts coursed through her mind, Cleo spun a nut onto a bolt, and hastily tightened three more. Stepping back, her team leader scowled blackly at the panel as he thrust other bolts into place.

Nigel looks grim today, she reflected uneasily. I hope he doesn't succumb to anger. Come to think of it, though, I've never seen him lose his temper. But what he's capable of doing while in perfect control of himself is bad enough! The engineer's mind rambled, even as her hands went on tightening nut after nut.

Imagine facing Nigel across swords, in a duel, she mused, shivering. His arms are longer than most men's. Could Nigel best Signe, I wonder? The Commander's height almost equals his. Nigel outreaches her, but then, so did that Columbian prisoner she dueled to the death...Heath. His slight advantage didn't save him, Max emphasized, when he told me what he had witnessed.

A vivid portrait indelibly imprinted on her mind by her late husband's description of the tall, silver-haired warrior's standing motionless over the corpse of the man she had slain, watching with blazing eyes as Heath's life-blood dripped from her blade, recurred to trouble the widow's mind.

Whatever must Heath have done to Signe? she asked herself, not for the first time. And when? Max never knew. Neither combatant gave the least hint. Whatever, Heath paid the price the victor exacted.

Covertly casting an appraising eye on the limber swordsman heaving a panel off the deck, she shuddered anew.

I'll just hope that Signe and Nigel never meet, she resolved, as a lurid visualization scrolled down the screen of her mind. War. What a stupid waste of human potential! But a free people can't just give up without a fight, when invaded by a greedy, rapacious enemy bent on enslaving them. Oh, Max...you gave your all to keep Gaea free! I honor your patriotism...your devotion to duty...your high courage. I failed, when I turned combatant...

Lunchtime found the laboring crew nowhere close to being finished. Returning after the meal to take up where they had left off, Cleo wished that she possessed

strength enough to give Michael the help Leonard offered Nigel. *Marvin's tiring. He* hasn't been exercising the way Leonard has, or as I have, she surmised. I'm in excellent shape, but I'm just not built for this sort of lifting!

As if some extrasensory message passed directly from her brain to Nigel's, he spoke, his words eerily paralleling her thoughts. "Leonard, Cleo and I can manage," he ordered. "Give Michael a hand, for a while."

Wiping away the sweat trickling down his forehead as a result of his having raised a doubly heavy panel containing a door, Michael offered no objection. When the fine-boned woman valiantly struggled to help her partner lift their door assembly, the premier athlete smiled in sardonic amusement.

"No need to rupture a disc, Cleo. Just stand ready to slip in a couple of bolts. That's good."

Watching approvingly as his fellow engineer clamped a lock-pliers over the head of a bolt, and wedged the tool against a projection so as to keep the head from turning as she tightened the nut on the opposite side of the wall, Nigel grunted in satisfaction. Hastily, she fastened another on the opposite end of the panel. Letting go with one hand, Nigel thrust two bolts into key locations before stepping back.

Squinting against the sting of sweat that had run into his eyes while his hands were occupied, he wiped his sleeve across his face. Wet circles visible on the fabric of his tunic under each arm, and between his shoulder blades, apprised the Gaean that his uniform's adjustment must have failed early on. Dark, damp hair lay plastered to his forehead. The acrid odor of perspiration wafted around the woman scrutinizing her partner.

If we aren't a grubby bunch! she groused. Aluminum chloride notwithstanding, do I smell, too? Not that anyone would notice in the collective exhalations of overtaxed glands!

By 1800, both halves of the crew found themselves at a point where stopping for supper would be impossible. Doggedly, five people worked on for another twenty minutes. When Nigel and Cleo finished their wall, the woman unhesitatingly spun a nut onto a bolt protruding from the panel Michael held. As three pairs of hands swiftly secured that piece in place, Nigel heaved the last panel of Michael's wall into position. Four pairs of hands feverishly tightened bolts. Five exhausted workers walked the seemingly endless distance down the rim towards the dining hall.

Wearily, Cleo seated herself, and set her bowl on the table. Sipping a cup of steaming coffee, she debated whether or not Justin would issue her a public reprimand if she dumped her meal untouched, and decided in the affirmative.

I'll wager I sweated off another half-kilogram today, she conjectured glumly. Better not risk angering our overzealous medic. Justin's fully as tough as Michael when he figures his duty demands it. Even so, I'm going to take my time, and relax over coffee before attacking the stew.

Across from her, Michael seemed to be entertaining similar thoughts. Ignoring his bowl, he drained his cup. The legs of his chair grated jarringly on the deck, as he pushed the seat back, intending to rise.

Swiftly and silently, Conrad set a second full cup in front of him. Having muttered "Thank you," Michael drew his chair back to the table, and sipped the steaming brew, his eyes remote.

Two portions seemingly revived the Captain. Reaching for the bowl, he applied himself to the food, noting that Cleo did likewise.

After ingesting the stew, the exhausted woman sat slumped in her chair, unwilling to make the effort just yet to rise and wash her utensils. Leonard picked up his dish, and reached for hers. Meeting her protesting glance, he shook his head.

"Sit tight, Cleo. Finish your coffee," he urged solicitously.

Smiling gratefully, she watched him wash both bowls, bring another full cup, and set it before her. "Anyone else care for a refill?" he asked, sweeping his glance from face to face. Nigel and Michael chorused an assent.

Their youthful subordinate waited while Conrad filled more cups. Carefully, he picked up three in the fingers of both hands. Just as he positioned himself to serve Michael, Marvin rose abruptly, and collided with the bearer of the drinks. A cascade of

scalding coffee missed both men, but drenched the chair, and spread in a steaming pool on the deck.

Having narrowly avoided catching the full contents of three cups down his back, Marvin reacted without thinking. "Can't you watch what you're doing?" he snapped, raising his voice in the heat of his exasperation.

Before Leonard could frame a reply, Michael's voice, glacial in tone, reverberated across the intervening space. "Marvin, you were at fault! Mop up that mess. Now!"

Visibly disconcerted, the object of the curt reprimand silently took the cloth Conrad handed him, and complied, his face working. Leonard withdrew, to stand out of the way. None of the other spectators moved.

Having waited until Marvin finished the chore, Michael rose to his feet. When he spoke again, the icy anger freighting his voice sent chills coursing down Cleo's nerves.

"Marvin, of all the petulant, childish, irritable, exasperating people it's ever been my misfortune to know, you take the ultimate grand prize. You need to listen to a recording of yourself. I should have made one, yesterday. I will, if I hear one more cranky outburst—before I lock you up to listen to yourself for twelve straight hours. Latch your damned mouth, for the balance of the time you're working next to me!"

Only the presence of the woman prevented the Captain's employing blatantly obscene epithets. Having delivered himself of that cutting ultimatum, he seated himself, glaring at the offender.

He went too far! That thought hammered at Cleo's consciousness. In front of everyone...damn him! He could have had the decency to reprimand Marvin in privacy! Pity overwhelmed the Gaean as she beheld the expression that contorted the thin face of the man so savagely castigated.

Acting on blind impulse, the lone woman got to her feet. In the silence that dropped like a pall in the wake of the Captain's virulent attack, Cleo walked over and slipped an arm into that of the stunned recipient of the reprimand. Looking up at him, completely ignoring the senior officer glaring now at her, she spoke, her voice warm and inviting. "Shall we retire early, Marvin? Let's go."

The stricken offender's tall body remained rigid. Two spots of red accentuated the dead white of his shocked face. His immediate impulse—to jerk his arm free of the woman's before turning and fleeing—died, aborted by the astounding realization that Cleo just took his part before them all. That cognizance penetrated the fog of mental anguish generated by the vitriolic words seared into his memory. Clinging to that one clear concept amid the shattered wreckage of his ability to reason, Marvin yielded wordlessly, mechanically, to the insistent pressure of the woman's arm, and allowed her to lead him away.

Her heart racing, Cleo strode down the corridor towards her cabin, forcibly propelling the stricken culprit along. Throwing open her door, she shoved him through, and slid the door shut behind her. Resolved to help him talk out the hurt, determined to forestall his pained withdrawal into some private mental hell of his own where words would fail to reach him, she took the offensive.

Gripping both of his arms just above the elbow, she declared with adamant force, "Michael ought never to have said what he did, Marvin! Don't take his words to heart. Let's talk." Turning him, tugging on his arm, she drew him to the edge of the bed, and sat down herself. Given that her hands still clutched his arm, her weight pulled him off balance, and forced him to slump beside her. "Marvin, Michael was clearly in the wrong," she exclaimed with impassioned certainty. "Don't let what he said fester!"

The dead-white face twisted into a mask of anguish that tore at the viewer's heart. "He wasn't in the wrong, Cleo." That assertion struggled out: a tortured, strangled whisper. "I get on his nerves. On all their nerves...all the time. They put up with me only for what I know...what I can do. I can't help aggravating them. I try not to, but things slip out before I can stop them."

Shock mingled with concern in the mind of the hearer expecting an outpouring of self-pity, not a concise analysis of the situation.

"Marvin," she consoled him warmly, "you know what your problem is. That's

eighty percent of the solution. You can change the way you interact with your comrades! All you need is the determination."

Misery shone nakedly from the liquid dark eyes staring not at her, but at the deck.

"Cleo, it isn't all that easy. I know I rub them the wrong way, but I don't always know why. The less I say, the better, usually. I need to keep from interacting with them, but there's nowhere to go, here...no way to get free of their company!" Desperation charged the voice that trembled audibly. As he spoke, he twisted and retwisted a fold of the bedcover.

"Marvin, would you accept my help? I think I could help. I'd surely try." That appeal came couched in a tone almost maternal in its solicitude.

Staring at the attractive lover he shared with five men who he felt certain despised him, Marvin reacted with disbelief. "Why would you want to help someone like me?" he queried agitatedly. "When you've got...the others...and I can't even..." His fluidly expressive face a picture of misery, he flushed hotly as his voice trailed off into pained silence.

Cleo's eyes never wavered from his. Her hands dug impetuously into his arms, and her voice carried irresistible certainty. "Because you're extremely gifted, deeply sensitive, and very lonely. I know all about that last. I'm your friend, Marvin. Believe me."

Shock showed nakedly on the pale face, before it crumpled into a quivering grimace of emotional anguish. Tears coursed uncontrollably down the thin cheeks. Embarrassment so intense that the consciousness of it palpably hurt its profoundly troubled witness radiated from the gangly body even after Marvin averted his face and buried it in his hands. His shoulders shook. Sobs racked him, but no other sound reached the lone listener.

Devastated by the reaction she perceived as an inability to believe her, Cleo threw her arms around the weeping spacer. Hugging him fiercely, she let the first words that rushed to her lips emerge. "Marvin, it's all right to cry. All right. Cry it out. Don't be embarrassed. Tears bring emotional relief. Let them come. They'll help."

Her arms pressed her companion's torso against her fine-boned body with strength amplified by a sudden adrenaline rush. Cleo sensed the profundity of the man's despair. Stark fear of what that despair might drive him to do flayed her consciousness.

"Marvin, it's all right," she assured him briskly. "I understand...truly. Don't be afraid of my knowing you gave way to tears! I'll help you cope. It's all right!"

Her heart thudding, Cleo held him until the storm of weeping passed. Reaching for a corner of the bedcover, she offered it as she urged him to wipe his face. Watching as he complied, she silently pleaded for his attention, begging him not to curl into a ball of silent misery.

"Marvin, your reaction had to have relieved some of the pain. Now, let's talk about how I can help."

The tormented Columbian culturally programmed to regard a man's shedding tears as proof of reprehensible weakness managed to regain a shred of poise. Shaking his head, he replied sadly, "Cleo, some things friends can't do for you. You don't understand what it's like to be afflicted with uncontrollable urges that habitually drive you to act blindly...without thinking."

Refusing to take no for an answer, Cleo again dug her fingers into her companion's arms. In the intensity of her emotion, she all but shook him.

"You don't think so?" she chided him reproachfully. "How little you know! If I hadn't been blessed with a friend...a brother...who did for me what I couldn't do for myself, I'd never have become what I am today. Never!"

At this juncture, pain clouded the eyes of the captive. The naked force of that emotion registered on the man until now fully absorbed in his own agony. "What...what do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"Marvin, when I was just a girl, I developed a problem worse than yours. I've got a fearsome temper. When I lose it, the world dissolves in a red haze of anger,

and my ability to reason vanishes. When that happens, I'm capable of anything: of doing harm to my friends...and even of worse things. The older I got, the more likely it became that someday, I'd kill someone in a fit of uncontrollable rage."

Wholly incredulous, Marvin stared at the beguilingly attractive woman he saw as petite, and offered a vehement protest. "Cleo, I simply can't believe that. Not of you! You're the most self-controlled woman I've ever met...the kindest. I can't imagine you killing. No way!"

Smiling wearily, the Gaean offered a reasoned rebuttal that belatedly brought conviction. "Marvin, it's a measure of how completely I changed...learned to control myself...that you think that. Fifteen Earthyears have passed since I last succumbed to a fit of murderous rage. I had a brother: Glendon. He helped me to overcome a fault that threatened to land me in dreadful trouble. I'll tell you how. What he did worked for me."

To her vast relief, Cleo divined that she had reached the sufferer she so fervently wished to help. Interest, belief, hope, all reflected from the eyes riveted to hers. "Marvin, let me pull off your boots. Let's get into bed, and talk—under the bedcover, where we can relax—while I tell you."

Startled, the man stammered, "Cleo, don't...no...I...I'll do it," but swiftly she knelt, vigorously yanking off one boot, and then the other. Rising, she commanded in a voice admitting of no refusal, "Get undressed, Marvin, and slip in. I'll turn my back."

Having faced away from her bedmate, the amateur therapist shrugged out of her tunic, kicked off her boots, and stepped out of her pants. She heard the thump of Marvin's body dropping to the bed, and the rustle of the bedcover. Backing to sit on the edge, she slipped under the cover. The other occupant lay rigidly still, staring upwards into space. Rolling onto her side, Cleo invited matter-of-factly, "Marvin, turn and look at me. It's easier to talk, that way...more relaxing. Let me tell you what Glendon did."

Slowly, the man thus coaxingly adjured turned, and devoured the piquant face

of his benefactor with his eyes, as curiosity overcame his renewed embarrassment at finding himself expected to converse in such intimate nearness to her nude body.

Her tone conversational, confiding, Cleo launched into her story. "All of my family knew I habitually lost my temper. They all worried about it, but nothing my mother said ever produced the least effect. My father died before the problem grew dangerous." The Gaean hurried past that point, resolved to inject no distracting side issues. "One day, as I prepared to leave for an afternoon class at the University, I couldn't find my gloves: the ones I wore when I worked in the tertiary tank, among the plants.

"I figured that Glendon must have borrowed them. He did, at times. His hands weren't any bigger than mine. Like me, he was slightly built. Hotly and resentfully, I accused him of taking them. He denied that he had.

"I was afraid that I'd be late. I had put in a bad morning, but unfortunately, so had he. His nerves, like mine, were on edge before the argument began. Insisting that he must have taken the gloves, I accused him of lying. A heated exchange ensued, that made both of us grow steadily angrier. Beside myself, I shouted at Glendon. When he responded with a cutting retort, I saw red. Grabbing a heavy glass bottle off the table, I went for him. I tried my damnedest to hit him with it.

"Realizing at that point that I was out of control, he wrenched the weapon out of my hand, and slapped my face...really hard. Three times...stinging slaps. In all my life, no one of my family, or anyone else, had ever struck me. The shock brought me out of my blind rage. I ended up crying hysterically on Glendon's shoulder.

"My brother's anger subsided as quickly as it appeared. When I stopped sobbing, he sat me down, and faced me. 'Cleo,' he warned somberly, 'you have a problem. So do we all—a problem with you. If you go on like this, you'll one day kill somebody: someone you love. Me, likely. We're going to devise a way for you to control that temper. Right now. You're simply going to have to recognize when you begin to lose it—while you can still reason logically—and learn to shut your damned mouth until you've cooled off!' His words shocked me almost as much as his striking me had, but I listened."

Pausing briefly, the narrator saw that she held her listener spellbound.

"I had to admit that Glendon was right, but I tried to tell him that it wasn't all that easy. 'It happens too fast!' I cried in desperation. 'I react before I realize what I'm doing!'"

Having pondered the problem, he came up with an idea. "Cleo, let me help you,' he insisted. 'It's us you do it with—the people you love best—not strangers. I'll watch you. We'll use a code word: some term that no one realizes means anything special. When I see you start to lose your temper, I'll say it. You listen for it, and when you hear it, just stop short and shut up, until you train yourself not to mouth off when things get to you. Angry words lead you on to violent acts, as they did today.'

"He was right. I admitted that. I wanted to change, being horrified at what I'd tried to do. So we chose a code word: mittens."

"What does it mean?"

"My mother was a first-level teacher, who taught the youngest children. Brilliant educator, she was. She collected old poems and stories out of our world's bank: ancient tales...quaint rhymes brought from Earth. Their rhythm fascinated us, even though the words were often hard to understand...archaic. She read to us, all the time we were growing up.

"That poem had been Glendon's favorite when he was a small boy. 'Three little kittens lost their mittens.' Baby cats lost their hand coverings, it means. Mittens have thumbs, but no separate spaces for fingers. Children wore them, in cold regions. We picked that word, because of the fight over the gloves.

"I was working, while carrying a full load of courses. I put in long days, while worrying a good deal about...economic problems. I studied early in the morning, and went chronically short of sleep. Our life wasn't easy, although that didn't excuse my fits of blind rage. I started to lose my temper with my mother one night, over what to have for supper. Glendon said casually from behind me, 'Mittens, Cleo.' It worked. I bit down on the next angry word, and said not one thing more. My sister noticed. She started saying it. My mother did, finally, as well. During that whole Earthyear—my last two terms at the University—we worked on my problem. I began saying the code word to myself, when things got aggravating. I not only mastered the temper. I got so I thought out everything I said—the important things—with extreme care. I changed myself, Marvin. Fundamentally and permanently. You can do the same, assuming that you can bring yourself to accept the help you need to begin."

The social misfit's eyes filled with longing, even as he shook his head. "Cleo, I'd willingly accept your help, but you'd likely not be close by when I next say something to provoke a reaction like Michael's tonight."

"Marvin, you said you didn't know why you rub people the wrong way. If you knew, would you find it easier to change?"

Embarrassment, fear and shame contended with poignant yearning, and won out. Bracing himself to weather new trauma, Marvin whispered, "Yes."

"I can tell you, but what I'll say will hurt your feelings."

"You couldn't hurt me any more than Michael just did," the man now launched on a painful course retorted bleakly. "I doubt whether anything you could ever say to me could truly hurt, Cleo, when I know that you...care."

Touched, the Gaean replied gently, "I do care, Marvin. Truly! Let me list three things you need to work on. If you change those, the others will change of their own accord.

"First. If someone pays you a compliment, smile! Say, 'Thank you!' For example, when I tell Justin the food's good, he doesn't reply, 'Oh, it's just some awful slop I scooped out of the primary tank, yuck.' He says, 'Why, thank you, Cleo.' Make that a habit."

The amateur therapist watched the man visibly flinch, but he nonetheless took her criticism. Having listened, he finally managed a smile: a strained smile, but genuine. "I know what you mean. I don't say thank you. I say...something derogatory. About myself." "That's right. And no one wants to hear that. They won't think it, either, unless you yourself train them to think it."

Silently accepting the validity of her premise, Marvin nodded.

Gently but firmly, Cleo drove a new barb into his flayed psyche.

"Second. When you're upset, you snap at people, driving them to snap back. Train yourself to say in the privacy of your mind, 'I'm upset. I either need to make a conscious effort to make someone else feel better, or say absolutely nothing.' Monitor your feelings, Marvin. You get upset rather than angry. Michael merely gets angry, although he usually manages to control his wrath. Learn to watch yourself when you're upset, so that you can control how your perturbation makes you answer. Put yourself in other people's boots, and think of them instead of yourself. That'll help."

A painful flush rose to color the man's pale cheeks, but he replied shamefacedly, "The way you do, even after all we've done to you."

"Putting yourself in others' boots gets to be a habit," the Gaean replied with convincing vigor. "That's what you have to do: make a constant, ongoing effort to replace bad habits with new ones.

"Third. You're very shy, Marvin. That's difficult to control. You don't look people straight in the eye, and initiate conversations. You don't try to meet them halfway, and talk pleasantly over lunch, for example. You drop your eyes, and look so embarrassed that they shrink from conversing with you, because they find watching you flush and look away painful to behold. Smile more! Make pleasant remarks. Force yourself to look straight at people. *That* will become a habit."

Even as the speaker described that final fault, Marvin flushed, and averted his eyes, displaying the exact reactions she just urged him to change. Realizing what he had done, he exerted painful effort. Turning his eyes back to hers, he met her warmly sympathetic glance squarely.

"You're right, Cleo," he admitted in a low, pained whisper. "I'll try. I'll talk to you, first...to practice...if you won't mind."

"I enjoy talking to you. Do that, Marvin. Now, let's put what happened behind

us." Sliding closer, prompted by quintessentially feminine concern for a sufferer, she snuggled her body against his.

Abruptly, Marvin reared to a sitting position, his face working. Startled, his bedmate rose to face him.

"Cleo," he urged in a tremulous whisper, "don't. Don't...wake desire...I can't control any better than I can control being embarrassed at lunch. You've been so kind...you don't need to put up with the rest of my problems. I can't...satisfy you. Just let me stay on my side of the bed. I'd go away, and let you sleep undisturbed, except that I have nowhere else to bed down."

"What makes you think that you can't satisfy me?"

His voice rising an octave, the tormented spacer cried out, "You've seen how I am! I can't...hold off...long enough! And you haven't even started. I know that, but I can't control myself! I shoot my load too damned soon! You don't need to contend with my dysfunction, on top of everything else!"

Taken aback by that outburst, Cleo for the first time perceived that physical aberration, rather than social ineptness, caused the peculiar effect. Firmly, she declared, "Marvin, as long as we're straightening things out, let's consider this new difficulty. Please, don't grow embarrassed on account of our discussing so personal a problem. Listen to me. So you can't help what inevitably happens prematurely. So what? If you really want to satisfy me, I can show you how...*after* you do what satisfies you...if you want to take the time to learn."

His mouth agape, Marvin stared at the potently desirable woman offering so handicapped a lover that astounding solution. For the moment, shock banished embarrassment. "Cleo...why would you want to try?" he blurted, patently astonished.

Gamely, the sorely stressed amateur therapist suppressed the sudden onslaught of exasperation generated by the question. *Be patient!* she chided herself savagely. *You just had the incredible gall to tell this poor afflicted soul how to run his entire life!* Stricken by shame at her initial reaction, she mustered a smile that struck her companion as warm and friendly, if slightly rueful. "Marvin, when a woman makes you that invitation, you don't ask why!" she declared forcefully. "You just reach out and go for it! If I didn't want you to, I wouldn't have said what I did!" And with that vigorous expostulation, the Gaean reached for *him*.

Wrapping her arms around her companion's chest, Cleo fell back onto the bed, pulling him down on top of her. Her hands slid down his back. Despite the stupefaction generated by her action, he felt the touch of her tongue on the smooth skin of his shoulder, and the sensuous touch of her firm, full breasts pressing against his chest.

Warned by the pressure of his erection on her thigh, Cleo quickly facilitated his entry. Her brief caresses of the partner succumbing to uncontrollable lust aroused her enough to make his swift penetration at least comfortable. Moving in time with two hard thrusts, knowing what to expect, she hung on to him as he reached another premature climax. Her arms stayed put. When he raised his head, she smiled up at him.

"Did that feel good?" she inquired serenely.

Flushing scarlet, he stammered, "Of...of course it did!"

"All right, now lie beside me." When he obeyed that flat command, Cleo guided his hands, as she had Leonard's, that first time. As Marvin hesitantly cupped her breasts, she talked to her charge, softly, caressingly. "There. That's nice. Now, use a finger to tickle my nipples. Mmmm...that feels so good!"

Bemusedly, her pupil did as she told him, and as she showed him. His heart fibrillated as he heard her breath come faster. Her body quivered under his hands. He knew enough about female physiology to realize that she could not simulate certain physical reactions, and that if they occurred, she must be growing aroused. Those telltale signs produced by his touch roused him to new, fierce desire. Having just attained release, he discovered that the swift, urgent, uncontrollable ejaculation failed to materialize.

Whispering new instructions, Cleo caressed him as he obeyed them. She

sensed his new readiness. "Marvin, can you...?" she queried hoarsely.

He could. He did. His thrusts failed to produce the usual effect in him, but lifted his partner to a peak which he entertained no doubt that she reached. Exultantly, he savored his cognizance of having achieved an unprecedented feat. His partner's palms pressed down on his back, as she moved with him, willing him to satisfy himself. To his astonishment, he attained fulfillment again. Utterly spent, he went limp. Work-roughened hands briskly massaged him even as soft lips brushed his bare skin. Elation mingled with bemusement as Marvin lay suffused with pleasure greater than any he had ever achieved in the bed of a courtesan.

When he slid off the warm, slack body beneath him, Cleo wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him passionately. Returning her kiss with astonishing ardor, he demonstrated that he had learned from her prior salutes. When she withdrew her mouth from his, she laid her head on his shoulder, and rested an arm across his body.

"Marvin," she murmured, her hand tracing intricate patterns on his chest beneath the cover he pulled across them, "you satisfied me. Completely."

The satiated, emotionally drained Columbian felt the shapely feminine body snuggling against his side relax. A welter of turbulent thoughts warred in his inner awareness. One prevailed, but he never voiced it. In the depths of his being, he savored it, pondered it, set it free to float in the stream of his consciousness. *I love you, Cleo. I love you!* 

## WEEK THREE: FRIDAY

Having awakened early, Cleo grew aware of a long, spare body curled closely against her own. A few faint snores apprised her that Marvin still slumbered. Conjecturing that mere sexual release almost certainly would fail to banish despair as deep as that which had assailed him on the prior night, she developed unsettling doubts regarding the efficacy of her attempt to help him.

If you aren't the limit! she castigated her alter ego sardonically. You're no psychologist, nor a therapist, nor a medic. You've taken on a delicate task for which you aren't qualified. And yet...what you told the poor suffering soul was true...and he knew it was. Glendon wasn't a psychologist either. I understand Marvin a whole lot better now. At least he knows I care. Perhaps that alone will help.

A vivid memory of Marvin's inability to face her at breakfast sparked worry that he might opt to skip the meal again. Galvanized by fear of the repercussion that choice would inevitably produce, she shook his shoulder with determined vigor.

Marvin came awake with a convulsive start. His worried bedmate watched his eyes cloud with misery, as the recollection of the previous night returned. Abruptly, he sat up, and glanced despairingly at the clock.

Fronting him, Cleo gripped his upper arms, the fear dominating her awareness overriding any cognizance that she knelt nude on the bed.

"Marvin," she assured him vehemently, "I know how you feel. You don't want to face Michael over fishcakes or whatever. But Michael was in the wrong. He shouldn't have lit into you in front of all of us. Likely he'll have realized by now that the exhausting day he put in yesterday caused his temper to fray. You need to brace yourself to walk in there beside me, look Michael squarely in the eye, and wish him good morning. Talk to me over breakfast if you can manage to do so. If you can't, at least eat as if nothing happened last night."

Exquisitely aware that genuine, deep concern prompted that appeal, Marvin took comfort from that realization, even as he countered despondently, "Cleo, a Columbian spacer-captain infuriated by a subordinate doesn't worry about the niceties a private employer might, believe me. But you're right. I have to work beside the Captain all day, and if I skip breakfast it'll just put off the inevitable, and anger him worse." His head bowed, his shoulders slumped, he looked up as Cleo laid a comforting hand on his arm. In a voice husky with pain, he added, "If it hadn't been for you...for what you did, last night...in front of everyone...and after..."

That ominously aborted confidence doubled the woman's already dire fear. Throwing her arms around the sufferer still in the throes of despair, she hugged him hard enough to drive the breath from his lungs.

"Marvin, yesterday was a bad day for all of us," she asserted vehemently. "Put what happened behind you. At least you and I understand each other better now. You have one friend. You know that past all doubt. If you make the effort we talked about, you'll end with more. So let's tackle the first obstacle together."

Marvin's arms tightened fiercely around the only woman, other than his mother, ever to state categorically that she cared for him, and the first who had ever called him friend. When at length he released his grip, Cleo sensed nascent resolution in him as he rose purposefully, and dressed.

Combing her hair in front of the mirror in the bathcabin, she frowningly regarded the deep circles shadowing her eyes.

Michael, don't light into Marvin at breakfast, she pleaded silently, as if the potency of her fear might admit of her communicating by extrasensory means. He'll space himself, and the responsibility will rest squarely on your head!

Having consciously composed her face, the Gaean walked with head high into

the dining hall, and preceded her escort through the line. Fervently, she hoped that his nerve would suffice to get him through the ordeal. Justin she observed to be as beset with anxiety as was she, when he helped her to squares of breaded fish and a muffin.

Seating herself opposite the Captain whose face she saw to be set like stone, she smiled serenely even as her heart sank.

Seating himself next to his nemesis, Marvin braced himself, and took the plunge. "Good morning, Michael," he greeted his superior, speaking with creditable firmness as he faced the man he addressed.

That utterly unexpected gesture very nearly breached the composure the officer in command customarily maintained. Swiveling around to impale his victim of the previous evening with a hard stare, he replied evenly, "Good morning."

Picking up his fork, Marvin went to work on a square of fish, his eyes focused on his plate.

*Bravo!* the profoundly relieved amateur therapist silently applauded, concealing her elation as she sipped her coffee.

Leonard, who had been behind Marvin in the line, seated himself opposite the diner whose exchange with the Captain he had overheard. His "Good morning" included everyone, but he smiled in comradely fashion at the shipmate so publicly chastised on the prior night.

Nigel, who had also heard the startling exchange, sat down beside Cleo, his coppery face maintaining its accustomed impassivity. His eyes nonetheless rested for a few seconds on the offender of the prior night, who, he observed, ate with seeming appetite. Reflectively, the second officer sipped his orange juice. If he divined the cause of Marvin's uncharacteristic behavior, he nowise let it show.

Determined to dispel what he perceived as awkwardness arising from universal uncertainty as to how to regain an easy companionability over a meal, Leonard remarked cheerfully, "You know, I read somewhere that Earthmen believed fish to be brain-food. We all ought to sport increased power of mind, by the time we arrive back home."

To Cleo's surprise, Nigel abetted the youth's ploy, speaking in a lazy drawl. "Fish are a source of choline: a chemical precursor of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine, which plays a major role in memory. So perhaps you're not far off the mark."

Won to gratitude, the Gaean engineer shot her Columbian counterpart a mischievous smile. "Choline's present in appreciable amounts in steak, too, Nigel."

That sly reminder produced a lugubrious sigh. "I'd be better off if my memory of *that* delight were dulled considerably, but I'd never last as a vegetarian," the Lieutenant acknowledged resignedly.

His voice steady, Marvin remarked, "Real coffee's full of caffeine, so it makes you come alert. Does chicory extract do that, Cleo?"

A surge of fierce pride conveyed itself to the contributor in a glance that sparkled, but Cleo replied in a tone kept carefully matter-of-fact. "Why, I'm not sure, Marvin. I rather doubt that it does, but I'd have to run an analysis to be certain."

In a tone as noncommittal as that employed by the Gaean, Michael added a comment. "Justin's brew seems to stimulate me, but that could be a mere placebo effect. If I think it'll work, it will."

"Hm. Don't overindulge in carbohydrates after your eye-opener, chief," Nigel advised equably. "They cause increased production of a soothing neurotransmitter that'll tend to cancel the effect, real or imagined."

"Serotonin. It makes you less aggressive...placid, or even drowsy," Cleo agreed, relieved to see Michael participate in the discussion.

"Just what I don't need," Leonard asserted wryly. "I guess I'd be wise to wrap myself around this overly generous slab of finny swimmer."

By the time the meal ended, Cleo savored her certainty that the crisis lay behind them. Her respect for Marvin she acknowledged to have grown appreciably. The electric tensions so apparent at supper made no reappearance. The four people who followed the Captain as he strode purposefully to the bridge set to work with renewed vigor to install the third and last divider.

A night's rest seemed to have restored Nigel's accustomed tireless strength. Lifting the heavy panel housing the sliding door as if it had been made of acoustic foam, he held it while Cleo and Leonard thrust bolts through critical points. Michael heaved the adjoining panel into place. Marvin's fingers, deft when manipulating tools, quickly secured four steadying bolts. Five people worked steadily at the onerous task.

Promptly at 0800, Conrad arrived with a container of cold orange juice, and a stack of glasses. Sitting with her back against a newly installed panel, the Gaean drained a cool draught in a succession of long, steady gulps, and smiled at the assistant cook as he quickly refilled her glass. Sipping the refresher, she caught Marvin's eye, and beamed on him, causing his thin face to light with warmth.

Sitting relaxed against the wall opposite Cleo, Michael studied her expression out of half-lidded eyes. A flicker of sardonic amusement crossed Nigel's unprepossessing features, as he observed the focus of the Captain's glance. Leonard lay flat on his back on the deck, his hands cushioning his head, his classic face serene. No one spoke, but no lingering currents charged the air, to send searing pulses racing down raw nerves.

Having gathered the empty glasses, Conrad strode away. Rising to his feet, Michael picked up a ratchet and socket, and a handful of bolts. Perceiving that signal, the others rose in a body and resumed work.

Just before lunch, Leonard's hands tightened the nut on the last bolt. Surveying the enclosure, Michael grunted in satisfaction.

Keeping his voice studiously expressionless, Marvin addressed the Captain. "If you'd like me to replace the connections to the pressure sensors, and test to make sure that the doors will seal automatically in case of a drop, I'll do that, Michael. You'll need time in which to detach the storage modules you'll be installing in here."

Turning, the recipient of the offer fixed gimlet eyes on the man volunteering to undertake a tedious chore: one that Michael loathed the thought of attacking. "I'd appreciate your doing so," he replied, his voice holding no edge. "Nigel, after lunch, your crew can unbolt lockers while you and I strip the ship of equipment, which we'll move to the main corridor of Central. Then we'll haul the lockers here. Let's eat."

Over the generous portion of baked fish, baked sweet potato, steamed greens and roll that Justin heaped on her plate, ignoring her raised eyebrows, Cleo cast a sidelong glance at the protégé silently applying himself to his meal, noting with relief that no especial agitation showed on the face unable to conceal strong emotion.

Even as his glance rested meditatively on the Gaean, Michael directed a query to the second officer. "Nigel, do you happen to know whether that the ship we appropriated stocks a pressure suit small enough that Cleo's feet would reach to the boots?"

Availing himself of a prime opportunity to rake a shapely female form with boldly appraising eyes, Nigel shook his head. "Not likely, chief. We may have to tuck her into one of ours, hm? I'll volunteer, should the need arise."

"You'd fill any we've got," Leonard promptly interjected. "She'd be far more comfortable sharing mine." That assertion came accompanied by a mischievous grin.

Justin called over from behind the counter, "Better eat up, girl. Expand to fill the width, if not the length, and foil these characters."

Attacked from the front, flanks, and rear, the Gaean spluttered, "I'm quite sure I can manage on my own!"

"Your mass and height fall below the norm for Columbian military recruits, Cleo," Michael pointed out, smiling in response to the teasing, but genuinely concerned. "We'll grab the smallest suit for you, and hope that we never face an emergency where you'll need to wear it for a long time." The chill cast by that observation caused the joking to subside.

Marvin looked up from his meal, straight at the amateur therapist whose admonitions he had taken so deeply to heart. "Your people harbor no reservations about educating a woman in a profession, Cleo. Does your world produce female spacers as well?"

Three manifestly surprised diners focused their attention on their normally silent

associate. Fired by curiosity, they turned to regard the Gaean, who nodded. "They surely do, Marvin. Our people long ago spread over thirty-nine of the dense, unusually metallic planetoids of the Gaean Group, mining metals and exploiting buried drifts of water ice. We built a fleet of cargo ships. Rock-hoppers, they're affectionately called. They're small vessels that hauled goods between isolated stations.

"Quite often, women formed part of the crews. Sometimes they were wives of the men, sometimes not. Either way, they participated fully in the work. Norman confiscated those ships. He removed them to Columbia, so that our outlying rocks remain isolated." As a concession to her pride in her charge, Cleo expressed none of the virulent anger any mention of Norman unfailingly evoked.

"Imagine, going to space with a wife to share the life! I could grow fond of that idea," Leonard enthused, smiling affectionately at his teammate.

"It offers attractive possibilities, if one were simply a civilian scientist," Nigel admitted ruminatively. "But the idea that women could serve as military personnel I consider utterly absurd."

Pursing her lips, Cleo refrained from offering a tart rejoinder, even as a vivid image of a tall, commanding, silver-haired warrior rose unbidden on the screen of her memory. Glancing at the Captain, she watched his brow knit.

"I wonder," Michael remarked musingly. "A sword-wielding female rebel commander ought to be inconceivable, but the reality exists, as Norman discovered. Well. We'll see what we can find to outfit our feminine spacer. In the meantime, better follow Justin's advice, Cleo." Flashing her a grin, he rose to wash his plate.

The woman thus publicly admonished turned a reproachful glance on the medical technician, disturbing his aplomb no whit.

At a rapid stride, Michael led the way to a distant section untouched by their ravages until now. Pointing to four tall lockers specially designed to hold tools, he directed, "Start on those. Then go next door, and unbolt the large unit I marked. Don't try to move the lockers. We'll be back before you work them free. Lay out the contents out on the deck and the counters. We may appropriate some of these tools."

Cleo and Leonard attacked their chore with vigor the greater for the lack of tension characterizing this day.

The afternoon passed peacefully, prompting to the amateur therapist to savor vast relief.

Psychologist or not, she assured herself, I managed to make a dent on Marvin's shyness. Bad habits, mostly, his reactions. Powerful emotions he can't control reside under that fussy exterior. It took a world of courage to do what he did today: moral courage, harder to muster than physical, for him. I hope it lasts. At least Michael doesn't go on riding a man. Anger surely does get the best of him, at times!

That final observation conjured the chilling memory of their first confrontation. As enraged as he grew that night, it's a wonder that Michael didn't space me, she reflected somberly. If I had tried to fight him off, who knows where he might have stopped? But...as he claimed the next day...he's normally decent...ordinary. Neither the brutalizing effect of his military experience, nor his acute awareness that he isn't answerable to any higher authority here, served wholly to override that basic decency.

Besides...look what he did earlier, for Leonard, without even knowing the lad! Today Michael took time to worry ahead about my safety, in the midst of countless other pressing concerns. Her captor's promise echoed in her inner awareness. He'll do his best to keep me safe, she assured herself, comforted by the recollection.

Until I pass out of his custody. That inevitable afterthought produced a chill. Shivers again rippled through the captive as she contemplated the pitfalls ahead. Resolutely, she turned her mind onto less troubling reflections, and made a joking remark to Leonard. The question that periodically recurred to undermine her peace of mind subsided back beneath the plane of her consciousness.

At length, the movers returned, to lift the heavy lockers out into the corridor.

"Time to quit," Michael announced. "We'll move all this gear tomorrow, Nigel. Tonight I'm going to recoup five or so drinks off you, if you're game." "Tonight will end with my cleaning you both," his fellow gambler drawled. "I'll have to consider how I'll dispose of my prize. I expect that I'll be able to control my ungentlemanly urge to swill it down in front of the pair of you."

"Time enough to think of disposing of it when you've won it!"

Supper passed uneventfully. Marvin added a comment to Cleo's and Leonard's discussion, directly addressing the gratified woman who smiled warmly at him while acutely aware that Michael's glance targeted her, rather than the socially handicapped spacer exhibiting so uncharacteristic a loquacity. Her composure rivaling that of the Captain, she ate serenely, in unhurried fashion, sipped a final cup of coffee, and rose to leave.

Justin stepped through her door ten minutes late, savoring the anticipatory glow that had buoyed his spirits all day. Stripping off his uniform, he smiled down at the woman worriedly noting the evidence of fatigue as she held out both arms to him.

Weariness notwithstanding, her partner exerted himself with all his wonted artistry, prompting her to respond as much out of affection as passion. Awash in bliss after climaxing simultaneously with this lover taking pardonable pride in producing that response, she lay contentedly in the curve of Justin's arm, savoring this respite from stress.

The previous evening she knew to have taken a severe toll on her emotional balance. Untroubled by any fear that problems other than tiredness afflicted this lover, or that he would make any demands troubling to her peace, she relaxed, enjoying the warmth of his embrace, and the closeness.

Grown aware of sliding into an insidious lassitude that threatened to send him into premature sleep, Justin roused himself. Valuing his time with this woman he loved as much for her company as for the release she provided, he turned to face her, and spoke his thought. "You know, Cleo, you saved me a chore I couldn't have managed with a tenth of your success, last night," he conceded gravely.

"You realize what could have happened, don't you?" The Gaean's words emerged not as a question, but as a flat statement of fact. "Only too well. I've known of its happening to a number of spacers, but never yet to a man whose mental as well as physical health forms my responsibility."

"Justin, you'd have coped." Cleo's arm tightened around him. "I expect that the combination of the demands posed by the military life plus the hardships any spacer faces takes a lot out of men, in the long run."

"So it does. It wasn't as bad, before the war. Second Corps isn't actively engaged in the conflict. That was a blunder into which a brutal opportunist talked Leon and the unscrupulous advisors using their influence with the First Minister for their own selfish ends. We accidentally stumbled into a situation that resulted directly from the war, nonetheless, and that fiasco landed us here."

Fired by curiosity, Cleo asked, "What happened?"

"We went to run a check on Halleck Station, on an outlying Gaean planetoid, which your countrymen abandoned when the war started. Galt and Norman hate each other's guts, but Norman maneuvered Leon into pressing Galt to send a team whose skills the Commander of Third Corps coveted, to ready an outpost for use as a transfer point for stockpiling and shipping the metals plundered from various Gaean planetoids. Norman's own teams all had their hands full, so he sweetened the deal by offering Galt a cut of the loot, and gained what he sought. After ordering us to remain aboard, Norman's captain and his five crewmen went ashore at Halleck, heavily armed, to make sure that the Gaeans really had abandoned the station, before helping us unload our gear.

"Well...the former occupants had evidently rigged a trap. The station blew, in its entirety. No hope for Heston and his spacers, we knew beyond doubt. Damned nearly no hope for us!

"Luckily, the hatch on the bridge leading to the lock had been closed, and even more fortunately, the lock was more than two hundred meters from the point where the first explosion occurred. At the instant when that flash and the attendant eruption of debris appeared on the screens, Nigel flipped the switch that activated the fields that protect the hull from meteoroids. That blast, and the three others that followed it, drove a stupendous shower of fragments towards the ship. The fields vaporized those, but the shock waves vibrated with devastating force through the entire fabric of the ship. The water fuel stored inside the horizontal torus, and the water serving as a shield against cosmic radiation in the vertical torus, absorbed a good part of that energy, but all three lifeboats ripped loose from their locks on the hull.

"The optical telescope used as an antenna for the laser communication transceiver took severe damage, owing to the circumstance that the Captain chanced to be transmitting our time of arrival to Galt's headquarters in Columbia, when the first explosion occurred. That unfortunate coincidence caused other components in the unit to crash as well.

"Reacting with admirable presence of mind, Michael managed to lift the ship off the lock more or less intact, but all three lifeboats slipped off their damaged moorings during the ascent, and plunged to the surface of the planetoid. Seals had slid into place automatically, when the lifeboat locks sustained damage, so we didn't lose much air. Scary thought, damaged ship and no lifeboats. Worse yet, most of the damage didn't show up until later.

"Michael accessed the program for the trajectory that Heston used to make the transit from Columbia, and set us returning along it. Curious about an anomaly in it, he brought up data from the ship's bank, and discovered the existence of this orbiting station, which caused the effect.

"Three hours later, it became apparent that the ship had taken damage far more serious than we'd thought at first. That harm proved severe enough that it looked doubtful whether the automatic guidance system would continue functioning to keep the vessel on the programmed flight path. It also seemed certain that some obvious damage to the hull might well cause a rupture that would cause us to lose part of our fuel. The Captain set us on a course that intersected with the orbit of this station, which was closer than Main World of Gaea.

"When we approached, we picked up your leader's communication emissions on our short-range receiver. The Gaean accents told us that the occupants weren't any of Norman's people. We figured that one of the sections must be an autonomously operated shuttle-vehicle, but we couldn't tell which one functioned as such.

"As we activated the thrust to decelerate as we approached, one of the damaged power lines leading from the generating equipment on the hull snapped in two. That failure took out both the bulk of the ship's memory, and the automatic descent sequence we were using to dock us. That disaster occurred right in the middle of our descent, or what I think of as a descent. Luckily the screens showing the exterior weren't affected, or we'd have crashed into the axis, blown the ship, and fatally damaged the station.

"Pulling off a feat I'll admire for the rest of my life, Michael docked a second class military ship manually, the way you do a lifeboat. Astonishing, the skill he displayed. We hit a shade hard, nonetheless. That impact fragmented a second power line that had evidently torn loose to drape itself across the docking module that fits to the top of the lock. That rupture lethally overloaded the generators of the lasers that convert the water fuel to plasma, to drive the ship. That final disaster caused irreversible damage. You know the rest."

"My word, Justin, what a narrow escape!"

"That was quite a flight. Michael's extraordinary degree of expertise impels me to believe that he'll succeed in what he's attempting."

Impulsively, Justin tightened his arm around the Gaean, seared by the bitter realization that these intimate weekly exchanges would end with the voyage. A lifelong habit of schooling his psyche to make the best of whatever unexpected happiness fell into his life tempered the pain. Drawing his partner close, he kissed her, letting the gesture convey the depth of the feeling he could not trust himself, just then, to put into words.

The identical thought crossed Cleo's mind. An almost telepathic message passed between the pair, driving them once more to a communion that for them joined spirits as well as bodies, and conferred a peace that transcended the merely physical. From that idyllic state, both partners slipped easily into sleep.

## WEEK THREE: SATURDAY

Habituated to rising earlier than his comrades, Justin woke at his accustomed time. Lying in that drowsy state that precedes full mental alertness, hating the thought of stirring, he savored the warmth of Cleo's back nestled against his own. Her slow, regular respirations assured him that she still slept. Opening one eye, he glumly ascertained the time.

Twenty-five minutes before I have to figure out five or six new ways to disguise fish, he groused dejectedly. Conrad's having a hard time eating. I need new flavorings. Cleo's rhubarb was a gift. Do you suppose that she could dream up some other ideas? I'll try asparagus, when the stalks she talked about make their appearance.

As he watched, his bedmate stirred. Upon returning to consciousness, she grew aware of her companion's nearness. Opening her eyes, she stretched, yawned, and rolled onto her back.

Propping himself on an elbow, Justin smiled down at her. "Cleo," he coaxed, "I know this is a hell of a thing to ask a lovely woman sharing her bed with an old man—especially at 0330 of a morning—but have you any suggestions as to plants I could use as flavorings for fish dishes?"

A peal of laughter erupted from the other occupant of the bed. "Justin, what a left-handed way to deliver a compliment! You're not old. Just comfortably mature. Let me think. Herbs, you need. I know where dill's growing. Earthmen used it to flavor vegetables preserved in dilute acetic acid. Pickles, they called the product. Thyme they used in roasting fowl, so I don't see why it couldn't flavor the stuffing for fish. Oregano! Really potent. You could mix it with onion, tomato, or both.

"Justin, why don't you just access my research records? I listed everything unusual that I located, noted all the information I could find in the bank about each species, along with what I remembered, and mapped where I found each variety growing."

Chagrined, the head cook declared disgustedly, "Now, why in hell didn't I ask you earlier? Girl, you're a lifesaver." Slipping an arm under his partner, he kissed her with all the ardor of a man half his age.

At length, breathless, Cleo murmured in his ear, "Not bad at all for an aged, tired, discouraged, but sexually potent cook!"

"Talk about left-handed compliments! If I'm that last, it's because you've made me feel young again. And if we don't get up, I'm going to get cut down in the bloom of my renewed youth by my irate partner!"

Laughing, Cleo rose to her feet, and walked unembarrassed to the bathcabin to retrieve her uniform, feeling as if she had been married to Justin for a decade of Earthyears.

After an uneventful morning meal, two teammates followed Nigel to the main corridor of Central, where he and Michael on the prior day had collected a heap of spare parts, electronic components, tools, pressure suits and related gear, generators of various sorts of lasers used for cutting and welding, rolls of glass-cloth, coils of thick electrical cable, spools of line, and sundry other equipment, most of which looked heavy. Two sturdy carts reposed next to the pile.

"You two convey this gear to Eleven," Nigel ordered. "Michael and I will lug the lockers. After those are installed, arrange what you hauled in them." Turning on his heel, he strode away.

Glancing in dismay from the huge aggregation of massive gear to his fine-boned female comrade, Leonard exhorted solicitously, "Suffering shades of long-lost spacers, Cleo, we're in for a workout, even with carts. You be careful what you lift, hear? Pick

the lightest items."

Warmed by the lad's concern, the Gaean smiled gamely. "I've watched how all of you lift, and I've learned a few things. You're not a whole lot heftier than I am, but you think nothing of heaving up all sorts of heavy stuff. I'll manage."

Resolutely wading into the array, Cleo grasped a spool of line. Flexing her knees, keeping her back straight, taking the strain on arms and legs instead of vertebrae, she raised the burden, and slid it onto the cart. Leonard watched, frowning, but admitted to himself that she indeed had learned how to lift. Deliberately selecting the most massive item he could raise without assistance, he began loading his cart.

Having pushed and pulled the ungainly vehicles all the long way to Eleven, the youthful spacer again expressed concern as he and his partner unloaded the gear. "Damn, Cleo, we'll have to set this stuff well out of the way of Michael and Nigel, so they can maneuver the lockers into place. The only place available is along this far wall. Then we'll have to tote the damned lot across the deck to store it. We'll be lifting everything three or four times!"

That realization had already impacted the petite laborer's mind, leaving discouragement in its wake. "Don't I know," she replied, thinking, *No way am I going to gain any mass this week!* 

Wearied by three hours of strenuous labor, Cleo pushed her cart back to Central, and took her break in the dining hall.

On spying who entered, Conrad joined her. "You've got Justin fired up to new flights of imagination," he informed her. "He's touring the tertiary tanks, so I'm fixing fried eel for lunch. Supper will likely be an experiment."

"Conrad, tonight just the thought of parking my limp carcass in a chair will fill me with bliss. I could eat fried bedcover and say it was good."

A chuckle died away as the assistant cook studied the obviously fatigued visitor to his domain. "Tough day?" he asked worriedly.

"Tiring. Lots of lifting. Good for my muscular development." That last

observation came accompanied by a wan smile.

"Your development suits me just the way it is. Curves in all the right places!"

"What gallantry!" Cleo teased, smiling up at him. The grandiose, theatrical bow he made her evoked a giggle. Draining her juice, she rose, and headed back at a trot to dive into the pile that nowise seemed smaller.

By 1100, Michael, Nigel and Marvin succeeded in hauling half of the bank of lockers to Eleven. Justin served what his assistant had cooked. Plagued by fatigue, Cleo had to force herself to down her lunch, even though her liking for the rich meat remained strong.

*Exhaustion should make me hungry*, she mused glumly, *but it produces the opposite effect. Better dig in, woman, or you'll end up worn like a backpack inside somebody's pressure suit!* 

The afternoon seemed endless to the Gaean. Doggedly taking pains not to strain muscles or ligaments, she nevertheless developed a stitch in her side that took some time to subside. Cramps plagued her calves. Spasms cruelly tightened the muscles over her shoulder blades. Pain stabbed her every time she moved. Her arms began to feel leaden.

Leonard, who had taken the worst of the lifting on his own self, looked and felt tired, but he suffered no distress to equal that which he knew racked his partner. "Cleo, sit out a trip," he urged. "No sense injuring your back."

"And let Nigel catch me loafing? No way! I'm all right. You're the one who should rest. You've done far more than your share!"

"The hell I have!"

By suppertime, the pile cluttered the deck of Eleven, and the full bank of lockers stood fastened in place, ready to receive the mounded gear, but both crews had run behind Nigel's projected time for completion. Her mind having stayed preoccupied by the work for most of the day, Cleo suddenly remembered whose night it was.

*Oh, my aching, tired body!* she wailed inwardly. *No amount of lifting will have worn Nigel down! Better eat lots of the experiment. You're going to have to revive.* 

Walking into the dining hall on leaden legs, Cleo picked up a plate with numb arms, having caught a whiff of a pleasing odor. *Oregano*, she identified the fragrance. *Onion. Tomato. Cheese*.

"If this tastes as good as it smells, it'll be a resounding success," she assured the creator as she held out her plate.

Conrad shot her a grin over Justin's shoulder. "It tastes even better," he assured her. "Best disguise for the finny fillets we've come up with yet!"

A taste proved that the enthusiast had not exaggerated. The small chunks of fish and vegetables, covered with a thick sauce redolent of onion, oregano, tomato and cheese, retained no trace of fishy flavor. *Mmmm*, Cleo approved. *I like this!* 

Michael and Nigel took their seats, followed by Marvin and Leonard. Watching covertly for reactions, Cleo saw Michael's eyes light with pleasure. "Whatever this is, it's delicious," he declared. Targeting the Gaean, he inquired, "Another surprise?"

"A suggestion, was all. Herbs as flavoring. Oregano."

"Damned if I can taste what I know has to be fish."

"That was the general idea."

"Brain-food packaged for easy consumption!" Leonard interjected.

Smiling directly at the Gaean, Marvin spoke without stammering. "As nice a surprise as the coffee, Cleo."

That feat drew Michael's attention to the expert whose repeated contributions at the dinner table set the Captain wondering anew what in hell sort of magic Cleo had wrought, to bring about so startling a change in the poor sod.

"Amazing, how herbs liven up a dish," Nigel remarked, his eyes raking his fellow engineer. "Our Ministry of Food Resources really ought to look into oregano!"

"Justin's the one you all need to pat on the back. He figured out how to use the spice," Cleo reminded the diners.

Rising stiffly from the table, the exhausted woman washed her dish, and wearily retired to her cabin. After bathing with the last of her water, she stared at her reflection in the mirror, depressed by the sight of the greasy shine to her hair. Well, Nigel knows what I hefted today, she reminded herself. At least I smell better than he did Thursday night!

Walking naked to the doubled bunks, having tossed her uniform into the adjuster, Cleo debated dejectedly whether or not staying awake would prove easier sitting in the chair. Deciding in the negative, she dropped heavily into bed.

It would be Nigel's night when I feel so exhausted, she complained bitterly to her alter ego. I don't dare tell him that I just want to turn over and go to sleep. He'd likely take offense, and I surely don't need new conflict. Fighting drowsiness, she tossed and turned, rumpling the sheet.

Nigel strode in on cat-like feet. Stripping off his uniform, he sat down on the side of the bed, and observed the evidence leaping to view. His ill-favored face creasing into an ironic smile, he drawled, "Hardly in need of what I am, tonight, are you?"

Surprise melted swiftly into wariness. "I'm tired, I'll admit, Nigel," the Gaean confessed forthrightly.

Balling up the bedcover, her partner for the night tossed it to the far side of the bed. "Turn over on your stomach," he commanded.

Puzzled, the exhausted woman obeyed. Positioning himself astride of her, his weight on his knees, so that the fraction resting on her buttocks proved negligible, Nigel placed both hands on her shoulders, just below her neck. Long, strong, skilled fingers began to massage her back. Thumbs pressed into her spine. Fingers manipulated the vertebrae of her neck. Tense muscles began to loosen. Iron hands moved outwards across aching shoulders, their fingertips stabbing deeply, rhythmically, into other muscles afflicted by spasms, forcing them to respond. Cramped flesh relaxed under that expert, probing touch. The seemingly tireless hands worked their way back to the woman's spine, probed the crevices of her vertebrae, and spread outwards again.

The tension in Cleo's overworked musculature drained away like water seeping out of a sponge. Muscles drawn tight by exhaustion too great to allow them easily to relax limbered and stretched. Stimulation succeeded strain. As he worked, the masseur heard his companion's long-drawn-out sigh of sheer delight. His eyes sparkled, and his smile deepened.

Shifting position, Nigel massaged the muscles of his partner's upper right arm, and shifted to her left. At length, he rose off her, to kneel beside her. Maintaining his silence, he repeated his ministrations for a longer time on the tight, aching calves of her legs.

Does he ever wear out? the recipient of his ministrations asked herself in wonder. Oh, what bliss. What utter bliss! Nigel, you're a marvel.

"Better, hm?" the masseur inquired as he surveyed his partner's limp, slack body.

Turning over, the rejuvenated recipient of his efforts beamed on him. "I think I'll live to face tomorrow, now," she confided gratefully.

Stretching out beside her, Nigel turned her so that she lay with her back towards him. "I'll attend to the parts I missed," he whispered in her ear. "Just relax."

Drawn firmly against a muscular torso, Cleo went pliant as two expert hands made a slow, pleasurable journey down the front of her body. Relaxed to the point of bonelessness, she succumbed to the force of the desire that Nigel's intimate caresses never failed to arouse.

Warmth suffused her. As shivers coursed from her loins upwards, she pressed back against him, her eyes closed. His body moved. Hers curled on its side. Gripping her shoulders, Nigel penetrated her feminine depth from behind. Still unused to that position, the Gaean gasped softly, as much in delight as in surprise. Rhythmic thrusts reached a center of pleasure she never knew she possessed. The shivers intensified, but died away, as sheer exhaustion prevented her from reaching a climax.

Deeply aroused himself from handling her shapely nude body for so long a time, Nigel achieved his peak with unwonted swiftness. Savoring pleasure, he lay holding his partner for a few seconds, before turning her over, to gaze narrowly down at her panting chest and euphoric face.

Kneeling beside her, he parted her legs, offering intimate caresses of her stillerect nodule. Lying limply back, her eyes closed, the widow felt those expert hands continue what their owner's thrusts had begun. Under the multiple touches of fingers that produced a height of pleasure usually reserved for the act of coition itself, she attained the release her exhaustion prevented from occurring.

Opening her eyes to meet a look of frowning appraisal, she heard her lover ask, "Did that do it?"

"Yes," she breathed.

His brow furrowing, Nigel stared down at her. His sibilant voice took on an edge as he rasped, "Don't put on an act for me, Cleo. I can tell when you've reached a climax, and when you haven't. In the latter case, I'll tend to your need, one way or another, but I hate to have a woman lie to me!"

That unexpected verbal attack demolished the captive's peace. "I never claimed that I had!" she retorted acidly.

"Your face tried to tell me that."

Rearing up abruptly, Cleo glared angrily at her accuser. "Nigel, I've got quite a few faults, some of them pretty bad," she informed him tartly. "But lying isn't one of them."

The memory of his considerate earlier act intervened to overcome her brief, sharp annoyance. With disarming candor, she admitted, "I'm not used to reaching a climax every time—especially not the kind you give me! Every touch of your hands every move you make—produces intense pleasure. Whatever my face told you a while ago was the truth."

As he weighed that patently sincere assertion, Nigel's frown faded. A novel notion struck him forcibly. Reaching out, he drew his still-ruffled companion into his arms, and lay back with her head pillowed on his shoulder. His question emerged as a flat statement of fact. "You didn't get to choose your husband, did you, Cleo?"

"My family arranged my marriage, with Max's family. That's our custom."

"And your husband was as inexperienced as you were, wasn't he?"

Nettled, the Gaean turned to face the man holding her. "He was," she admitted, as her eyes grew stormy. "But that doesn't mean I didn't love him!"

"I know that," Nigel conceded equably. "Just as I know that my being experienced won't cause you to grow to love me."

Staring searchingly at the premier master of erotic art drawling that conclusion, Cleo grew doubtful of its accuracy. "Don't be too sure of that," she advised, her face melting into a most beguiling smile.

Two strong hands tightened with cruel force on both of her arms, sending shafts of pain shooting the full length of those limbs. "Why would you think I'd believe what that implies, when you've had Michael eating out of your hand from the beginning?" the Columbian hissed malevolently.

Shock rendered the object of that attack speechless for a few seconds. Anger rose like bile, but the Gaean controlled herself admirably. "If you'll stop hurting my arms, I'll tell you why," she responded levelly.

Unwilling respect surfaced in glittering dark eyes. Relaxing the cruel grip on her arms, the aggressor settled her unresisting body against his own. "Tell me," he demanded.

Cleo's eyes stabbed into his. "Nigel, I'm no courtesan," she asserted evenly. "I don't think like one. I can't mechanically engage in sexual intercourse with five different partners five nights a week, and then develop love for only one man of them, on the sixth. I'm coming to care deeply for *all* of you. Yes, for Michael." That bold admission vibrated with passionate intensity, which diminished no whit as she flung at her accuser, "And for Leonard, for Marvin, for Conrad, and for Justin. And for *you*, Nigel, no less than for any of the others."

Eyes shooting dark fire burned into those nakedly projecting reproach, for a span of time that seemed to Cleo endless. When the limber athlete finally spoke, the partner he still held all but immobile detected no lingering anger. His tone conveying reluctant admiration, he conceded grudgingly, "If any woman could truly love six men at once, Cleo, it would be you." Drawing her firmly into the hollow of his shoulder as was his wont, he drew the bedcover over them both, and relaxed against her. Not one word more did the man speak.

Enfolded in arms of steel, the Gaean battled burgeoning fear, her mind racing. *Oh, my soul,* she groaned silently, *Nigel's jealous! Of Michael—not of any of the others! Of the leader inexorably bent on staying in control…on continuing to make the decisions. Nigel's jealous of the Captain he possesses the ability to kill! This man's a duelist: one of those touchy Columbians who has slain men for uttering sneering remarks at which he took offense.* 

*Oh, Michael. Did you foresee this development? What will you do about it? What can I do?* 

Exhaustion overwhelmed the captive traumatized by this new development. Troubled, worried, utterly worn out, Cleo fell asleep clasped in the arms of the chief author of her anxiety.

## WEEK THREE: SUNDAY

Cleo woke abruptly, to find herself encircled by two strong arms actively holding her fast. One iron hand gripped her shoulder hard enough to cause her to wonder whether that circumstance denoted passion, or presaged the beginning of an assault. Instinctively, she stiffened.

"Awake, hm?" a sibilant voice murmured in her ear.

Opening her eyes, she scanned the unprepossessing visage of the man holding her immobile. His arms in no way relaxed their grip, but his voice held no edge of anger. His eyes glittered, as he spoke. "I let you sleep in, for once, Cleo. I know what you lifted, yesterday. In your own way, you're a warrior—tough, determined, fearless. I'm coming to realize that the two of us have a great deal in common." Before she could surmount the shock generated by that impassioned assertion, Nigel's mouth closed over hers in a long, passionate, utterly possessive kiss.

Cleo's body reacted independently of her mind. Her lover's questing tongue aroused intense pleasure, despite her acute realization of her utter helplessness against his strength. As if a chasm had suddenly opened beneath her feet to reveal a flow of incandescent magma, she beheld in a lightning burst of clarity the power of the turbulent emotions Nigel's ironic self-possession routinely hid. Her piercing awareness of his hitherto latent capacity for jealousy merged with her perception that his feelings had indeed undergone change, but into what those emotions had metamorphosed, she could not imagine.

Fear lanced through her, setting her heart fibrillating. The possessiveness

inherent in that demanding kiss disturbed her, even as she succumbed to the insidious appeal of her partner's mastery. Aroused by the very consciousness of her physical inability to resist, she responded fiercely in spite of her apprehensions. Chaotic thoughts raced through her mind.

Having withdrawn his lips from hers, Nigel relaxed, and regarded his bedfellow with a return of the old mockery. "While I'd profoundly prefer to finish what I just started, I yield to the dismal need to rise," he drawled. "I refuse, however, to deny myself the pleasure of watching you stand tall and walk naked under my eye into the bathcabin, to retrieve the uniform I'm *not* going to fetch."

Taken aback, the widow culturally programmed to a strict modesty stared in dismay into dancing dark eyes. Beholding only amusement, she divined that cruelty played no part in prompting his demand. She nonetheless sensed the strength of whatever emotion now animated that unfathomable psyche, and felt daunted by it.

Flushing scarlet, she rose, striving to retain a shred of dignity. Lying back relaxed, Nigel let his eyes travel the full length of her shapely figure. The palpable force of that raking glance set the Gaean's teeth on edge, as she walked, with as unhurried a stride as she could muster, to the sanctuary of the cubicle the door of which she closed behind her.

Leaning against the metal panel, Cleo tried to pull herself together. *My blistered soul,* she fretted in a combination of weariness and frustration, *what next?* 

Nigel is starting to think of me as some sort of soul mate! Why does he care whether or not I love him? He certainly isn't about to love me. I doubt if he really knows what that word means! But he wants whatever I feel beyond mere physical desire focused on him instead of Michael! He's annoyed by any private friendliness I show the Captain—as he was the other day when Michael and I visited alone during our break. He sees his superior officer as a dominant autocratic leader who has retained his power to issue commands. That feat Nigel resents even while he admires it.

Well, damn him to slow rot! I'm not his possession—or Michael's, either! I've

given both of them far more than either earned any right to expect! I'd give Nigel my full affection, if he could accept what the man he so envies has resigned himself to bear. I'll give Michael credit—he surely has buried any jealousy still gnawing at him. Oh, my foul luck. I'm going to feel from now on as if I'm walking along the edge of a sword!

Hastily pulling on her clothes, the still-fatigued Gaean combed her hair while bracing herself to emerge from her retreat.

Nigel rose lazily from the chair, to grasp both of her shoulders. Smiling sardonically, he observed, "Tucked back into that shapeless garment you wear like armor, hm? Hiding your allure for another week. Good thing, likely. Well, let's ascertain what variation on the eternal fish the cooks invented for today." Opening the door with courtly grace, he gestured his traumatized lover through it. Impacted by all the masterful force of his enigmatic personality, she accompanied Nigel to breakfast.

Towards the end of the morning meal consisting of the rhubarb cobbler that had become a universal favorite, Michael rose, and collected his subordinates' glances with his eye.

"Since today's Sunday, we're again going to knock off early," he announced. "Nigel has promised to host a get-together. Having made good on his brag to clean Conrad and myself, he sports the wherewithal. We'll repair to the recreation hall at 1500, eat sandwiches at 1100, and down cold leftovers tonight, thereby giving the cooks a break. They've outdone themselves this week, as I'm sure you'll all agree. Again, let me assure you that I'm pleased with our progress."

Reseating himself, the shrewd observer sampled the currents. Tension evident in Cleo's body during breakfast—a taut wariness oddly at variance with her obvious fatigue—disturbed him.

What's bothering her now? he wondered uneasily. Nigel seemed all week to have accepted her fully. He actually complimented her, which is amazing, if she only realized it. Did they have an argument?

My second officer shows no sign of any upset. The cocky bastard looks smug as a supply clerk who just stuck you with an eight weeks' supply of freezer-burned meals. Cleo put in a rough day yesterday. Damn the selfish sod, he knew that. He likely demanded more of her in bed than she could muster—came up against her strict conditioning, perhaps. For all that she has given herself to you with such passionate abandon, spacer-captain, sleeping with six men has to bother her. Her society doesn't even tolerate courtesans, let alone condone extramarital affairs by respectable widows!

A wave of guilt rose to flay the autocratic leader's perception of himself.

Could you have forced them all to leave her alone? he agonized. Could you have mustered the power of will to do the same? Could she have resisted the temptation to turn to a compassionate soul like Justin for the comfort of a physical relationship? Once she did that, they'd all have competed for a like favor. Rivalries would have destroyed us. You did what you still see as the best solution for her as well as for us.

Can you keep the promise you made her...keep her safe?

A succession of disturbing images flowed across the screen of the veteran officer's inner vision, each more unnerving than the last. *Pull yourself together,* he ordered his alter self. *One day at a time. We're nowhere close even to launch, yet. Just keep a wary eye out, while you find an angle you can exploit when the time comes.* 

Upon arriving at Eleven to arrange the equipment in the lockers, Cleo and Leonard found that Marvin had been assigned to help them. As the trio worked, both officers stalked through the main deck, where Michael marked the location of other dividers, and Nigel planned the layout of ventilating ducts, water and drain lines.

Cleo noted approvingly that Marvin not only vigorously attacked the array of heavy items, but also did as Leonard had done: lifted the most massive and cumbersome himself.

Having firmly steered her to the pile of small tools, Leonard crisply issued

instructions as to how to arrange them. Acutely aware that the chivalrous youth intended to spare her any heavy lifting, the tired Gaean generated a rush of affection.

Leonard looks exhausted, she noted solicitously. Thank the Powers today is Sunday!

The morning wore away. Marvin worked silently, for the most part, but doggedly. His younger associate treated him with all the friendliness he would have shown Conrad or Justin, though he initiated none of the joking repartee at which Conrad, especially, excelled. When the three teammates sat down for a break, Leonard remarked pleasantly to the testy expert, "I really admire your being able to build this board damned nearly from scratch, Marvin. Just learning to detect and replace faulty components gave me fits."

Flushing, the man thus roundly complimented averted his eyes for a few seconds, before consciously forcing himself to meet the younger man's glance squarely. "Why...I...I thank you, Leonard," he replied with only a trace of a stammer.

Inwardly delighted, Cleo watched approval replace a flash of amazement on the lad's open face.

By 1440, the bridge rested complete, except for the couches upon which the two people manning the board would lie with knees bent and shoulders slightly elevated, or sit, depending on whether the vessel chanced to be accelerating or coasting along a trajectory at uniform velocity.

Standing with hands on hips, legs thrust wide apart, Michael surveyed the achievement. Somberly, he recalled his proposing to tether the section to another mass, and set both masses spinning. No less determined at this juncture to enjoy the sense of possessing weight conferred by the generation of centrifugal force, the Captain again deemed insupportable the severe danger to health and fitness posed by a protracted period of weightlessness: danger which a rigorous program of exercise could mitigate, but not eliminate. Viewing his unorthodox bridge, he readily conceded that he would never again take for granted the sensation equating with Earth-normal gravity, whether standing on a planetoid, or commanding a military ship which

achieved the same effect by rotating a torus within a protective envelope.

Satisfied with the central core of the evolving vessel, Michael addressed the subordinate whose expertise he knew to have been crucial to the achievement. "Well, Marvin," he remarked, no trace of sharpness shading his voice, "as soon as we get the couches installed, and Nigel switches the ventilators, you'll be able to dispense with the tent. Be a relief, that, eh?"

"Indeed it will." Marvin's gangly body tensed ever so slightly when his superior addressed him, but he answered firmly, looking straight at the man he answered. Concealing the shock engendered by that unwonted response, Michael called a halt to the work, and led the way back to Central.

At 1500, five crewmates draped themselves in various comfortable positions in the recreation hall. Nigel strode in, bearing a tray on which reposed Conrad's bottle, a bowl of ice, and a stack of glasses. Justin followed, carrying a box and a glass-cloth bag. His unprepossessing face creasing into a sardonic smile, the host drawled provocatively, "I frankly admit to having obtained far more satisfaction from fleecing my fellow gamblers and rubbing in my victory, than I ever could from drinking the prize before their envious eyes. I'll instead retain my right to be accounted an officer and a gentleman, hm?" Pouring out seven drinks amid chuckles, he passed the glasses around.

When everyone sipped appreciatively, the host waved his free hand towards the box. "Justin made a find the other day when he ransacked the old food-chemistry lab for the twenty-fifth time," he confided. "He discovered a stack of holographic prints really old ones. Quite a few merely showed the owner's family members, but the trove included a series showing some nameless artist's superb abstract sculptures, a second group depicting shots of Gaean planetoids taken from space, other views of astronomical interest, and some studies of flowers. We concluded that you'd enjoy seeing them."

Opening the box, Justin passed around a stack of brilliantly colored prints. Accepting the first from Conrad, seated on her left, Cleo found herself gazing at her native world as it must have looked from the bridge of the free-flying section, when the ill-fated expedition set out for the station. Sorrow engulfed her, as she commiserated with the pain Wallace and Marva, and her other comrades, would be enduring, thinking her dead.

*I wish I had some way to let them know I'm not*, she mourned. A second notion banished the first, as guilt rose to assault her. *Better they think that, than find out how I'm living!* 

Not that I'm likely to see Gaea any time soon. I could end up in a penal work force, if Galt turns out to be entirely merciless. Too slim a possibility to hope that I might get exchanged for some Columbian prisoner of war Signe holds, though that's a long chance. Don't think about that. You can't do anything about it. We may not make it to Columbia. Time enough to worry once we're launched.

Resolutely, the Gaean handed that print to Michael, who sat opposite her, and reached for the studies of flowers.

Delight radiated from her face as she gazed into seemingly three-dimensional space, at a spray of asters: flowers sporting a brilliant purple hue. The color entranced her. A product of an environment in which bright colors constituted a rarity, the descendant of space-faring Earthmen indulged her innate craving for feasting her eyes on lovely hues.

We cultivate flowers still, she mused, despite the emphasis in Gaean culture on the practical. A food-chemist could reproduce their oils and fibers, but not the exquisite contours of blossoms we cherish far more for their colors than for their scents. Bouquets form as costly a luxury in Columbia as in Gaea, I suspect, the viewer surmised accurately.

Having sated her inner vision on purple, Cleo passed that print to Michael, and immersed herself in the orange and yellow of marigolds.

How lovely! she marveled. Imagine blooms like those growing all over the ground, free for the picking. What riots of color Earthmen took for granted!

Grown conscious of lingering a shade long on the object being passed around,

Cleo hastily handed the print to the man exquisitely conscious of the subtle changes crossing the piquant feminine face utterly unschooled in hiding its owner's thoughts. Reaching for the print offered by Conrad, Cleo raptly contemplated blue.

I wonder what those are? Inverted cups, hanging in rows from long stems. Lovely!

Distracted from contemplation of the flowers by Leonard's seating himself beside her on the couch, she obeyed as he urged eagerly, "Look, Cleo. Redder than rhubarb, even."

The Gaean's eyes widened as they rested on a blood-red, full-blown rose. "Oh, how exquisite," she breathed. "That deep crimson makes rhubarb seem pale in comparison. Look at that scintillating drop of water resting on one of the leaves! I'll wager the holographer intended that to represent dew: moisture that condensed out of Earth's atmosphere."

His perception of the composition of the study subtly altered, Leonard acknowledged with a wry chuckle, "I figured that he'd just been careless while lifting the flower out of the vase. I never guessed that he might have intended the effect!"

Cleo feasted her visual sense on the single, long-stemmed blossom. "I like this one best," she declared positively.

"So do I," Leonard agreed with equal emphasis.

Rising, Conrad handed the Captain one of the astronomical prints. "Look here," he urged. "Extraordinarily close-up shot of Whipple, this print. And we thought we got a good view from that ship we lifted during the escape from Halleck!"

"Mm." Having studied the image, Michael observed thoughtfully, "Whipple follows an extremely elliptical orbit around the sun. Its aphelion point is about the same distance from the sun as is the almost circular orbit of the gas giant. There's been considerable speculation that Whipple is actually the nucleus of a gigantic, burnt-out comet. Intriguing possibility, that, although it's also possible that Whipple got ejected from the asteroid belt between Hawking and Einstein.

"The bodies occupying the libration points in Dyson's orbit around the gas giant

astrophysists universally agree to be captured asteroids, including Columbia and the planetoids known collectively as Gaea. It takes Whipple nine Earthyears to make one revolution around the star, but it takes the gas giant almost twelve. At aphelion, Whipple's orbit almost intersects with that of Einstein. Every thirty-six Earthyears, Whipple and Einstein approach each other as closely as they ever get.

"This is such an Earthyear, which explains why we enjoyed so spectacular a view, but this print must have been taken at the exact time when the distance separating the two bodies reaches the minimum possible. For this encounter, that time won't arrive until six weeks from now."

Glancing interrogatively at the woman he saw to be listening intently, Michael asked, "Was that one reason why your leader risked coming here this Earthyear?"

Suppressing the pain that again washed through her, Cleo nodded in assent. "Yes. Wallace is an astronomer, and never has Gaea failed to send a team on an Earthyear when Whipple makes that near approach. That was one reason why he ventured to come, despite the danger, and the difficulties involved. This station's orbit around Einstein allows a better vantage point from which to observe Whipple, than does Gaea."

Michael caught the slight tremor in the captive's voice as she mentioned the Gaean leader. Admiration supplanted pity, as he noted the control the prisoner of war maintained over her face. Her eyes dropped to the print she held, before she forced herself to raise them, and smile at Leonard. At that moment, a technical question posed by Conrad diverted Michael's attention back to astronomy.

Taking advantage of Conrad's vacating the place next to the woman, Nigel seated himself beside her. "Look at this, Cleo," he urged. "Whoever that sculptor was, he achieved a brilliant statement. See how the form draws your attention to the apex? So does the variegated color. The apex lies off-center, and leads your eye away from there into the distance. The composition's designed to lift the viewer's spirits. The artist worked hard, and most successfully, to achieve that pronounced impact on the senses. I'd have been tempted to buy that piece, if I'd ever seen it at a

show."

Astonishment gripped the Gaean: emotion she fought to conceal. No trace of sarcasm, or ironic arrogance, tinged the sibilant voice. As the man's eyes stared into the space seemingly enclosed by the print, admiration reflected from his ill-favored face.

Gazing at the abstract sculpture, Cleo readily agreed with Nigel's assessment. The creator had worked in ceramics, using both shape and changing color to draw the eye up along five sinuously flowing forms which approached each other at a point in space, but did not meet. Both the forms and the swirl of colors combined to give a sense of fluidity, of delicacy, of continuous upward reaching. In some surreal manner, the beholder stared at what he knew to be a solid ceramic object, and thought of motion, of freedom, of soaring into infinity.

"Oh, Nigel, to have achieved that effect of rising like flame—like plumes of cloud—in that solid medium! I see what you mean. The sculpture launches you into the void, mentally."

Quizzical dark eyes raked the woman uttering that manifestly sincere tribute. "The artist had to have been a Gaean. Some of your people see beyond mere utility, hm?"

"In art, or music, or literature, certainly," the Gaean instantly affirmed. "In pure research—knowledge valued for its own sake—of course. But not in personal adornment, or personal living space. Gaeans shy away from anything approaching physical luxury, or soft living. They shun overindulgence of any sort."

"I knew that, but I never realized that that they cultivated the arts to the extent of producing a master like the person who created that delight to the eye." As he spoke, Nigel let his glance stray back to the print.

"A populace that concerned itself solely with breathing, eating and reproducing wouldn't stay human," Cleo retorted a trifle tartly.

"No. For civilization to advance, there must be unfettered minds reaching for new ideas...new modes of expression...new knowledge...new applications of old knowledge. However, I find it hard to picture that activity's going hand-in-hand with rigid social conditioning: stern repression of physical desires and personal ambition."

"Surely a person free to indulge both his physical desires and a rabid lust for personal power won't produce great art or new ideas! If he never learned selfdiscipline, he wouldn't produce anything but personal excess and trouble for his countrymen!"

"Exactly. But he needs to *develop* self-discipline, not have rigid prohibitions imposed on him from without."

"How many men will teach themselves, in a society that allows them to do exactly as they please? That's a prescription for anarchy. I'll agree, too much rigidity tends to be repressive, but complete license I regard as worse. A man who habitually indulges in gross excesses invariably becomes a rapacious, brutal, selfish, greedy oppressor of his fellows...like..."

Cleo's voice trailed off, as she suddenly realized that the discussion fast escalating into an argument took place amid a silence in which five other people sat hanging on the adversaries' every word.

Michael broke the stillness. "Like Norman," he finished for the Gaean, his face and voice expressionless.

Acutely aware that today was Sunday, that she attended a social gathering, and that she was in a sense the guest of these men who so recently counted themselves her enemies, Cleo bit back the acid words that surged up like bile to sear her tongue. Smiling mischievously at Michael, she inquired, "Would you say that the example you just mentioned is best known for producing marvelous works of art?"

A ripple of laughter in which Michael joined broke the tension.

His eyes sparkling, Nigel conceded candidly, "You scored a touch there, Cleo. Actually, the notion occurs to me that each of us bears in mind a stereotypical image of the other's countrymen, and both images are exaggerated. You don't fit mine of Gaeans, any more, I'll wager, than Justin does yours of Columbians."

Amazed at that admission, Cleo responded with a hearty, unforced laugh. "I'll

agree one hundred percent with your final contention!" she asserted with no inward reservation.

Rising with his usual fluid grace, the host occupied himself with refilling the drinks. As new conversations began among small groups of two and three people, Michael let the talk flow around him. Still curious regarding Cleo's tension at breakfast, he had listened intently to her exchange with his dangerous subordinate from the beginning. Conclusions formed, to churn within his consciousness.

Nigel must have violated her sensibilities last night, he conjectured dourly, but she hasn't stayed angry with him. They're both right. A society ought to aspire to a middle ground, with no excess either way. Power. You've relentlessly set political power as your ultimate goal, without thinking through how gaining it might change you. Cleo painted Norman in exact detail. Selfish opportunist, that ruthless bastard.

Does power always corrupt? Or are the men tough enough—and ambitious enough—to grasp power when an unexpected opportunity offers, corrupted already? Maybe a power-wielder who set himself an overriding goal other than simply enjoying absolute mastery over his fellows, would stay civilized. Cleo described Signe as a charismatic inspirer of devotion—a rebel warrior bent on evicting an oppressor. Most probably, Sigurd's daughter would never have reached for autocratic control of her people if Norman hadn't invaded. Not a power-seeker, that woman: a patriot shoved into the breach by circumstances beyond her control.

Would I be able to handle wielding autocratic authority over my world for an indefinite span of time without turning into...what did Cleo say...a rapacious, brutal, selfish, greedy oppressor?

Shame rose suddenly to smite the man searching his soul. I wield autocratic authority here, and on the first night, I raped her, he chided himself savagely. So I can't claim moral superiority even over Norman, damn the vicious rotter!

Lost now in private reverie, Michael again reviewed the arguments offered by each participant in that brief debate, in the light of the dark speculations crowding into his thoughts so unceasingly lately. The astronomical discussion impinged, prompting him to dwell on the explanation he just offered Conrad. A connection between two concepts that until now had seemed wholly unrelated struck the spacercaptain forcibly.

Toying with an idea, he wryly, amusedly, projected himself into an imagined situation.

A ship of your own, and control of your world. Those two yearnings leap to prominence in your mind every time you consider a new career move...or try to judge what effect some foul disaster will produce on your career. Damned if you haven't just figured out a way to achieve both! That solution could well work better than anything you've come up with yet! he conceded in sudden wonder.

Unconscious that he did so, he shook his head. *Talk about far-out notions!* he castigated himself savagely. *Think back over the week you just put in. You're clutching at wisps of cord when you need three-centimeter cable!* 

The appealing vision persisted. That eureka insight gives you what you want, though, his alter ego countered wistfully, even if in a pretty fanciful way. But damned if it doesn't offer a solution to a major future problem you've seen absolutely no way to solve!

Savagely, the realist castigated the spinner of enticing fantasies.

You must think you're a master diplomatist, spacer-captain. You aren't! Witness the way you tore into Marvin the other night. Lose that talent, and you're dead. Literally. You don't know computers on the level of their operating systems. You perceived your danger before ordering him to do a stint at punishment drill, thank all the Powers. You stopped before going to a length guaranteed to drive a marooned social misfit possessed of genius to space himself. But you came appallingly close to precipitating a disaster. And if it weren't for Cleo, what you did do might have been enough to prompt the poor bastard to take his own life. You owe your prisoner of war, spacer-captain. You owe a big debt to the woman you raped.

Shame surged anew. Forcibly driving it out, Michael again considered the fanciful solution.

Keep the wild idea you just hatched in mind, he urged his alter self. You've got plenty of time yet in which to make a final decision, or to conjure up some other solution to that future problem...one practical enough to work.

When interest in the prints finally appeared to have played out, Justin rose, and drew the attention of the company. Warm amusement played over the seamed brown face of the oldest of the castaways.

"I found more than those prints, while engaged in my twenty-fifth foray through the chemicals left in that old lab," he announced. "I conveyed my find to Michael, but he insisted that I keep it. I figured I'd back a new round of games of chance. Chess is more my style than poker, even though Marvin keeps me in a perennial state of defeat, but I'm going to give my fellow cook a chance to get his revenge."

Reaching into the bag reposing at his feet, the medical technician withdrew two liter-sized bottles of clear liquid. "This is a dilution I made of straight, unadulterated ethanol I unearthed. Given that pure ethanol would paralyze one's throat muscles, I cut it to the strength of ordinary whisky, and flavored my imitation, to boot. I'm going to invite our three gamesters to dice for these bottles. The winners can use them for a new stake. Likely Nigel's fellow poker players will match his generosity in sharing the winnings, and we'll all participate eventually. What the gamesters will really be striving to win is the distinction of acting as host." With that, Justin tossed a pair of dice onto a table.

As three inveterate gamblers exchanged grins, Michael handed the dice to Nigel. "Shall we each make a single throw? Or take the best total score out of three casts?" he inquired, glancing at each participant in turn.

"Total of three," the provider of the refreshments urged without pausing to reflect, as Conrad nodded vigorously.

"I agree. Better to prolong the suspense," Michael acknowledged. "Shake."

"Your luck should have about run out by now, Nigel," Conrad asserted scathingly.

"There's a difference between luck and skill, friend," came the drawling rebuttal.

Shaking the dice, the victor in the first round contemplated his score: three. "And luck seems to have deserted me." Shaking again, he achieved a five, and an eleven. "Not likely that'll serve," he acknowledged ruefully.

"Aha!" Michael crowed as he rolled two sixes. His face fell, as the next cast came up three. "Come on, now..." A five appeared. "My score beat Nigel's, anyway."

"Only if Conrad's total proves higher than mine," that worthy instantly objected.

Having shaken with exaggerated vigor, Conrad threw a two. "My luck's worse than my skill," he growled disgustedly. A ten came up, prompting a muttered "Better." The dice came to rest, ten again uppermost. Elated, the winner flashed Nigel a triumphant smile. "You're spaced, partner. I'll venture my bottle again."

"Keep yours, for the time being, Conrad," Michael advised. "I'll stake mine when we play, on the same conditions as before. You might need a shot some night, after your fiftieth round of cooking fish."

That observation prompted a wry grin. "You know, just the thought that I could treat myself that way will help me face the damned things."

Laughing and trading jokes, the company consumed the remainder of Nigel's bottle. By the time suppertime rolled round, the fatigue and strains of the week seemed forgotten.

We've made it this far without suffering any irremediable disasters, Michael reflected wearily, but they're tired. Edgy. I'd let up—drive them less relentlessly—but that would only prolong the agony, and afford them more time to brood. Well, we'll see. Tomorrow night will serve to boost my morale, anyway.

## **WEEK FOUR: MONDAY**

An hour prior to her alarm's sounding, Cleo awoke. Lying on her side, fighting restlessness, she watched the digital dial of the clock methodically dismiss the seconds. Certain that she had adjusted to waking at the proper time, she frowned as she drew a daunting conclusion.

Six nights a week, I don't get to sleep until 2100 or after. I've adjusted, but to a seven-hour shift. Last night I fell asleep an hour earlier, to find myself wide-awake seven hours later. What a disgusting development!

Combing her hair an hour later before the mirror, the woman narrowly inspecting her reflection observed the gauntness of her face. Justin's efforts to fatten me up must have been canceled out by all that lifting, she surmised dejectedly. I suppose the strain of helping Marvin cope with his problems reinforced the physical toll the work took on me.

The glow of pride kindled within the amateur therapist by that reflection prompted her to view the end result as well worth the loss of whatever mass her amateur psychological counseling cost her. *Marvin's working manfully at changing himself,* she reminded herself elatedly.

As she made the bed, her mind strayed to the previous Saturday night. Shivers coursed down her spine as she fervently hoped that Nigel's jealous spell simply represented a passing effect of two hellish workdays, and that no such emotion would surface during the work-shift. A cloud of foreboding settled into the back of the captive's mind. That persistent anxiety she failed to banish completely. Better wrap yourself around whatever breakfast consists of, she admonished her alter ego sternly. Convince Justin that you're making an effort.

The ensuing meal turned out to be a new addition to the menu: a baked dish consisting of small chunks of fish mixed with cheese and topped with grated baked white potato moistened with a creamy sauce containing small black and gray flecks, which conferred a novel flavor.

Justin did look through my notes, the Gaean concluded. I sincerely hope that my assumption that he just served edible fungi doesn't turn out to be a ghastly error!

Glancing about, the engineer observed that both Michael and Nigel had ingested almost all of their portions, and displayed no discernible distress.

If I remember rightly, the symptoms follow directly on eating the poisonous sort, she assured herself as she gamely sampled the offering, enjoying the flavor even as she braced herself for the worst.

"Tastes good. Another surprise?" Michael inquired.

"Justin's, mostly. He accessed my research notes."

"What's that stuff in the sauce?"

"Agaricus campestris."

"In plain Earth-Standard?"

"Mushrooms."

That response galvanized Nigel into staring at the speaker with raised eyebrows. "Edible ones, I trust?"

"I fervently hope so. As you see, I'm eating them with gusto."

Frowning, Michael queried sharply, "What are mushrooms?

"A type of fungus. A delicacy, on Old Earth."

*"Fungus*? Like *mold*? Justin just fed us a cousin of *slimeballs*?" That expostulation conveyed shock, tinged with outrage.

Chuckling, Cleo undertook to reassure the objector. "Not a very close relative. Slimeballs evolved here, from molds carried from Earth as contaminants. Mushrooms were cultivated on Earth. Some hopeful gourmet must have added a pinch of the spawn to the soil that formed, over the Earthyears, in most of these tertiary tanks. Unfortunately, the common edible mushroom sports some look-alike, noxious relatives. I expect that our ancestors knew better than to bring along that sort. In any case, if these were poisonous, you two would be expiring at our feet by now."

Marvin and Leonard, who had been all ears, eyed each other dubiously over helpings barely touched, but the younger man gamely lifted a quantity on his fork. "Dig in, spacer," he urged. "The guinea pigs are still alive and kicking."

Smiling straight at the Lieutenant frowning in incipient wrath, Marvin joked, "That's no proof that we're safe. I strongly suspect that Nigel's constitution would shrug off a dose of poisonous fungus."

The second officer's habitual inscrutability enabled him effectively to mask whatever astonishment that wholly uncharacteristic bantering remark on the part of his socially handicapped associate produced. Nonetheless, his frown vanished. "Let's hope that notion doesn't have to be put to the test, hm?" he drawled, flashing his fellow an appreciative grin.

*Bravo for you, Marvin!* Cleo cheered inwardly. Michael's face betrayed no more surprise than had Nigel's, but Cleo felt the force of the speculative glance the Captain fixed on *her*. Her composure equaled his, as she polished off the last few bites of the novelty.

At length Michael rose, drawing his subordinates' attention. "I'm going to alter our work assignments, today," he announced. "These sections, having been flown here by remote control, mount no cameras on the hull to display the surroundings on the screens of the board. The cameras mounted on the ship weren't damaged. I'm going to enlist the help of Marvin and Conrad during all of today.

"That'll leave Justin short. Leonard, you'll fill in for Conrad in the foodchemistry lab today and tomorrow. Nigel, at 1200, Conrad and I will be going out on the hull of the ship, so I'll need you and Marvin to man what's left of the board on the bridge. We'll leave one set of cameras until the very end, so that you'll be able to keep us in view. A bit chancy, working on a shock-damaged hull, but we've got no choice. Have Cleo unbolt the seven bunks I'm appropriating. As long as no one will be working on the bridge in Eleven, Nigel, this morning would be a good time for you and Cleo to make the necessary changes in the ventilating system."

"Good idea."

Walking beside her team leader to Eleven, the Gaean battled renewed foreboding, but this time, concern for others evoked it.

If Michael described their foray as chancy, I'll wager it's downright dangerous, she fretted. I know it's necessary, but I won't relax until they're both back safely. Brr. They'll be out often, from now on. Their constant danger I'll experience as a new source of stress. One coming right on top of the other!

Standing on a ladder under the center of the old vent, Nigel sent his assistant to the corner of the main deck, where the stack of lengths cut to the new specifications reposed. While she moved sections of duct to the foot of his ladder, he disconnected all but a few of the metal screws holding two runs of ventilating ducts.

Crisply, he issued orders. "Stand ready to hand me that square junction. I'll remove the old ductwork, and the blowers, running from this first intake. We can't waste any time. I've turned off all the fans and blowers below."

As aware of that circumstance as he, Cleo nodded. Reaching for the length he handed down to her, she waited while he disconnected the second before handing him what he needed as he installed the junction, and the four runs leading out of it.

Engaged in installing the two heavy metal plates that would cover the openings where the old ducts had passed through the walls, Nigel muttered, "It's getting stuffy in here."

"I wouldn't risk working with live power, either."

"You consider electrocution worse than breathing stale air, hm?"

"Most definitely!" his assistant asserted, sparking a sardonic laugh.

Leaning the ladder against the curving wall, Nigel set about making the alterations in the wiring that would allow the fans and blowers in the new ductwork to function in place of those in the old. Glancing over his shoulder, he commanded, "Go below and make the changes in the on-off manual switches in the main box."

Elated by that peremptory order, Cleo complied.

My word, he's trusting my expertise with a vengeance! He seems confident that I won't cause a short guaranteed to burn out a fan or fry the wiring. How heartening! Things really are looking up.

Peering into the open box, the Gaean listened for a rustle. A stiff wire emerged through the conduit, to protrude into the interior. Pulling on that, she drew five bundled cables down far enough to be able to make her connections. Deftly, she employed a wire stripper to cut away the outer sheathing of each cable, and bare the ends. Those she connected to the five additional switches necessary for the increased number of fans on the main deck. At length, she mounted the new switches in the box.

Intent on her task, Cleo never heard Nigel steal up behind her, to observe the manner in which she made the necessary connections to the master switch that allowed the system to operate either automatically or manually. At the conclusion of her chore, she stepped back to collide with the man standing behind her. Her gasp of surprise prompted Nigel to remark amusedly, "When you're intent on a job, you're as easy to sneak up on as you were the first time we met."

"How did you get past me that day?" the Gaean asked, curiosity overcoming a flash of bitter chagrin at the memory of her capture.

"I undid a grate over an output vent, loosened the end of the duct and forced it aside, slid through the opening, and dropped to the lower deck. I knew where you had to be, but I assumed that you most likely had jammed something through the ring to prevent my opening the hatch, as indeed you had. After locating a tool kit, I climbed up on Central's waste tank, from where I could reach an output vent into a bathcabin, being certain you wouldn't be making your stand in there. After removing the duct, I opened the grill from the wrong side, using a laser cutter from a tool locker. I then emerged not too far behind you."

"If you'd been simply a spacer off a military ship, you'd probably not have

managed that feat so easily," the chagrined rear guard observed tartly.

"That's true," her captor acknowledged serenely. "I'm not faulting your action. Your strategic sense matched your cool daring, that day. And you're a competent electrician, as well."

Astonishment produced a sharp intake of breath, owing to the compliment's coming across as unmistakably sincere. "Why, thank you, Nigel," the recipient breathed, mollified by the man's words.

"Throw the main breaker. We inhaled enough oxygen-poor air last week."

The whirring of fans fell soothingly on Cleo's ear as she followed her companion back up the ladder into the stuffy atmosphere of the main deck. "Not so bad that we can't finish taking down the old system, hm?" he declared rather than asked.

"Compared to that hole where we appropriated the ducts, this air's prime."

Chuckling, the team leader carried the ladder into the bridge, where he positioned it under the old run. "You use this," he directed. "I'll hang off the free-fall handholds." Together, the pair began the onerous chore of removing the old ductwork.

At the hour in which Nigel normally sent the Gaean on her break, he walked around the bridge to where she stood balanced on the ladder, unfastening a long duct with both hands. "Since we two constitute the whole team today, Cleo, let's take a break together, hm?" The assured voice made the suggestion seem a command.

Rendered faintly uneasy as the memory of this man's words and actions of Saturday night and Sunday morning flitted through her mind, Cleo descended the ladder, to walk beside the team leader as he strode purposefully to a far corner of the main deck. When he seated himself with his back against a wall, his arms clasping one bent knee, his lithe body completely relaxed, she dropped to sit cross-legged on the deck, facing him.

"Does the University of Gaea routinely confer degrees on female engineers?" the Columbian inquired in a tone conversational, although infused with curiosity.

"I was one of four women out of a total of seventeen people earning a degree in

life-support engineering when I graduated. Ours was a typical distribution. In some departments women form a higher percentage than that. More women qualify as chemists than physicists or engineers, usually, and a good many train as mathematicians, physicians, and medical technicians." Frowning in puzzlement, Cleo inquired, "Are women excluded from the University of Columbia?"

"No. A few persevere each Earthyear, and attain a degree, but they encounter extreme difficulty in finding employment that utilizes their training, afterwards. In Columbian society, government, business, cargo shipping, or the like—any economic sector employing professional people—are overwhelmingly dominated by men.

"They always have been, in a culture molded by the thinking of its founders: remnants of mercenary corps, who fought the space wars of Sol System, and took the incredible risk of making a time-dilated, one-way Jump outside our universe to emerge in this vicinity, knowing only the mass and spectral class of the star that they gambled would possess a planetary system in which they could survive. Tough men: fighters led by aggressive types who rose to dominance because they knew how to gain and keep power.

"Five military commanders still rule Columbia, in actuality. At this point in our history, our First Minister—currently Leon—qualifies merely as a figurehead. But even if that weren't so, women remain virtually excluded from the power structure in Columbia, no matter what degree they might have earned. No, if a Columbian woman gains political influence, it's indirectly—and few accomplish even that." Regarding the listener silently digesting that assertion, he added meaningfully, "You're unique in my experience, Cleo."

"Your women must find life frustrating, at best, and the brightest must live lives of quiet desperation."

Frowningly, Nigel weighed that assertion, and shrugged. "Likely some do," he admitted. "But a good many settle readily for the financial security and social status marriage to a bureaucrat or businessman gives them. Those conditions work against the drive to gain a degree, and pursue a career under a heavy handicap. A life of

ease would produce a soothing effect, hm?"

"Or a deadening one." Cleo stared into eyes reflecting ironic amusement that matched the bantering tone in which their owner had couched that last statement. "I can't begin to imagine what my mental life would be like, if I knew none of the things I know. I wouldn't be the same person, without that long, disciplined study of science, technology, history, literature, mathematics...all I've learned over thirty Earthyears."

"No, you wouldn't be the Cleo I'm coming to know." A slight tensing of the lithe body passed. Outwardly relaxed, the Columbian sat back. "What thesis did you defend to gain your degree?" he asked.

That query evoked a rueful smile. "I undertook to prove that by using genetic engineering techniques, I could create an improved variety of potato that could serve as the main ingredient for a perfectly nutritious food. I genetically fused two of the eight potato species, to produce tubers in which a half, rather than a third, of the potato's nutrients lie just beneath its skin, in the cortex. By stripping skin for fiber, and also the cortex, and processing that material with vegetable oil, casein, certain vitamins and minerals, and flavoring, I produced bars having little mass. I then demonstrated that human beings could survive indefinitely, with no ill effects, eating nothing else, in some sort of emergency.

"My genetically engineered plants became a standard fixture of our tertiary growth, but unfortunately, our elderly, grossly unimaginative Minister of Food Resources displayed more than the usual bureaucratic resistance to change, so the bars never got manufactured."

Admiration tinged with the faintest gleam of astonishment surfaced briefly in the Columbian's eyes, before the amusement returned. "Too bad we lack access to a supply. We wouldn't be reduced to consuming fungi, although I admit to finding our breakfast surprisingly tasty."

Smiling mischievously, Cleo conceded, "I rather think more would have to be done in the flavoring line, before my bars would find eager acceptance day after day.

What thesis did you defend?"

Nigel's smile proved as rueful as his associate's. "I hypothesized that the bacterium *Hydrogenomonas eutropha* could be utilized in place of the usual algae, to reduce the level of carbon dioxide in the air, and produce a growth yield and water. The water could be electrolyzed to provide the oxygen for breathing. I designed such a system for use aboard military ships, and proved that its efficiency exceeded that of the algal systems, but if you think civilian bureaucrats resist change, you should try persuading their military counterparts! To this day, my idea remains a fanciful footnote to the record of Columbia's expansion of its military space fleet. I heard with profound relief that my defense of my thesis sufficed to secure my degree."

"I sympathize, Nigel, believe me." Wry humor danced in the Gaean's eyes, as she added, "At least neither of us experienced the disaster that befell an acquaintance of mine. Up for a history degree, he'd taken as his thesis the idea that the Earthcentury-and-a-half-old Covenant, in which your ancestors and mine agreed never to manufacture or use weapons that could kill at a distance, would keep the peace in perpetuity. On the day he was scheduled to defend it, Norman invaded Gaea."

The chuckle that tale evoked warmed the Gaean. "He'd have been hard put to defend the indefensible, hm?" His amusement fading, Nigel offered a candid admission. "That solemn agreement was never abrogated. Columbia's violation of the Covenant constitutes in my mind a blot on our national honor. A world's word ought to be as binding as a man's. Few Columbians would break their word, for any reason. How Leon did that, and stayed even nominally in power, remains beyond my ken."

"That feeling didn't keep you from choosing a military career." As she made that observation, the Gaean managed to keep her bitterness out of her voice and off her face.

Glancing narrowly at his companion, the man thus obliquely chided observed levelly, "If Norman had invaded your world with corpsmen armed only with swords,

he'd be in no different position now. In giving up all arms, your people laid themselves open to disaster. If the idea of going to space forms a man's chief motivating force, only two options lie open to him: enlisting in a military corps, or hiring onto a cargo ship. I much preferred the former, especially as I could combine the careers of researcher and spacer. I'm forced to admit, though, that we spend most of our time patching up existing systems that unskilled corpsmen damage, or let get drastically out of balance."

Leonard's words echoed in the mind of the woman digesting the unsettling assertion preceding the personal justification. That memory prompted her to wonder whether Leonard got his idea from Nigel, or whether most Columbians believed that a world's citizenry should learn to use arms. Nigel's reasoned explanation of his motives in joining mollified the woman culturally programmed to revere the tenets of civic cooperativeness and pacifism.

"I concede your point," she admitted forthrightly, "about your reasons for enlisting. Perhaps our leaders did make a mistake: one they're rectifying, slowly." Smiling, she held out her hand. "We called a truce a while back, Nigel. Let's renew it."

Surprise blended with admiration, as a powerful hand clasped that of the Gaean. Having retained his grip longer than was necessary, Nigel reached for the other. Rising to his feet, he drew the woman up with him.

"Your world possesses an articulate spokesman in you," he acknowledged with a smile. "Well. Time we returned to our current patch-up job." Releasing both hands, he strode resolutely back to the tedious chore awaiting them.

Perched once more on her ladder, Cleo resumed her task. As she worked, she pondered what she had just learned.

What a dismal life a woman like me would lead in Columbia! I can't remember when I wasn't possessed by the urge to learn—from the time Mother first read to me, and Father formed the habit of discussing the news of the day and his interpretation of history with Glendon, Nyla and me over tea on Sunday mornings. What a dull, stodgy life wives of their professional men must lead! Working in a factory would be preferable.

Columbian men pursuing a career of any sort inhabit a mostly male world: one that operates according to masculine rules. Their lives must be a constant struggle to win dominance over their fellows, and status in their society. They see women as possessions, and stay prepared to duel any man who steps over a line drawn around the wife they regard as such. Just as did the brother-in-law of the Chancellor Nigel mentioned in his anecdote. They never experience the easy camaraderie with female associates that Gaean men not only take for granted, but find enjoyable. Neither do they form any close friendship with a female comrade: a friendship utterly without sexual overtones, such as mine for Wallace and Leroy, or Marva's for Olav.

Military men must be even worse off. I'll wager they seldom encounter women casually in social settings like dinner-parties. Their world I judge to be exclusively male, except for the courtesans they seek out for one reason only. I don't imagine they do much talking on those occasions.

An idea lanced out of nowhere, to set the Gaean frowning.

When a woman marries a Columbian professional man, she gives him sexual relief, so that he doesn't have to patronize courtesans, in return for the secure life of ease Nigel mentioned. She trades her favors for the same thing courtesans do, but on a more socially acceptable plane. By excluding her from the career that engrosses him, her husband shuts her out of the main focus of his life.

What a vast difference between their marital arrangements and a marriage like Max's and mine! Or Wallace's and Marva's: a union of two people who share their work, their recreation, their whole lives. Friends as well as sexual partners, respecting as well as loving each other. Comrades. Able to include a woman like me, or a man like Leroy, in that close, warm, companionable atmosphere they generate together, while harboring no thought of jealousy of any sort.

Sorrow again flooded Cleo's heart, as she imagined the pain afflicting her former comrades. Consciously, she sought to avoid dwelling on that circumstance. Darker

reflections now chased across the captive's consciousness.

For a good many of the spacer-fighters conditioned by Columbian mores, it must not be a big step from the idea of hiring a woman to satisfy purely sensual needs, to that of routinely wresting sexual satisfaction from any female enemy who falls into their hands, she ruminated bitterly. Norman's corpsmen routinely raped women, and Norman made no attempt to keep a handle on their brutality!

If his society conditioned a man like Michael to see marriage simply as a more refined and genteel trade of favors, no wonder he found it relatively easy to make the decision he did. In his view, open brutality such as that perpetrated by Norman's corpsmen constituted the main danger to be avoided, not the actual act of obtaining sexual satisfaction. Civilization to Michael meant setting bounds on what he and his men could do—regulating their behavior—institutionalizing it.

His solution hasn't worked out the way he must have thought it would, I'll wager. I've become far better friends with all six men than any of them—even Justin and Leonard—would ever have become with a wife he left vegetating at home while he pursued his career. No, forcing me to sleep with all of them wasn't the most radical thing Michael did. Making me a part of his crew was!

As a consequence of that decision so revolutionary for a man molded by his society, I've become a comrade, sharing six men's lives and work as well as their bed. New experience for them, that comradeship. Especially for Nigel! I've exerted more than a civilizing influence. I've achieved a cultural impact. Likely the wives of their fellow professional men will seem vapid to them, now that they've known an educated female crewmember. I rather suspect that any one of them would be hard put to find a Columbian woman who ranks as his intellectual equal, if this experience produces the effect of waking such a desire.

Smiling ruefully as she climbed down and once more moved the ladder, Cleo admitted a shade guiltily, I enjoyed that visit with Nigel this morning. I find it flattering to think that he's growing to enjoy my company, and to respect my professional abilities. But I'm very much afraid that if he's as jealous of Michael as I think he is, this new development contains some frightening implications. To put it bluntly, he'd find it easier to share a body than a mind. He'd want a soul mate's thoughts fixed solely on him.

A shudder passed through the woman acutely conscious of her vulnerability.

No matter how cultured Nigel might be, no matter how intellectually brilliant he is, he's barely civilized. He still scares me spitless, not merely for what he could do to me, but for what he could do to Michael, as well. Yet I find the man fascinating. I must be growing addicted to danger as a stimulant—as if my life didn't offer stimulation enough, just at present!

Cleo and Nigel finished the changeover just before 1100. Casting a last, ruminative glance around the open space of Eleven's deck while inhaling a deep breath of air restored to freshness, the officer grunted in satisfaction. Turning to Cleo, he reached into a pocket for a green tablet of formidable size, and thrust it on her. "Down this now," he ordered. "It'll prevent your throwing up this afternoon."

Obediently, Cleo walked into the bathcabin, and washed down the outsized medication with a drink of water. *Free fall must not pose any more of a problem to Nigel's iron constitution than does lack of air,* she decided wryly. *I wonder if anything has ever made him sick?* Shaking her head, she returned unaware that he had swallowed his pill without bothering to take a drink.

Over baked stuffed fish, baked sweet potato, and vegetables, Cleo observed that the Captain had omitted to provide himself with the beverage he normally drank with any meal. Speaking for once without thinking, she inquired brightly, "No coffee today?"

A broad grin accompanied his reply. "I'm exercising a necessary discretion, Cleo."

Conrad, sitting in Leonard's place, elaborated bluntly on his superior's words, even as the Gaean belatedly realized her mistake. "It doesn't do to risk overloading the suit's capacity, woman. You're uncomfortable enough in one as it is, without experiencing a nasty overflow." Flushing deeply scarlet, Cleo dropped her eyes and applied herself silently to her meal, amid grins.

Thirty minutes later, Michael and Conrad stood in Central's conference cabin, donning pressure suits with Nigel's and Marvin's assistance. Shedding his uniform, Michael inserted one bare foot, and then the other, through the front opening and into the legs of the suit, fitting his feet into the boots attached to the fabric of the pants. As Nigel raised the top portion, Michael inserted his male organ into the sheath that connected to the urine-storage receptacle, his rugged face creasing into a grin at the memory of Cleo's embarrassment at lunch.

*Put her foot in her mouth for once, she did,* he chortled within the privacy of his mind. *She doesn't do that often!* 

Stooping, he backed his shoulders into the opening, pulling the fabric forward, so that his head popped through the ring that locked to the one on his helmet, yet allowed him to rotate his helmeted head. Slipping an arm into each sleeve, he reached for the front pack, which sealed to the aperture through which he had inserted his body to don the suit. Anticipating his move, Nigel raised the pack, fastened it, and minutely examined the seal.

I've donned a suit by myself, in an emergency, the wearer reflected, but I surely do feel safer when someone else runs the checks.

Standing with only head and hands uncovered, Michael tipped over his head the helmet that hung from the left side of the neck-ring, and let his assistant latch it. Having assured himself that the helmet had sealed properly, Nigel did the same for the gloves that hung from each sleeve.

Locked within the suit, Michael immediately experienced a fundamental isolation—from his comrades, from the station, from the surroundings he viewed through his faceplate. Silence impacted his consciousness, producing a sense of his having already entered the void.

Quickly, Nigel donned the pack worn over his shoulders, which allowed him to communicate with the two men in the suits. Marvin, who had assisted Conrad, did the

same. "Michael." On seeing the eyes behind the faceplate meet his, Nigel instructed, "Check your readings."

In response to that directive, Michael pressed the thumb of his left glove to the back of his little finger, squeezing a switch that activated the life-support pack. Focusing his glance to the small figures visible in an area in the lower right of the transparent faceplate, he waited until all the numbers stopped changing, and enumerated the final readings to his second officer.

The figures revealed that the suit's pressure bladder had inflated to provide an atmospheric pressure adequate to prevent the nitrogen from boiling out of the occupant's blood, thereby causing a fatal case of the bends. Michael now stood encased in a close-fitting pressure bladder fashioned of a specially fabricated synthetic material overlaid with, and connected to, an intricate system of narrow tubes made of the same material, which circulated the air that protected against extremes of heat while it allowed the wearer to breathe.

To assure himself that the ingenious system of tiny motors—devices that flexed specially fashioned joints in the bladder in response to the contracting and relaxing of his muscles, which the suit sensed—functioned properly, Michael raised an arm. Without such aid, he knew, he would not have been able to bend or rotate his joints—fingers, wrists, elbows, shoulders, hips, knees or ankles. Both the front and rear packs provided the power for the air-circulating pumps, the heaters, and the motors. Most importantly, they utilized chloroplasts isolated from living cells, which absorbed the exhaled carbon dioxide and water vapor. A reversible chemical reaction catalyzed by the presence of light provided when the wearer activated the suit, converted those exhaled substances to sugar and oxygen. The system swiftly attained an equilibrium that allowed the occupant to stay suited indefinitely.

Between the pressure bladder, with its overlay of small tubes, and the exterior fabric of the suit, lay multiple thin layers of incredibly efficient, gossamer-light insulation and other exotic products of high technology, which protected against extremes of cold and the impacts of meteoroids. Bands of woven metal reinforced the fabric around the arms, and across the chest. From these, stout rings depended, to which gear could be attached for ease in carrying. The chemically inert, corrosionproof outer microlayer rendered the silvery surface highly reflective.

The backpack containing the life-support equipment formed an integral part of the ensemble, conforming to the contours of the wearer's shoulders and back. The sculpted bulge conveyed the eerie impression to anyone unfamiliar with the mechanics of the suit that occupant must be hunchbacked.

Satisfied that Michael's suit functioned perfectly, Nigel fastened the harness-like maneuvering unit around the seemingly stooped, potbellied figure. That device allowed the suited spacer to fire jets of compressed nitrogen, supplied from strong, light-density, perfectly insulating tanks specially engineered to hold a reserve of liquefied nitrogen. Firing the jets would permit Michael to propel himself, or stop himself, in his weightless state as he traversed open space to reach the hull where he would be working.

Having adjusted the unit, Nigel switched on the amplifier in his communications pack. "Ready?"

"Ready." Michael's voice resounded through the area.

"Ready here," Conrad echoed.

Striding out, Nigel summoned Cleo from the dining hall next door. With the ease born of long practice, the two suited men moved down the corridor towards the compressed-air elevator that would transport them to the main lock in the axis. Cleo bore the specialized tool kit she had fetched before lunch, at Nigel's order, from the bridge in Eleven.

Having watched Michael and Nigel, and then Conrad and Marvin, vanish into the elevator, the Gaean waited until the conveyance returned. Strapping herself against the wall, she touched the control, bracing for the sensation that her stomach somehow remained behind. When the door slid open automatically, she unlatched her belt, pushed herself gently off the wall of the elevator compartment, and floated outwards into the lock to grab a free-fall handhold when she neared the wall. As she watched, the two suited spacers eased their bodies through the pressure-proof door into the adjoining, inner lock from which they could emerge through the side of the axis into the hard vacuum of space. Michael touched the switch that caused the door to seal behind them. Nigel riveted his eyes to the panel to the right of the door, which indicated first that the air had been pumped out of the inner lock, and then that the exterior pressure-proof door had opened.

"All right, chief?" he inquired, through the microphone curving over his shoulder from the pack.

"Fine so far."

Nodding in satisfaction, Nigel touched the switch that opened a second door that led to the lock to which the ship lay moored. Unhesitatingly, he pushed himself off a wall so as to float into the cylindrical area roofed by the base of the docking module of the ship: space which contained air ejected into it by the ship after the clamps sprang out to seal the vessel to the rim of the lock.

A trifle daunted, Cleo stared into the black well leading to the hatch which opened onto the bridge of the ship: a cylindrical space extending fifteen meters beyond the base of the ship's docking module. Had the vessel been moored on a planetoid, she knew, the well, equipped with an elevator, would have yawned upwards from the ground. Here, however, the ship's docking module attached at a right angle to the axis, so that the two-and-a-half-meter-wide hole in the deck of the elevator platform, which gave access to the five-meter-wide well, seemed the entry to a hall that stretched away a daunting distance before the woman unaccustomed to the sight.

Without looking to see whether or not the Gaean followed him, Nigel launched himself down that black tunnel, and vanished through the hatch at the other end.

Taking a deep breath, Cleo imitated his action. Emerging onto the bridge, she found it necessary to readjust her mind. The hatch through which she sailed lay in the deck. Instinctively, she clutched a free-fall handhold stretching across what she would have regarded as the ceiling, had the formidable mass of a planetoid looming directly beneath the ship exerted the gravitational pull that human bodies sensed as weight. Clinging until her forward momentum spent itself, she shoved herself off the curving upper reaches of the bridge, and grasped a handhold on a wall, plagued by a disconcerting disorientation.

Nigel reached one of the two couches still attached to the deck, the other two having been unfastened and tethered to the far wall, awaiting transport to Eleven. Prior to his arrival, Marvin, who Cleo saw to be harnessed into the other couch, had activated the part of the board still functioning, and had switched off the fields both of the hull and the station: fields that vaporized any meteoroids on a collision course with the station.

Fascinated, Cleo drank in the spectacular sight of the exterior of the ship: a sight displayed on four screens. Nigel and Marvin also watched, as Michael and Conrad aimed jets of compressed gas to maneuver their suited bodies over the horizontal, or H-torus, which encircled the smaller, doughnut-shaped ring perpendicular to it. The latter construct, conventionally designated as the vertical or V-torus, consisted of a protective envelope shielding the inner construct housing the habitable portion of the ship. That inner torus, which rotated when the ship coasted along its trajectory at uniform velocity, now remained motionless, its habitable part positioned over the docking module.

"We can see you plainly, Michael," Nigel asserted. "All the cameras are functioning. Better watch carefully for loose, live power lines, hm?"

"You can bet we will." As he spoke, Michael landed feet-first on the hull, and stuck there, as the electromagnets integral to the soles of his boots gripped the metal. To raise a boot, he manipulated a switch with pressure from his big toe, deactivating the electromagnet. Trained to work in a suit, he operated the switches automatically, devoting no more conscious thought to that process than he ordinarily used when walking, even though he made sure that one boot always secured him to the hull.

Glancing around, he catalogued the damage wreaked by the shock wave on the

generators mounted along the circumference of the H-torus. Those powerful devices obviously no longer possessed the capability to send laser beams shining down onto a collar-like mirror, which reflected an intense concentration of that energetic radiation onto the ring of thrust-orifices below the V-torus, so as to impart a stupendous exhaust velocity to the water vapor exploding into plasma beneath the heatshield. Sadly, he noted the damage sustained by the intricate equipment able intermittently to draw power from the disc-like region of the giant planet's magnetosphere, in which electric currents flowed, carried by low-energy plasma trapped in the planet's magnetic field.

Intense regret assaulted the spacer-captain. You did all you could, he tried to comfort himself. You saved your whole crew, although you lost a ship. I hate knowing I did that, even if the vessel wasn't under my command. Our world can't afford this loss, war or no war!

Damn! Won't Norman be incensed, even though this ship ranks only as a vessel of the second class? Thank the Powers Heston didn't command one of the original military ships from Earth: those armed with irreproducible weaponry! Even so, the loss of the ship will loom a lot worse in Norman's mind than the loss of Heston and his spacers. Poor beggars. Bastard or not, Heston advanced gamely into what turned out to be a lethal trap. I can't help feeling sorry about that, but at least they died quickly.

Shrugging off his gloomy reflections, Michael took a few seconds to savor the view. The huge turquoise disc of the giant gaseous planet called Einstein by the settlers of the system, hung seemingly motionless, inexorably drawing the eye. That body seemed the more splendid for the sharp contrast between its brilliance, and the blackness of the void overspread by a lacy veil of unwinking bright stars.

The gibbous, heavily cratered, dark-and-silver face of Whipple, making its near approach, competed for the observer's attention with the more familiar sight of the huge turquoise planet: the primary body around which its satellite Dyson orbited. The latter object, the moon with which both the Gaean and Columbian Groups co-orbited, presented a bland, almost featureless face, owing to its being enshrouded by an atmosphere of noxious gases.

Whipple just possibly could be the dust-and-ice-encrusted, burnt-out nucleus of the most gigantic comet ever to suffer loss of the coma-producing ice surrounding its core, Michael marveled. I wish to hell I could steal the time to use some of that astronomical gear in Twenty-seven to make detailed observations of Whipple. Wouldn't I love to take however many days that would require, and lose myself in study?

But I don't dare take the time. I don't dare give the impression that I'm in no hurry to return to Columbia, and that we Second Corpsmen rank now as free agents. I need at all costs to maintain the illusion that we're still part of the Columbian military, and my subordinates owe me the same obedience to orders here that they would if we'd been sent on any routine mission. I've barely hung onto that control as it is, and I can't risk weakening it. Better get to work, spacer-captain.

Regretfully tearing his eyes from the grand panoramic view of a vastness in which he formed a speck of alien life, Michael began his task. On seeing his superior begin work, Conrad wrenched his own fascinated gaze from Whipple, and set about detaching the power-generating gear he needed.

Gingerly picking his way through the equipment mounted on the hull, Michael reached the first camera. Kneeling stiffly on one knee—the construction of the suit did not allow it to bend at the waist—he touched the switch that opened the movable half of a vertical set of jaws containing interlocking, V-shaped teeth. Those relatively sharp projections meshed completely when the camera was removed, and fitted precisely into V-shaped depressions in the sides of the camera when a spring-loaded mechanical device caused the jaws to open, and then close on the inserted camera.

At the touch of a gloved finger, the jaws sprang apart, and the camera floated, tethered by its electrical connections. Deftly, Michael pulled the connecting junction in the wiring apart, snapped the camera to a ring on his suit, and pushed the second switch, which caused the movable jaw to separate from the mount. That component he attached to his suit.

Not content to take only the camera, the Captain unbolted the mount with its fixed jaw, to which the electric control-mechanism and the connection to the power line on the hull attached. A muttered curse escaped him as he contemplated the base of the mount, which formed an integral part of one of the plates composing the hull. Having separated the mount from its junction with the power line, and suspended the item from his suit, Michael frowningly studied the base.

I'll be forced to improvise bases for these jaw assemblies, and laser-weld them to the hull of Eleven, he groused. That'll mean searching through the station for something I can adapt. Likely Nigel can come up with an idea of what I could use, as thoroughly as he's studied what's available. I'll ask him. Hell of a job I face: welding bases on the side of the hull facing away from the axis. Damn! Well, one down, and a daunting number of these outfits to go. Get with the program, spacer-captain.

On the bridge, Nigel turned his eyes from the screen, and addressed Cleo. "Proceed down that corridor"—he gestured with a hand—"and unbolt the two bunks in the first cabin. Then advance to the far cabin. The mattresses attach to the frames by interlocking bands. Leave them for now. Tether each bunk so it can't float freely. Report here when you've finished. If there's time remaining, you can repeat the operation in the remaining two cabins, so as to free three more mattresses."

Nodding, Cleo gingerly propelled herself down the corridor. Clutching the handle of the first door, she managed to slide the door aside by bracing her feet against the jamb. Pushing off the frame, she grabbed the edge of the mattress at the foot of a bunk. Given that she launched herself too forcefully, the momentum of her lower body carried her onwards, peeling her hands off the mattress, and bringing her up against the far wall with a resounding thump.

"Damn!" she cried in exasperation. Clutching the metal bar forming the head of the bed, she maneuvered herself into the meter-wide space between the two bunks. Bracing her back against one of the twain, she thrust a foot against the other. Warily, she opened the tool kit tethered to her belt, and managed to grab the lock pliers and power ratchet and socket, and insert a fresh power pack, without allowing the remaining tools to float away into the ambient air.

Holding the ratchet clutched under an armpit, the woman wholly unused to working in free fall clamped the pliers to a nut, and wedged the tool against the bracket. Pressing the socket over the first of two bolts securing the head of the bunk, she touched the switch. As the socket rotated, a compensatory motion within the handle of the ratchet prevented its exerting a reverse torque on her body. Stuffing bolt and nut into a lidded section of the kit, she removed the second bolt.

By the time Cleo removed and captured the eight stout bolts that had held the bunk in place, and tethered the bunk to a free-fall handhold, she knew a few strategies for manipulating tools in the weightless state.

I don't feel any urge to throw up, she noted in relief. Hopefully I won't need the self-sealing bags I shoved into this kit, just in case. I do hope Michael and Conrad are taking care!

Taking care herself, she freed and tethered the second bunk. Gratified by her success, she propelled herself straight through the bathcabin connecting the two cabins, gauging her speed accurately enough that she managed to hang onto the mattress of the first bunk, although her body involuntarily performed a graceful cartwheel. After readjusting herself, she went to work on the bolts. Fifty minutes later, she made a second traverse of the bathcabin, launched her slim form out the door, and cautiously redirected her motion so as to avoid flying out of control past Nigel and Marvin.

Upon arriving on the bridge, Cleo grasped a free-fall handhold. Gazing wideeyed at the screens, she watched the man she recognized as Michael by his activity, noting that both men on the board stared intently at the image, and seemed not to have noticed her entry.

Having gone down on one knee on the hull of the H-torus to snap open the jaws of the clamp holding a camera and remove the device, the Captain hung it from his suit. Feeling overly encumbered, he decided to float the bulky gear from a trailing line. Rising to stand erect, he unrolled a long piece of thin but stout webbing, and attached his collection of components to the line, rather than to the rings on his suit. When the floating objects trailed his bulky figure in satisfactory fashion, he shifted his position.

Just at that juncture, the latch that should have held the clamp open malfunctioned. Of their own accord, the vertical jaws snapped shut, snagging a fold of the pressure-suited spacer's pants-leg between two rows of interlocking V-shaped teeth.

Hearing Marvin gasp in horror, and Nigel deliver himself of a luridly unprintable expletive, Cleo divined the danger to the wearer of the snagged suit.

Jolted by a sudden tightening around his leg, Michael discovered that he could not move. Instantly, he realized his predicament. No hint of the wrenching fear assailing him surfaced in his voice.

"Conrad, I need you," he informed his companion evenly. "Don't hurry. Watch where you put your feet."

The man working some distance away turned to look. His sharp intake of breath impacted the ears of the three tense observers on the bridge. Moving as fast as he could without radically endangering himself, Conrad reached the trapped officer. Minutely, he examined the twenty-centimeter-long row of teeth tightly gripping a fold of the fabric.

"Release the clamp." Not a quiver surfaced in the crisp, level voice issuing that flat command.

The engineer's voice betrayed acute strain as he replied, "If I do, and those teeth have pierced any of the cooling ducts, the bladder will blow when the clamp releases. That bladder material resists pressure, but won't take the least fraying. You'll die spaced!"

"If you unfasten the jaw assembly from the base, the jaws will release automatically."

"I'll go back for a metal-cutting laser!"

"Where are you going to aim the beam? You'll hole the hull, if you try to detach the base. You'll blow the ship—decompress the gas in this torus, and lose the entire volume of water. When the water erupts from the hull, you and I will be instantly encased in ice: frozen to this hull, which could then disintegrate under the new strain, given the shock it has already endured. And if you merely cut through the jaws, the teeth will release anyway!"

Nigel's voice rasped through both men's helmets. "We'll evacuate the ship, Michael. Conrad will fetch a laser, and hole the hull! You'll very possibly survive!"

Michael's reply came couched in a tone of absolute command. "No way, Nigel. I won't buy a tenuous chance of surviving at the price of stranding the six of you. I won't destroy all chance of salvaging the gear and the water you've got to have, so as to leave. Conrad, this is an order. Release the jaws. Now!"

Cleo's heart ceased beating. Time hung in stasis. Eyes glued to the screen, she watched as Conrad reluctantly prepared to obey. She saw that Michael could not release the clamp himself, being unable now either to kneel, or bend from the waist.

Dropping to one knee on the curved surface of the hull, the engineer laid a gloved finger on the mechanism for releasing the clamp. "Michael..." he whispered. A pleading note infused that hoarse utterance.

"If this is it, Conrad, I'm as ready as I'll ever be," Michael asserted in a tone of finality. "Nigel, you're in command. Get them all home, hear? And keep Cleo safe."

"You have my word, Michael." The sibilant voice betrayed an unwonted depth of emotion as its owner offered that assurance.

The Captain's command—possibly his last—tore at Cleo's heart. A succession of images flashed through her mind: of Michael's arms around her, of their strength, of his grin warming her, of his making her that promise. Having ceased to breathe, she watched Conrad's gloved hand touch the release. Her heart fibrillating, she caught the blur of motion as the jaws sprang apart. Faintness assailed her when she saw Michael's silver-clad, stocky form remain upright, motionless.

"The suit's intact!" Conrad's glad cry sent heartfelt, ecstatic relief surging

through the woman standing still as if carven of water ice.

"Those teeth must have just missed catching any of the ventilator tubes," Michael informed the shaken listeners. "The pressure's unchanged. Suffering shades of the moldering ancients of Earth, if that wasn't a long five minutes!"

"You can say that again, chief."

The Captain savoring profound relief experienced shock as he detected a tremor in Nigel's soft, sibilant voice.

"Michael, thank the Powers..." Marvin's voice trailed off, as a gut-wrenching reaction to the emotional stress, almost as devastating as the fear that had gripped him, overcame him.

Cleo made no sound. The cabin swam before her eyes. Her hand, its knuckles white from the intensity of her grip on the metal bar, relaxed its hold. Fighting an onslaught of giddiness, she clutched her chest as her heart pounded thunderously.

Oh, my blistered soul. Michael...if we had lost you...

Relief as intense as any she had ever experienced possessed her, driving all else from her mind. *You're not dead, Michael. Not spaced. I'll hold you again. Tonight!* 

The Captain's voice, steady as ever, seemed to float in from afar. "Conrad, how close are you to retrieving all the power components you need?"

"Another half-hour will do it. But shouldn't you..."

"I'll finish what I started. I'll be done when you are." That curt statement admitted of no argument.

Pushing herself off her perch, Cleo floated past the two men on the board. Turning to glance at her, Nigel observed the pallor of the face still bearing all the signs of profound shock. Frowning, he watched as the woman grasped the handhold next to the far corridor.

"Are you all right?" he demanded in a peremptory tone.

"I am...now." The husky, strained voice vibrated along Nigel's nerves, which had lost something of their usual iron steadiness. His frown deepened as her reply impinged on his consciousness, but he said no more. His eyes followed the slim feminine form, as Cleo pulled herself hand over hand to the door of the first cabin on that side of the bridge.

Half an hour later, the Gaean emerged from the last cabin, having completed her assignment. Trailing her tool kit, she propelled herself onto the bridge, and listened, staring at the dark screens. On the hull, two silver-clad figures, tugging lines to which they had attached a motley array of equipment, prepared to traverse the open space back to the lock.

"Ready, Conrad?" Michael asked.

"Ready."

Simultaneously releasing their boots, the two suited spacers propelled themselves off the hull.

Having shut down the board, Nigel unfastened his harness, as did Marvin. "Finished, Cleo?" the Lieutenant inquired, staring intently into the still-pale face of the Gaean.

"Finished. Seven bunks." The clear voice uttering that assurance betrayed lingering strain.

"Go on out."

Having launched herself through the well, Cleo opened the pressure-proof door into the main lock. Gripping a handhold on the wall, she glued her eyes to the control panel. No change appeared. Nigel's and Marvin's tall forms floated through the door, which closed behind them.

Frowning blackly, Nigel stared at the panel. Three bodies tensed, as it became apparent that the two men outside were taking more time than the traverse warranted. Her heart constricting, Cleo wondered despairingly, *What now? Not another accident...please...* 

Shrouded in silence, taut, still, three people waited. Nigel barked into the microphone, "Michael, what's the matter?"

Static crackled from the amplifier, prompting the officer to mutter, "Now what in the hell..."

Suddenly, the display on the panel changed, indicating that the outer door had been closed. Minutes later it changed again, showing that air now flowed back into the inner lock. The door opened, and Michael floated out, followed by Conrad. The Gaean saw that both of them were enveloped in a snaking tangle of line and tethered components.

Michael's voice issued clearly from the pack on Nigel's back. "Lost you for a bit, did we? Nothing serious. Let's get on down."

Turing his helmeted head, the Captain scanned Cleo's bloodless face. Reassuringly, he smiled at her through the clear, curved material of the faceplate, while Nigel and Marvin strove to untangle the all-encompassing welter of lines and components. When at length they succeeded, they vainly urged Michael to enter the elevator. The Captain crisply ordered Conrad and Cleo to depart. Michael and Marvin followed, hauling one tangle of line. Finally, Nigel emerged, his arms full of the remaining gear.

Michael so far unbent as to let Nigel unlatch helmet and gloves. "Whew!" the Captain exclaimed, rubbing the side of his nose vigorously. "What a relief to be able to scratch my itch." Reaching out a silver-clad arm, he squeezed Cleo's shoulder, smiling into her still-pale face.

The eyes meeting his hid nothing of their owner's feelings, but Cleo uttered not a word, being afraid to trust her voice. Exclaiming, "Conrad, let's rid ourselves of these damned suits," Michael strode away towards the conference cabin.

Divested of his suit, the nude spacer-captain, savoring his awareness of having been granted a fortuitous reprieve, stretched his muscular limbs. Frowning blackly, Nigel watched him reach for his pants, draw them on, and finish dressing.

"What the devil caused that ten-minute failure of the communications system?" the second officer demanded.

Scratching his bare chest vigorously, Conrad explained. "That was my fault, Nigel. I packed along several components that feature powerful residual magnetic fields. Those fields distorted the emissions, once Michael and I got so badly wound up in our two trailing lines of booty. It took some fancy gyrations to get us and the tangle separated well enough that we could maneuver into the lock."

"I wondered. That earlier scare I thought plenty for one day!"

"No lie!"

Laughter filled the cabin, as four still-shaken men released a bit of pent-up tension.

"Conrad, I'm ready for that cup of coffee Cleo tried to urge on me at lunch. How about you?"

Clapping the survivor of a nearly fatal accident on the back, the engineer observed dryly, "Having been scared spitless, I'm damned well ready. An overflow of piss around a leg pales in comparison to the disaster you just avoided by the span of a micron!"

Four shipmates drawn indefinably closer by their brush with danger strode into the dining hall in time to hear Cleo conclude her recital of the events of the afternoon to the cooks. His heart in his eyes, Justin laid an arm across Michael's shoulders. Leonard, his face almost as pale as Cleo's, gripped the Captain's hand, prompting the survivor determined to forestall any new expressions of relief to urge, "Justin, we could use a cup of coffee."

The man thus adjured hastily complied, emerging from the laboratory with a tall pot of the brew.

Having tested the temperature, Michael drained his cup in a series of steady gulps. Winking at Cleo, he observed blandly, "I worked up a thirst, after abstaining at lunch."

"Michael, nothing you can say right now will bother me in the least, since you're here to say it," she informed him crisply.

"I have to admit, I'm glad of that myself. Leonard, are you ready to dig into supper with unabated appetite?"

The temporary cook's grin matched the questioner's for wickedness. "If I catch any of you staring rudely at how I handle that, I'll describe my day in detail, while you eat," he threatened.

Bandying jokes, seven people savoring the intactness of their company conversed animatedly throughout the forty minutes remaining before supper. When they lined up to receive helpings of fried eel, potato cakes, and steamed greens, Leonard drew a knowing grin as he filled the electrical engineer's plate.

"Save enough for you, skinny," Conrad urged.

"Never fear, my appetite's unimpaired, and that's more than you could boast, right after you first helped Justin!"

"In that case, I'd say the job ought to fall to you permanently."

After dinner, Cleo repaired to her cabin. Standing before the mirror, she combed her hair, and stared at her reflection.

I'll wager that today etched permanent lines in my brow, she mused bleakly. My perishing soul! Michael and Conrad will be back out, tomorrow, on the hull of Eleven, I expect. I'll carry my heart in my mouth, all day. Oh, Michael. In that extremity, to think of me, and say what you did! I love you...

Hurriedly, she stripped off her suit.

Lying under the cover, utterly unable to relax, Cleo reviewed the events of the afternoon. The morning seemed as remote as ten Earthyears ago. Her mind in turmoil, she listened for a familiar step. At length, she heard her partner for the night arrive fifteen minutes early.

Barely had the entrant closed the door, when the Gaean sprang out of bed, unmindful of her state of complete undress, to hurl herself into his embrace. Clinging to him with wiry strength, she cried, "Michael, I thought you were going to die out there!"

"Today wasn't my time, Cleo." Lifting her bodily, the man elated by his welcome brushed his lips across her hair, before sitting on the edge of the bed and cradling her in his arms. "You looked white as freshly cut water ice, when I came back in."

"I don't doubt that at all." Slipping her hands inside the bands of her lover's

tunic, Cleo hurriedly pushed the fabric back over muscular shoulders, pulled at the sleeves, and drew the tunic off. Hugging Michael fiercely, she buried her face in his chest.

The touch of her tongue on his skin roused the hardy survivor from contented awareness of the depth of her concern to raw lust. "Let me shed my pants," he murmured in her ear.

Releasing him, Cleo reached out with insistent hands as he rose to his feet, to yank at his encumbering garment. The urgency implicit in her gesture acted on Michael's senses like a double shot of old brandy. His pants having dropped over his boots, he sat down to free himself of both, enjoying the touch of insistent hands sliding around his chest from behind as a moist tongue caressed the back of his shoulder.

Twisting out of Cleo's embrace, he folded her in his. With hands, and mouth, he used all the skill he possessed—more than he had utilized in their prior encounters, being unwilling until now to risk inhibiting that abandon which so deeply stirred him, by offending her Gaean sensibilities. Concluding that in her present state, no art with which he felt comfortable would likely do other than gratify her, he exerted himself to his utmost, and knew when he finished that his efforts lifted her to ecstasy.

Lying limply in Michael's arms, suffused with sensual warmth mingled with profound relief at knowing him alive and unharmed, Cleo savored both feelings. As she drifted slowly out of her state of euphoria, awareness of what he had done impinged on her consciousness.

My blistered soul, Michael just did what I thought no one knew how to do but Nigel, and I simply lay back and enjoyed it! He must have been afraid before tonight that I'd be shocked. Now he knows I wasn't. What must he think of me?

A hot blush suffused the Gaean's cheeks, just as Michael turned her towards him, having things on his mind he wished to share. The sight of her scarlet face jolted him. Drawing her close, he whispered, "You took pleasure in what I did, Cleo. I could sense that. Are you ashamed now of reaching that height of pleasure?" The note of dismay in her lover's voice shook the woman still unnerved by the event earlier in the day. "Michael, no...I'm not. You generated utter bliss. But I'm not used to experiencing that. It occurred to me to wonder...whether you thought me..." The flustered widow's voice trailed off into silence.

Amused as well as reassured, Michael hugged her as he murmured, "Cleo, I know your people place an absurdly high value on modesty, so I've tried not to do anything that would cause you offense. Just now, though, you seemed so eager, that I ran the risk. I enjoy making love to you in any fashion, but tonight was the best yet. And when you meet me more than half-way, you rouse me to admiration for an independence of mind that lets you rise above your social conditioning."

Conscious of the relief suffusing honest brown eyes, Michael succumbed to a need to share the thought striking him. "Cleo, let me tell you something," he confided in a tone of impassioned intensity. "Death's plucking at my sleeve is no new experience for me. Always before, when I landed in some jackpot like that today, I'd think, this is where your career ends, spacer-captain, and all the goals I knew I'd never achieve if that proved to be the case would flash through my mind. But today, a totally different vision unfolded when I figured I'd likely not make it. 'Damn,' I thought, 'I'm missing my night with Cleo, and I'll never get to hold her in my arms again.'"

"Michael!" Touched to the core, the captive tightened her arms convulsively around this man she perceived as a pillar of strength. "I was thinking much the same thing," she confessed, "and I'm dreading your having to go out there again tomorrow!"

Michael's mouth closed over hers. His kiss briefly stirred passion in both of them, but his need for communion of the spirit outweighed that physical urge. Lying facing his companion, he remarked softly, "Today's problem was a freak occurrence, Cleo. Actually, going out on a hull isn't fearfully dangerous. Normally, I enjoy it."

The degree of amazement produced by that assertion kindled a broad grin. "You know, Earthmen able to walk freely about on the surface of their planet must have developed a need to look down long vistas, or up into a limitless blue sky," the spacer remarked musingly. "I read somewhere that when they took their first halting steps towards entering space, they worried a lot about what the lack of far views would do to their minds. They built windows into vessels and stations which allowed a few disasters from meteoroid strikes, and later rendered the colonies all the more vulnerable to attack. Gradually, they altered their thinking.

"I guess men don't miss what they've never known. If you spend your life observing your star system on screens that don't give you a wrap-around view no matter how true the color or how fine the resolution of the image, that becomes normal reality for you.

"Well, we're not Earthmen. Standing in a pressure suit with your feet magnetically stuck to a hull—especially on a ship, or one of these small sections when you look out through the faceplate of your helmet, you're staring directly into infinity: past the countless banks of stars of the galaxy. Talk about vistas! You have no real horizon. You're the center of a sphere, almost.

"That view thrills me to the core, and yet I know men who find the sight deeply disturbing. Perhaps they get too clear a glimpse of what an infinitesimal mote a lone man forms in his universe. As for me...I grow awash in pride...develop a heady sense of freedom.

"For puny creatures, we've come a long way. That space stretching away beckons to me...exerts a siren pull on some non-rational part of my brain. An urge to see what's out there sweeps over me. That identical urge must be innate...the force that from the beginning pushed men to explore the unknown. It drove our ancestors to embark on their stupendously risky and utterly irrevocable one-way jump to this system. It fades when I come back in, to resume the ordinary press of work."

Breathless with wonder, Cleo stared into eyes blue as the fabled sky of a lost paradise: eyes that took on a dreamy aspect as Michael expressed in his usual concise manner thoughts she instinctively knew he rarely shared with anyone. Thrilled that he would confide them to her, she grew aware that her impression of him just took on a new, deeper dimension.

She had sensed the driving force of his ambition. Early on, she had realized that his anger at their first meeting stemmed not so much from his being stranded, as from his suffering a major setback to a career he saw as a path to achieving cherished goals. Now she glimpsed a more complex side to his thinking.

This man's as much researcher as he is leader, she mused. He's a scientist as well as military officer. Must breed conflicts at times, that dual role. Stricken with shame upon recalling that she had never asked the question lancing out of the black at this juncture, she asked, "What's your major field of study, Michael?"

"Mathematics, first and foremost. Navigation. Physics. But as captain of a military scientific team, I'm mostly a coordinator of a group of repairmen who spend a lot of time fixing what inept idiots mess up. The military life's the only route a man can take that will give him access to a ship, unless he's one of the lucky few that own a cargo vessel. And it's fast becoming the sole viable route to power..."

Suddenly conscious that he just revealed more concerning his personal ambitions than he intended, Michael abruptly broke off his remark in mid-sentence, and drew Cleo closer. With no lessening of the intensity of his tone, he covered his near slip with an admission every bit as candidly honest as the one that had almost escaped him.

"You know, Cleo, I wish I could spend a day in bed with you. Not just making love, but talking, with no worries, no responsibilities, no obligations. Completely relaxed. And then, I wish I could spare the time to take you out on the hull, and show you the view. I'd get you over your qualms about the danger."

Deeply touched, the prisoner of war exclaimed impulsively, "What a lovely thought! It's hardly practical, but I'm so downright relieved that you're alive, and here beside me, I won't tempt fate by wishing for more than I've got right now. Michael...kiss me again."

This time the passion stirred by that gesture prevailed. Lying utterly spent in strong arms afterwards, exhausted by the fears and strains of the day, Cleo drifted

into sleep.

Michael remained wide-awake for a long time. Physically satiated, he quested mentally for solutions to a host of problems, one of which towered mightily above the rest. The wild notion that had so intrigued him on the previous day returned forcefully to color his thoughts and fire his imagination even as he enumerated to himself the reasons that made the crazy idea an impossibility. At length, utterly wearied in mind, he pillowed his head on Cleo's breast, and slept.

## **WEEK FOUR: TUESDAY**

Cleo awoke early, to find Michael still soundly asleep. Propping herself on an elbow, she studied the rugged face on the pillow.

No one would consider Michael handsome, she reflected, and yet I'll wager women have always found him attractive. Respectable women, that is. I don't suppose looks matter especially to courtesans. What quality does this man possess that makes me think that? His utter self-assurance? That aura of command that strongly impacts women as well as men? That grin that so early on warmed me enough that I lost a goodly share of my anger and resentment, despite his having taken me by force?

His words of the night before came back to her, producing an inner glow.

*Oh, Michael, I'd like to spend a day in bed with you, for the chance to get to know you even more deeply than I now do. For that, first, before making love, even though you stir some elemental passion in me that no one else has ever roused…even Nigel. Even…Max.* 

An onslaught of guilt passed almost immediately into something akin to wonder. Where did you learn what you know about the art of making love, spacercaptain? Have there been women in your life who weren't courtesans? Women you loved? Who loved you?

The intent observer minutely studied the granite features relaxed in sleep. How old are you? You can't be fifty yet. Forty-six? Forty-seven? Or is there a lot of wear on you? If days like yesterday occur frequently in your experience, likely they've taken a toll...etched those creases into your forehead, and produced those wrinkles at the corners of your eyes and mouth. Come to think of it, you look younger, asleep, and not nearly so tough as I know you to be. Time you woke. I'll give you what you need, never fear. I never saw a morning yet when you didn't need that.

Dropping on her bedmate's muscular chest, Cleo slipped her hands under him, intending to kiss him, but at the first touch of her body across his own, he came instantly awake. Lightning reflexes sparked an automatic response. Drawing his feet up close to his buttocks, he bridged upwards. Thrusting one leg forward, he wheeled his body in the direction of the extended leg, and with his braced, bent leg pushed his startled companion over and off.

Even as he positioned his hand to deliver a lethal blow, the man reacting purely reflexively realized what he had done, and aborted his attack. His face creasing into an apologetic grin, he gathered his shocked bedmate into his arms, and kissed her, hard, long, and passionately.

Withdrawing his mouth at length from hers, he cautioned wryly, "As welcome a notion as that was, Cleo, it's a chancy thing to do to a man with training in martial arts. I'd hate to come fully awake to find that I'd stunned you with a slash to the side of the neck, or worse yet, killed you."

"My perishing soul! I all but expired from sheer fright!"

"Have I now got to forfeit what I suspect formed a most welcome invitation?" Laughing shakily, Cleo tightened her arms around this man she had not suspected to possess martial skills. "On the contrary, I'd appreciate your soothing my shattered nerves."

Rising to rest on his knees, Michael placed one on either side of her hips. Cupping both hands around her breasts, he rubbed her nipples, watching as her eyes closed, and her face grew rapt. Moving downward as he slid eager hands slid over her body, he tongued the soft skin of her stomach. Her hands caressed his shoulders, and then ruffled his hair. When his mouth found her now erect center of pleasure, a soft cry escaped her. Waves of exquisite sensation coursed along her nerves. When at length he desisted, and mounted her, she arched so as to meet the thrust of his hard manhood. As her hands gripping the muscled arms that raised his weight off her, Michael scanned the face that hid nothing of its owner's bliss, masculine pride serving to intensify the physical delight of the culmination he achieved simultaneously with his partner.

Spent, he dropped on her, and lay panting, pressing a cheek roughened by a faint shadow of beard against her breast. Her hands stroked his arms.

Damn, I don't want to get up, he complained to his alter ego. I don't even want to think about donning that blasted suit that so nearly became a tomb, yesterday. Damn it, today's just the beginning. Easy day, this, compared to the ones coming, when we rig a tether. I hope to hell that my engineering skill matches my estimation of it, and that Marvin's ability to program into the ungainly vehicle we're creating exactly what we're going to require so as to lift justifies my faith in his talent. We'll need all the skill and all the luck we can muster.

I likely shocked Cleo, just now. I guess I should have warned her to watch how she wakes me. Hell of a way to react. Why did she wake so early? She's undoubtedly worried about the risk we face today. Damn!

Rolling reluctantly off his partner, Michael propped himself on an elbow, and glanced at the clock on the wall. *Five minutes before we have to get up.* 

Opening her eyes, Cleo caressed her lover's broad shouldered back. "Scratch it, while you're at it," he urged. Complying vigorously, she smiled as she heard his grunt of pleasure.

Turning to look down at her, he observed, "While encased in a pressure suit, you can't scratch an itch, or blow your nose, or wipe an eye. You just have to grin and bear the discomfort. Well. Much as I'd like to lie here until I get the urge again, we'd better heave ourselves out."

"Heave yourself out, and throw me my uniform, like a gallant soul."

"You didn't seem to worry about your state of undress when you flew at me last

night!"

"That was last night."

"And why does walking around nude bother you, after what we just did?" Frowning puzzlement punctuated that query.

"I don't know, but it does."

Shaking his head even as he flashed his unfathomable lover a grin, Michael fetched her clothes, dressed, and helped her make the bed. As he opened the door to allow her to precede him out, he noticed that her uniform hung slackly on her slim frame.

Order Justin to give Cleo a check-up, he adjured himself. She seems to have lost quite a bit of mass. I wonder why? She's not off her feed. Tension? She seems to be getting along well with everyone. Has she arrived at the same conclusion that's tearing at you, regarding our return? Damn! Find an angle, Michael. One that's foolproof. There's got to be a solution you haven't thought of yet!

Having thrust those considerations behind him by the time he reached the dining hall, the Captain focused solely on the work now imminent. Independently of his mental processes, his body reflected the physical satisfaction he had just achieved in such abundant measure. As he strode into the dining hall to follow Cleo along the counter with a spring in his step, a glow of which he remained unconscious illumined his rugged countenance. Jauntily, he bore his plate and steaming cup to the table, where he did grow conscious of riveting Nigel's attention. That intense scrutiny he attributed to the imminence of a dangerous expedition onto the hull.

Seating herself opposite Michael, Cleo bid everyone good-morning, her own shapely figure betraying a buoyancy of the spirit that she never sought to hide, being for the most part unaware of its obviousness.

From his vantage point behind the counter, Leonard noticed. No jealous shaft impacted his generous heart.

*I'll wager that I know what they did on waking*, he surmised. *That business yesterday threw an awful scare into Cleo. I expect that she needed reassurance that* 

Michael's still in one piece. She seems to have satisfied herself that he is. Damned if she doesn't look even prettier than usual this morning. No sign of strain. Something's been worrying her lately. I sincerely hope it's not what I suspect it is. We don't need that!

Having assimilated a generous ration of banana muffins and baked fish, Michael shifted his gaze from Conrad, seated in Leonard's usual place, to the Lieutenant.

"Nigel, you know how those cameras are mounted on a ship's hull. They're set into the jaws of clamps like the one that almost did for me, yesterday. The cameras can be taken out and changed readily, and the jaws detached, but the bases of the mounts form an integral part of the hull. Eleven's hull lacks any way to attach cameras. You'll help me build bases, this morning. I've determined where on the hull the cameras will need to go. Conrad, will you encounter similar difficulty while rigging your power fixtures?"

Thus crisply questioned, the engineer shrugged. "It's a matter of increasing the power available, not starting from scratch, as far as my chore is concerned," he explained. "I expect that I'll manage. I've never gotten a view of Eleven's hull, but I've formed a fairly comprehensive idea of what's got to be out there. What bothers me is the spin. That could black us both out, especially if we try walking clear around to the side of Eleven facing away from the rim. I don't imagine I'll need to, but you will. I'd hate like hell to get launched into space at the velocity my getting hurled off would confer, or watch you vanish into the void!"

"We're going to diminish the spin. We can't stop it altogether. We'd cause havoc if we rendered the whole station weightless, but we can cut the g down to a ninth of Earth-normal, by slowing the angular speed from one revolution a minute to one in three minutes. That feat, we'll do gyroscopically. It requires no expenditure of precious water fuel. The Gaeans' space-worthy section must be equipped with a remote-controlled way to slow the station's spin as they come in. That would make it easier to land section and countermass simultaneously on a lock that ordinarily has a linear velocity of 93.6 meters a second. Right, Cleo?" "They do slow the spin, Michael. Docking on the station's still scary, even though the whole sequence is automatic."

"I thought so. Some programming job, that landing sequence, wouldn't you agree, Marvin?"

"I surely would. Quite a feat of engineering, this whole station. How old is it, Cleo?"

"One hundred ten Earthyears. It was built with an eye to viewing the second close approach Whipple made after the early settlers landed here, among other reasons. The First Minister of Gaea at that time chanced to be a scientist. He boasted incredible persuasive powers. He talked his Council of Ministers into financing the project. That was our golden age of scientific advancement, but researchers have continued to occupy this station periodically ever since."

"I see," Marvin replied softly.

"Do you wish me to help you outside, Michael?" Nigel inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"That depends on whether you and I can finish improvising those bases I mentioned, this morning, and on how difficult—or easy—they are to laser-weld to the hull. I'd prefer not to have both of us out there at the same time, Nigel, until that becomes absolutely necessary. If anything happens to me, you're in command. I'll hold you to your word of yesterday."

"You have it. You don't need to ask me for it twice." Dark eyes flashed, and the sibilant voice took on a brittle edge.

Michael countered evenly, "I'm not asking twice. I'm just stating a fact. Well. Marvin, assist Conrad, this morning. Nigel, you and Cleo will help me haul to Eleven what I took off the ship. After you lay out what she's to do, we'll see what we can devise for bases to which the mounts can be safely and easily fastened."

Pushing a wheeled bin in which she had carefully stacked her complement of cameras and jaw assemblies, Cleo arrived on the main deck of Eleven, accompanied by both officers. Having parked her conveyance on the deck next to theirs, she turned an inquiring glance on Nigel, who frowned as he spoke. "Cleo, there's no way you're going to be able to work on the line from condenser to accumulator tank. We need to do some intensive dismantling and cleaning of those components. It'll take more than one pair of hands for most of it. You're certainly not going to be able to mount a compressor to service the aerators after we change over, by yourself. So today would be a good day for you to work in the tertiary tank. The jungle could stand some taming, hm? Use your own judgment on what needs done."

Caught by surprise, the engineer beamed on her team leader. "That's a chore I'll enjoy, Nigel," she exclaimed, smiling radiantly at him. Her face swiftly darkened. "Michael, take care out there," she urged softly. "You and Conrad both." Without waiting for an answer, she turned, and vanished through the hatch into the lower deck.

Both officers watched her go. Warmth reflected from Michael's eyes, even as a frown overspread Nigel's unprepossessing features.

Stepping through the door of the tall enclosure into air that bore a pristine freshness, Cleo stood, hands on hips, regarding the lush growth overflowing the bounds of the ascending spiral.

My blistered soul, jungle's the right word! Where to start? I'll need to focus on plants that must be eaten just as they grow, even as they serve to reduce the concentration of carbon dioxide in the air. The potatoes badly need work, and they're a staple. Start there.

From a locker under the bottom loop of the spiral, the Gaean withdrew trowel, claw, shears, pruning tools, and several pairs of gloves, all too big.

Now, why haven't I collected those gloves I left in Fifteen? she berated herself in exasperation. No time now. These will have to work, or I can do without. My hands can't grow much more callused!

As the researcher's hands engaged in work she loved, part of her mind focused on other matters.

I hope nothing scary happens out there today. Don't forget to ask Nigel for

another pill. Reducing the g will likely induce motion sickness.

I wonder whether fish feel the effect. They must experience something akin to weightlessness all the time, buoyed up in water, though, come to think about it. If the station went altogether weightless, and the water in this primary tank rose in a ball to float, would the shrimp know the difference? They would if the ball fragmented into droplets, all right, but in a sphere...I'm not sure. Probably even a fish wouldn't notice.

Would enough oxygen diffuse through the surface tension of the sphere to keep the fish alive for a time, despite the lack of mechanical aeration? There'd be far more surface area, so I expect they'd be all right for a while. What would happen if a fish decided to investigate the "surface," and leaped through? Would his breaching the invisible film cause the sphere to fragment? Or would the unfortunate swimmer just float away, amazed at the change? With no gravity, his gills wouldn't collapse, as they would in the air of Earth, or a station with Earth-normal artificial gravity. It's that collapse that prevents the fish from getting oxygen, and causes death.

Remember reading that odd account? How on one of the first stations the men of Old Earth placed in orbit around the planet, they engineered no artificial gravity, and one enterprising experimenter grew fish hydroponically? How he let them float weightless in air having one hundred percent humidity? They stayed moist, and presumably happy, so maybe the fish would be better off if the sphere did dissociate into droplets. The fishy-smelling atmosphere would scarcely please the people, though. Just imagine accidentally inhaling shrimp, and worms, and snails, while floating about in air full of wrigglers from a primary tank. Yuck!

Shaking her head at that disconcerting mental image, Cleo turned her mind to more practical notions.

I need to transfer my collection of seeds, and my frozen flower and fruit tissue, to Eleven. Some night during recreation, I ought to move that small refrigerator I used to store my suspensions and solutions. Conrad would help me install it under this spiral. I'll take that material with me, when we go. I still might be able, some day, to finish that fascinating project I had barely commenced. Revolutionary, it would be, if it works the way I suspect it would. Might Gaea possibly be blessed with a new Minister of Food Resources, by the time Signe drives Norman out, and I get back?

If I ever do get back. Don't dwell on that possibility! Assume that you will, and don't let this exciting beginning you made come to nothing.

Firmly forcing that perennial worry to the back of her mind, the woman made the most of the unexpected opportunity, and worked diligently on the plants.

Absorbed in her task, Cleo lost track of time. No thought of taking a break entered her mind. Perched on the ladder suspended from a ring close to the peak of the enclosure, which allowed the ladder to be moved in a circle giving access to all parts of the spiral, she never heard the slight sound of the translucent door's opening, over the low, whirring background noise of fans.

Michael's brisk query startled her. "Forget to take your break, Cleo?"

"Is it that time already?" Setting her trowel aside, the engineer descended, carrying a glass-cloth bag of knobby tubers. Dropping her burden beside several other bags reposing on the deck, she smiled buoyantly at the visitor.

Instead of inviting her to ascend to the upper deck, Michael sat down with his back to the spiral. "Care if I spend my break here?"

"Of course not. I'd enjoy the company."

Michael's grin warmed the Gaean. "I left Nigel and Marvin giving gratuitous advice to Conrad," he informed her. "Nigel solved my problem in short order. He remodeled a certain type of light fixture into a base to which we could attach the mounts I detached from the bases on the hull of the ship. He also knew where to find a portable, continuous-wave laser-welding device I could pack out to the hull. That outfit's smaller than the one we brought from the ship. Hard to beat Nigel's inventiveness, when it comes to utilizing what's available."

"I've discovered that, myself. He's a genius at adapting to his need whatever lies handiest."

"He surely is. Flourishing stand of growth in this tank, isn't there? Amazing, that, given that no one tended it for Earthyears at a time."

"These plants were selected with hardiness in mind. Some of them would take over, except that whoever planted them isolated them from the rest. Like those hop vines, over there."

"Are those good to eat?"

"Not directly, usually, although new, tender vine-tips can be added to salads. Earthmen used the fruits to flavor beer, a bitter alcoholic beverage. If you've got only a limited supply of yeast, you can boil potatoes with hops, mash the cooked potato, and add a bit of yeast, with sucrose and a little salt. You let that rise, add some sort of granular meal to make the mixture stiff, cut that into squares, and dry and wrap them. If stored in a cool place, the cubes will keep until you're ready to use them in bread, or to start a new batch of yeast cakes. I expect that's what Justin has done, to keep what he found in the old lab going."

"Mmm. Any signs of asparagus stalks yet?"

"I looked today. See those? There ought to be enough for a trial batch, in a week or ten days."

"I'm preserving an open mind. Are those knobby jobs in the bag potatoes?"

"No. Those are tubers from edible sunflowers: another plant itching to take over. Boiled, they sport a sweet, tangy flavor. Justin uses them in mixed vegetables. They display an odd quality: their carbohydrates exist in the form of inulin, rather than starch, so they're not at all fattening."

That final word recalled to Michael's mind his resolve to order Justin to determine the reason for Cleo's loss of mass. *You keep forgetting to do that!* he chided himself. "Is chicory established in here?"

"No. That only grew in Twenty-four's tertiary tank. I fully intend to make a place for it, though, in ours. We can do without all that alfalfa. There's not much food value in that growth. Alfalfa got planted here because it's a tough, long-lived legume that harbors the bacteria that fix atmospheric nitrogen and improve soil.

Formerly, only legumes did that, but modern plants have been genetically engineered to fix their own nitrogen. Proper manipulation of the fifty or so genes involved takes delicate, precise work, but the technique has become standard."

"By all means, toss it out and start chicory. I'm getting as psychologically addicted to that as to coffee."

"I wonder if it does contain some stimulant alkaloid, like caffeine? I must analyze it, some time, and see whether I can isolate one."

"Wouldn't it be a joy to have time to work on all those fascinating potential projects we think up, and then forget?"

"It surely would. Nigel keeps muttering that if he could spare the time, he'd render the process of reactivating the ion-exchange resins in the urine-treatment apparatus automatic. And I had begun a truly engrossing line of plant research, before..." Recalling to whom she spoke, Cleo broke off in mid-sentence.

"Before we arrived to shatter your career, and mess up your life." Michael's bleak tone matched the wave of bitter self-reproach that rose into his consciousness from the place where it lay barely submerged, serving as a periodic source of mental pain.

Those words evoked an odd mixture of sympathy and chagrin. "What I managed to accomplish damaged your career, Michael," the shrewd reasoner conceded forthrightly. "Don't think I didn't realize that, right from the start. Knowing that made it easier for me to accept..."

"What I forced on you."

"Your solution worked out."

"Due to your mature handling of a touchy situation."

"And your skill at leadership, which has allowed you to stay firmly in control."

"I wish I could find a way to make up to you, some day, what I know living this life is costing you."

That patently sincere wish evoked a weary smile. "What's done is done, Michael. I learned yesterday what you've come to mean to me: more even than I thought. You made a decision that you felt to be best for everyone. Right or wrong, you can't alter it now. Let's not talk of that. Our careers are all on hold, until our present challenge lies behind us. If it's any comfort to you, I'm incredibly grateful to you for your other even more radical arrangement: making a female prisoner of war part of your team."

The man's rugged face brightened. "I frankly admit to having gotten more than I bargained for, there. You're a prime asset. That realization prompts me to concede that Columbia has wasted a good share of its national endowment of talent."

"When you attain your goal of governing your world, spacer-captain, keep that thought in mind, and change the way your countrymen regard women." That admonition emerged in a serenely matter-of-fact tone.

Concealing the shock her words produced severely tested the ambitious professional soldier's control of his face. "Any such notion would of necessity stay a vastly long-range goal, Cleo."

"You're young yet, so you don't lack time in which to reach a long-range goal."

"I'm forty-five. Half-way through my life...or at least the active part of it."

"You've that many more Earthyears at least in which to achieve supreme political power, and you possess ability combined with decency. Your world could do immensely worse, Michael."

The ambitious autocrat's shock deepened. "Cleo, that's the second most profoundly satisfying compliment anyone has ever paid me!" Rising, he took her hands in his, and lifted her to her feet. "Recalling those words will counteract the frustrations awaiting me this afternoon. I appreciate what you said, believe me." Those sentiments came couched in a voice freighted with telltale huskiness. "I'd best get back to my string of cameras." Turning, the Captain departed.

On seeing Michael arrive back on the main deck of Eleven, three lounging subordinates rose hastily to their feet, and regarded him quizzically. All of them knew what attraction had lured him below. Conrad's lean face wore a knowing look. Marvin developed a faint flush as he dropped his glance, forgetting his resolve for a time under the weight of his pained conclusion that Cleo would naturally prefer Michael's company on her break to his own. Nigel's face for the most part remained impassive, but a trace of strong emotion flickered briefly in his eyes.

Having resolved Conrad's problem, Marvin and Nigel set about helping him prepare for his foray onto the hull, leaving their superior to the tedious, self-imposed task of affixing an adaptor to each of the bases he and Nigel had fashioned earlier: bases to which the jaw assemblies would attach. Sitting cross-legged on the deck, Michael worked steadily, giving more than enough of his mind to the task to avoid any careless mistake that would result in a later loss of a precious camera. Other thoughts surfaced to disturb his peace.

Cleo's more perceptive than you gave her credit for being, he conceded wryly. She caught your slip, last night, or deduced what any military officer possessed of driving ambition would contemplate, these times, in Columbia. Decency. She said that to your face, after what you did to her, and she meant it. Is it true, really? You compromised whatever decency you possess by making the decision you did, regarding your female captive. You couldn't trust even yourself to let her alone.

Power. That has been your goal all along: clawing your way into a position where no one can give you orders. You've obeyed a lot of stupid orders over the Earthyears. Only luck enabled you to survive carrying out some of them. Well, luck deserted you, when you hit this jackpot.

Or has it? Would you wish yourself disembarking in Columbia about now, from the Gaeans' section, having jettisoned the five corpses of Cleo's comrades: noncombatant enemy researchers killed when you stormed aboard their shuttlevehicle over their dead bodies? You docked on this station prepared to do that. You never dreamed you'd be fighting women when you rushed the Gaeans, even though you knew that they field female fighters. Or at least, that Signe does.

What would it be like, to find that you'd wiped a woman? Or several? Dropped Wallace's wife, as well as himself, with a lethal pulse from a handweapon? Once you engaged in combat, you'd have fought your best. You would have knowingly killed women, if they formed part of an armed force that fought back. If Cleo had sought to play us off one against the other—deliberately tried to foment trouble—you'd have killed her. Passed judgment, and then executed an enemy far too dangerous to keep alive. You took a fearful chance when you made her part of your team. You placed a wealth of trust in your intuition. Worked out, that long shot did, far better than you had any right to hope.

Signe employs female combatants in her military force. What effect must their dying in combat produce on the morale of the men? Watching girls sustain ghastly wounds? Damn! Bad enough seeing that happen to the men under you!

Maybe if those rebels fight utterly convinced that dying for freedom beats the alternative, they could bear seeing girls die in action. Come to think of it, it was a woman of Old Earth who put that concept in the terms you find so memorable. "Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees." She scored a point.

Evidently Sigurd instilled that tenet into the head of that rebel daughter of his. Signe routinely engages in vicious hand-to-hand sword fighting through corridors and atop barricades. She fights with a blade, unprotected by even light armor that would hamper her movements. That blasted woman excels at a particularly bloody form of modern warfare.

Ironic, that. When long-range weapons of mass destruction grew so diabolically effective that use by equally well-armed hostile forces inevitably resulted in total mutual destruction, our ancestors opted not to incur the devastation wrought thus, and returned to less genocidal—less suicidal—methods of warfare. Norman's conquest—invasion mounted by a large force operating on a relatively slim budget eerily parallels the wars fought during the fifteenth century on Earth. What a woman Signe must be, to gain legendary repute as a warrior, while fighting that savage, ruthless, power-mad, but eminently skilled professional!

Time was, you never thought about women until you got the urge in a place where you could buy relief. At least...over these last ten Earthyears, you haven't regarded women in any other way. Myrna hasn't come to mind for a long time. Made a wise choice, she did. You can admit that, finally. She couldn't have handled marriage to a spacer who'd only be home every eight weeks or so. Quite the society matron now, she must be. So charming a hostess undoubtedly fills that role to perfection. Wedding the bureaucrat who rose to be Minister of Life-Support Maintenance constituted a social triumph, whatever that choice of hers cost you, or herself.

You enjoyed taking Myrna to bed. Obviously, you weren't her first lover. Probably, you were the last of quite a few, given her skill. But in hindsight, you can admit the truth. That sensual artistry formed her chief attraction. Once you gained access to her bed, Michael, you missed the excitement of the chase...missed the smug satisfaction arising from vanquishing your rivals.

What turn would your relationship have taken, when you got back from a long stretch on a place like that damned outpost on O'Neill? You couldn't have talked about your work. Myrna wouldn't have understood, or cared. Listening to her accounts of her social successes would have bored you numb. Maybe you're lucky you didn't get tied up in a contract which the arrival of children would have rendered indissoluble, in your perception, at least. You don't enter a contract lightly, even if your joint signatures could dissolve it.

Cleo. Now, she'd make a man a wife. Partner. Comrade. Lover, despite her conditioning. Witness last night. All her concern for your safety translated into passion. She launched herself into your arms with no thought of anything but you, while stark naked! What a woman she is. You didn't love Myrna, Michael. You didn't know, back then, what that word meant. But you've learned, now that you've irrevocably complicated Cleo's life and your own. Damn my luck! Or my stupidity. Or both!

Suddenly grown aware that dwelling on such recriminations prior to commencing a relatively dangerous undertaking—one in which he would need to keep his mind clear and his nerves steady—nowise constituted a wise course, Michael resolutely banished all thought of his personal life, and focused solely on technical considerations until the hour arrived for lunch.

Over plates of baked stuffed eel, rolls, and vegetable casserole, five people ate rather silently, two of them reviewing the work, and two the danger to their comrades. Whatever Nigel pondered found no expression on his face.

Behind the counter, Justin studied Cleo's aspect. She looks gaunt, he mused uneasily. She's still losing mass. Stress? Yesterday certainly didn't help her. She looked pale as a wisp of condensing breath in a refrigerated hold, last night. I need to summon her for a checkup and a talk. Remember to mention that to Michael. She looks strained again today. She's undoubtedly worrying about this afternoon.

So am I. I hate the thought of what might still happen. We need Michael. Nigel would keep his word, but he'd use raw force. Michael gloves that iron will of his with tact, and scrupulous fairness. Nigel would get us home, but at a steep price to our peace, and if we're to succeed, we need Michael's skills. Cleo's, as well. If we lost Nigel, we'd still have a life-support expert. Damn! Don't even think of that! Just hope we lose none of us.

After lunch, Marvin and Michael manned Central's main board, and shut down the spin. Having remembered to ask for a pill, before lunch, Cleo hoped for the best. Lying flat on her bunk, she endured the powerful sidewise force generated as her body attempted to move at unchanged speed, while the bunk slowed its rotational motion. A sense of buoyancy impinged on her senses, as the artificial gravity inexorably lessened.

*No queasiness*, she rejoiced. *These monster pills work better than ours did!* 

Waiting until her surroundings stabilized, the novice spacer gingerly stood up, savoring a pleasurable lightness of being. Emerging into the corridor, while carefully avoiding taking steps with her usual force, which would drive her nine times higher for the same muscular effort, she watched Michael and Conrad head for the conference cabin, where they stored their suits.

While walking back alone to Eleven, Cleo laid plans for the afternoon. I might as well dig out that alfalfa, and replace it with chicory and rhubarb. Yes, and artichokes from Twenty-two, even though Justin hasn't tried those. I should collect soybeans for seed, and plant those in place of alfalfa.

I need the gear I left in Fifteen. If I'm not here when they return, Nigel will guess where I've gone, won't he? He delegated this job to me, and surely he's long past thinking that I'm napping somewhere. He looked grim, at lunch. Worried? Hardly likely, especially after Michael emphasized that Nigel is second in command. Brr. Even now, I'd hate to think of the consequences of Nigel's taking full command. He'd keep his word, but we'd miss Michael's evenhanded organization of the work. We'd miss Michael Dreadfully!

Resolutely, Cleo banished those chilling thoughts. Upon arriving in Eleven, she piled the gear she had used that morning on the bottom shelf of a cart, and pushed the vehicle to Fifteen. With painstaking care, she divided rhubarb plants, and wrapped the roots in glass-cloth to prevent their drying out. That process she next repeated with the chicory.

*I'll collect some rhubarb seed as well,* she decided. Keeping her mind firmly on her work, she labored to attain the goals she set herself.

At mid-afternoon, Cleo chanced to glance at her watch. *Oh, my soul, it's half an hour past the time for my break. I guess I'll take it late—that won't matter, today.* Dare I stick my head in the door of the bridge, and see what's going on outside? Why not?

Having ascended to the bridge, Cleo entered the tent to find Nigel lounging in a chair, viewing the exterior on a functioning screen, while wearing the communications pack. Marvin she discovered to be nowhere in sight. On the screen, Michael's silver-clad form could be observed, as he wielded his laser-welding device.

"Nigel, may I watch?" the newcomer asked. "I worked past the time for my break, so I'm taking it late."

Swiveling around to glance sharply at his visitor, Nigel gestured to a second chair. "Sit there. Marvin's working in Central's main power box, making certain that Conrad doesn't electrocute himself. It's a good thing his pack still works that far away. He's able to talk to Conrad. I wondered if some of Central's equipment mightn't cause interference, but so far no problem has occurred."

"Everything's going all right out there, I trust?"

Though Cleo kept her voice neutral, she grew uncomfortably aware of the black frown produced by that inquiry. The Lieutenant nonetheless drawled, "Michael's hands will be tired, from manipulating that outfit with pressurized gloves, motor-assist notwithstanding, but the improvised bases seem to be working well."

"Michael knew they would. He unqualifiedly praised your suggestion," the visitor observed equably.

Abruptly, Nigel changed the subject. "Did the pills do the job?"

"Surprisingly well! Those green giants work a lot better than ours did."

The first smile that had creased the officer's ugly face since her arrival relieved Cleo's mind. "A lot of work went into perfecting those. Imagine a crew of twelve all urping at once, during a lift when four men are working the board, and eight are lying harnessed into bunks four of which will be used shortly for a sleep-shift. Doesn't bear thinking about, that scenario."

Giggling as she contemplated the vivid mental picture his words evoked, Cleo confided, "That would be worse than what I imagined, this morning: the contents of a primary tank dispersed into droplets in a station suddenly rendered weightless, and the people inhaling live shrimp, worms, and other disgusting organisms, while providing a foothold—mouthhold?—for the leeches."

Nigel chuckled. "I'd take leeches any day, over urping spacers, especially as I've run into that latter problem while teaching recruits to operate a lifeboat. Loose vomit. Ugh! There just isn't a polite word, Cleo. Nasty experience! And you can't give way to your urge to throttle the perpetrator. He can't control his reaction. For all that those pills rank as a marvel, they sometimes fail in that extremity, and if you make your pupil more nervous than he is already, he'll likely get rattled, and both you and he'll end up as a diffuse cloud of vapor expanding outwards from what's left of ship or station." Nigel exerting patience, and coddling a scared, motion-sick recruit! Hard to believe, though you wondered about his patience with Marvin. Even what passes in Nigel's mind for tolerance is carefully calculated. Does he ever lose that perfect selfcontrol?

"Flying a lifeboat. That's a real art, isn't it?"

"An art, and a most exhilarating experience. Sheer pleasure, once you attain skill enough that the machine feels like an extension of yourself. A lift in a ship seems tame, compared to the heady joy of flying a boat." Nigel's sibilant voice vibrated with the intensity of the feeling his words strove to express.

My blistered soul, if Nigel admits to experiencing such a thrill, what would I feel? Abject terror, likely, even before I puked all over my instructor. And if that chanced to be Nigel, and I were a recruit paralyzed with fright, I'd probably judge vaporization preferable to facing my instructor after we docked.

Michael's disembodied voice issuing from Nigel's pack drove all other considerations from Cleo's mind. "Nigel, switch on the screen for the third set. See if the image comes in."

When the second officer complied, a close-up view of Michael appeared, with Conrad's oddly bulky figure visible in the background. Standing, the Captain manipulated his laser beam, so as to melt the outer surface of an area on the hull, and the bottom of the improvised base, thereby enabling the two molten planes to fuse when the metal solidified. After a time, he knelt, and exerted pressure on the mount, satisfying himself that it seemed solidly attached.

Conrad moved closer, enabling the viewer to see that he bore a number of bulky components clipped to rings on his suit. "Marvin, is number four main line off?" he asked.

"All six are off. I told you that."

"Just double-checking. I'd hate to grab the bare end of a live cable. My suit's microlayer would conduct the current, and the field would zap the suit's circuitry. I'd as leave not smother while the carcass I could no longer so much as wiggle hurtled

into the void. I'm working with four now, hear?"

"Loud and clear, Conrad."

"Michael, let me know when you intend to walk around to the outside, so that I can keep an eye on you."

"I will. I'll need five more minutes, here."

Nigel reported, "The picture comes in clearly, Michael."

"Good."

Cleo eyed her watch. Ten minutes left on my break. Oh, Michael, don't black out when your boots hold you to the hull, and the centrifugal force whips your body outwards from the outer rim of a huge, spinning wheel. What you're about to do must seem like walking up a wall, and then hanging by the soles of your feet from the ceiling!

Tensely, she waited. Michael's unemotional voice sent chills down her spine. "I'm walking around, Conrad."

Holding her breath, Cleo stiffened. Nigel's body lost its attitude of relaxed ease, as Michael's silver form passed out of view. Conrad stood motionless, watching. Three people waited tensely.

"I made it all right, Conrad. This isn't the pleasantest sensation I've ever felt, but I'm not dizzy. I'll manage."

"Keep talking, Michael, so I know you're still all right."

"You don't need to hear the story of my life! Let me weld this damned base. I can't kneel, here. Tricky, this chore will be, on this side. I'll say something shortly."

Glancing at her watch, Cleo sighed. Reluctantly, she slipped out of her seat, and headed for the door. Nigel, intent on watching Conrad, and listening for Michael's voice, never noticed.

As she closed the door behind her, she reflected stoutly, *So far, so good. I can't help but worry, so I'll just have to work three more hours while mentally stressed.* 

The seemingly endless span of time wore away. For the most part, the engineer succeeded in blocking out her fear. Shortly before suppertime, she cleaned her tools

and stored them, having achieved all she had planned, and more. Elated by her discovery that the reduction in centrifugal force had enabled her to lift and carry far more massive loads than she would normally have been able to handle, she surveyed the spirals from the lofty vantage point of the ladder, savoring the feeling of having done a thorough job.

I'm glad that I found that ripe mushroom, she exulted. Sprinkling spawn on every bare patch of soil ought to raise some, anyway. Strange, how unpredictable they are. I've dug out all the dandelions, but those pesky seeds float everywhere. They zip through ventilators and grills, and whiz through fans. Face fact, woman. They'll re-introduce themselves.

Opening the door, Nigel surveyed his team member's progress. "Bent the greenery to your will, hm?"

"I made a stab at it."

"It looks good, Cleo. Let's get back before Marvin increases the spin."

"Are both men back in?"

"They're back. No problems surfaced. We get a superb view from all sides, now, and Eleven will soon boast a vast increase in power-generating capacity, as well. Let's go."

Relief surged through the hearer. Upon descending the ladder, she peeled off her gloves, put away her tools, and accompanied Nigel to Central.

Lying once more on her bed, Cleo awaited the unsettling sensations. *I hope that pill's effects haven't worn off,* she reflected uneasily. *Don't think about that. Oh, my soul. Speeding up's worse. You're not going to give way. Hear? You're not!* Clapping a hand over her mouth, she valiantly resisted a wave of nausea.

The sideways thrust ceased. Rising unsteadily, the novice at handling changes in the station's g discovered that her legs seemed made of lead, and her arms of rock. Lurching to the bathcabin, she heaved into the head. Long after her stomach emptied, the hard retching continued, sending pain stabbing through her rib cage.

"Oh, my blistered gut. Right before supper," she groaned aloud. "I simply can't

face a fish! Justin can rant all he likes. I'll deposit what I swallow right there on the deck of the dining hall, if he insists. Should I even go? I'd better. He'll come looking, if I don't. Food. Ugh!"

Walking into the dining hall braced to withstand the smell of fish, Cleo sniffed. *No finny swimmers tonight*, she surmised. Picking up a bowl, she held it out to the head cook, who observed her pale, clammy face, watery eyes, and set mouth. Informed by his grin that he knew exactly how she had spent the last ten minutes, she pleaded, "Go easy on whatever that is. Justin, please!"

"Try it, Cleo. It'll settle your stomach, and you'll feel better, having eaten." "What is it?"

"Potato soup, and toast. Not a smidgeon of fish in the soup, girl."

"Thank the Powers for small favors!"

Seating herself opposite Michael, whose rugged face seemed unwontedly pale, she tasted the thick, creamy liquid in which flecks of dark green floated. "Mmmm. Not bad at all," she remarked to no one in particular.

Two deep creases furrowed Michael's brow. "What's in it?" he asked suspiciously.

Cleo ventured a guess. "Potatoes. Chopped greens. A bit of onion flavoring. I'd say milk, if I didn't know that to be impossible. Whatever, I think that once I get it down, it'll stay there."

"Optimist, you are."

Bestowing a sympathetic grin on the Captain, Conrad observed, "For a man who just spent two hours standing on his head, you're doing remarkably well just to have arrived at the table, I'd say."

"So would I. Eating might cause a major setback. I'm not sure I should risk it." "Oh, give it a whirl."

"Watch your mouth!"

Chuckling, Nigel drawled, "Poor choice of imagery, that."

Studying the Lieutenant covertly out of veiled eyes, Cleo conceded dourly that

no sign of distress showed on his face.

I somehow doubt that hanging upside down—enduring a physical sensation that reinforces one's genetically programmed belief that the direction in which your body gets pulled equals down—would cause Nigel to miss a meal. Well, dig in. It tastes good, and it doesn't smell of fish. Resolutely, Cleo plied her spoon.

Michael sat watching her over his steaming cup.

Even coffee tastes like shit tonight, he groused silently. She looks as wrung out as I feel, after heaving a hangnail I bit off yesterday, and most of what I've eaten over the last three days—including a good portion of the lining of my gut, I don't doubt.

I thought I might puke in my helmet, there, for a scary five minutes. A man would almost certainly die, when his vomit clogged his suit's air-circulation system. At least I held off till I got back in. That increase in spin delivered the final punch that wrapped my lower intestine around my larynx. I achieved strong welds, even on the side opposite the axis, I'm damned certain, though. My hands ache, they're so tired. What a day!

Exerting raw willpower, Michael reached for his bowl, and made a stab at tasting the soup.

Rising a trifle heavily, Cleo washed her bowl, fervently hoping that the concoction would fail to make a dramatic reappearance. No such disaster having befallen her, she repaired to her cabin, where she washed her face, combed her hair, slipped out of her clothes, and lay down to await Conrad.

Justin was right, she acknowledged. I do feel better. Poor Michael! He made it through supper by the sheer power of his will.

Cleo reared up abruptly as her partner for the night walked in to seat himself on the side of the bed. Embracing him fiercely, she exclaimed, "Oh, Conrad, I'm so glad that you're safe! I worried about your being out there, all day. Both of you!"

"You did? And here I was, delighted to be employed in my professional capacity, instead of gutting and cleaning a blasted pile of scaly swimmers!" Bemused,

cheered by the forceful press of the arms tightening around him, Conrad murmured as he hugged their owner, "No woman has ever worried about me up till now, Cleo. New experience for a man in a chancy business, that." Smiling wryly, he warned, "Don't overdo it, girl. When my time's up, it's up. My exit from life would be damned quick, if it happened out there on the hull. No sense in your getting more uptight than I do myself, much as I appreciate your concern."

Moved to tenderness unusual in a man who had never formed a close emotional tie with any woman, Conrad kissed Cleo gently, touched by her obvious solicitude. Her eager response conveying as much again as had her words, the Gaean stirred depths in the hardy, self-possessed spacer that no one had yet plumbed. When her hands undid his tunic and worked to slip it off, desire enhanced the other emotions evoked by her concern, blending with those to infuse the act of coition with an emotional freight it had never before borne for the Columbian.

Contentedly holding his partner in a close embrace, Conrad savored the knowledge that he had once again brought her fulfillment. Knowing that courtesans avoided that consequence—that they preserved a detachment necessary to their peace of mind, however skilled they might be at giving the appearance of having reached a climax—the engineer habitually savored his own pleasure without giving any thought beyond behaving with casual civility to his hired partner. He had quickly realized that Cleo held nothing back, physically or emotionally. An acute desire to know himself man enough to satisfy her swiftly succeeded his initial astonishment. His certainty that he now achieved that goal each time he coupled with her served to shatter his own detachment irrevocably.

Remembering that she had called herself his friend, he grasped at that notion now to explain the strong emotions that flooded his heart and mind every time he climbed into her bed. The affectionate concern she had displayed with such artless honesty on this night stirred him deeply. Used to coupling with women who gave themselves to any man who could meet their price, it never occurred to the spacer to grow jealous because she slept with each of his five comrades. He nonetheless did wonder exactly what ranking he held in that hierarchy of six lovers. An unregenerate realist, he entertained no illusions that Cleo's affectionate nature would exclude all but his own self from her regard.

A pang of something akin to regret suddenly knifed through Conrad's mind, undermining his contentment. As unused to discussing his feelings as he was to analyzing them, the man grappled with unsettling speculations never dreamed of confiding to the woman in his arms that he harbored any doubts or confused longings.

Enjoy what you've got right now, he urged his alter ego in an excess of practicality. It's more than you've ever had. It won't last, but no streak of luck ever does. And yet...I can't do other than conclude that Cleo doesn't give her friendship lightly, and won't withdraw it readily. Well...whatever happens, she has mine. For good.

Lying half asleep in her lover's embrace, Cleo felt a sudden tightening of his arms around her, and heard the long sigh he unconsciously uttered. Intuitively gleaning a hint of the thoughts that had risen to trouble his peace, she shook off the lethargy of her drift into unconsciousness, and caressed him with both hands. Stirred once again to passion, even as he realized that her gesture had been intended to comfort rather than arouse him, Conrad poured into the ultimate physical expression of friendship all the emotional freight he could not translate into words. His gesture spoke volumes to his partner. When he lay utterly spent, Cleo relaxed against him, full of contentment in her turn, and sure of her place in his regard.

Thrusting his doubts firmly behind him, the confirmed fatalist dropped off into deep and untroubled sleep.

## WEEK FOUR: WEDNESDAY

Floating up out of a twilight world, vaguely aware of fragments of troubled dreams, Cleo knew without looking at the clock that once again by some ill chance she woke shorted of an hour of sleep.

This waking early simply can't go on! she chided herself grimly. I'm not getting enough rest! I'll go to work exhausted, and make some stupid mistake...or a dangerous one. Whatever's the matter with me? I'm wide awake now.

Opening her eyes, she confirmed her estimate of the time. Closing them again, she tried to doze off, with absolutely no success. Fighting her urge to toss, and thereby disturb the man whose back pressed against hers, she lay for fifteen minutes, until she felt Conrad roll over, and stretch.

On discovering her nearness, he slid an arm across her. Cleo's hand closed over his. "Awake already?" he inquired in a hopeful voice.

His partner turned to face him. "Awake, and acutely conscious that I made you a promise two weeks ago that I never kept," she confided, her fingers caressing his chest.

"Better late than never, woman."

Drawing her slim body against his, her gratified bedmate kissed her, waking desire lacking when she offered to keep her promise. Almost as though he sensed that, Conrad exerted himself to arouse her further. Having laid her flat, he kissed her breasts. His hands moved sensuously over her shapely body, stirring her to reach out and return his caresses. As he heard her breath come faster, and watched her face reflect mounting rapture, his own passion turned deep and urgent. Controlling fierce arousal, he parted her legs, and with both hands stimulated her to fierce need equaling his own. Sure of her readiness, he entered her quivering body to give them both the relief each now craved.

Lying breathlessly beneath him, Cleo smiled to herself as he sprawled slackly above her, his face pressed against her shoulder.

You're a far more thoughtful lover now than you were at first, Conrad, she commended him fondly, albeit silently. Did it take you a couple of weeks to get over the last traces of your resentment? Or have you taught yourself how to arouse me? I'll bet that you've given considerably more thought to pleasurable love-play these last few weeks than you ever did when coupling with women you hired to satisfy you. Whatever, you filled me with delight this morning, you decent, ordinary, comfortable man!

Rolling off his bedfellow, Conrad glanced at the clock, and observed glumly, "Today I go back to being a blasted cook, damn my luck." Turning, he drew her towards him, settling her back against his chest. "We have ten minutes in which to lie here and hate the thought of getting up, woman. You relax, while I do it for both of us."

Giggling, Cleo went pliant as warm gel, the depression that had afflicted her when she woke having vanished.

Hungry as a starved eel due to his inability to manage more than a taste of his supper, Michael wolfed down a generous serving of flat cakes topped with dark, sweet syrup while mentally reviewing what he wished to see accomplished by the end of the week. At the conclusion of the meal, he rose and drew the attention of his subordinates.

"We'll meet at this time in the conference cabin. You and Conrad will attend as well, Justin."

Seated between Nigel and Leonard, Cleo listened as Michael spoke. "As long as we've made a start at stripping the ship of what we'll need, I'd like to finish the job.

I've planned the layout of Eleven's main deck. We need seven bunks, and eight mattresses. Cleo's got the bunks detached. The bunks will fit through the hatch, and into the station's elevator—just barely—so we'll move them that way. Two couches will also go. They'll be a tighter fit than the bunks, but we'll manage. We also need to unbolt and move three of the metal tables that retract against the wall in the ship's cabins.

"Justin, you'll strip the ship of all medical and pharmaceutical supplies. We'll also take the four exercise sets. I haven't scheduled formal exercise sessions since our arrival, because I figured that the labor would constitute enough of a daily workout. However, we'll need those, aboard. We'll experience no difficulty in moving the gear I just mentioned, but I intend to take something else: something that will test our ingenuity to the limit."

Michael scanned the six faces riveted to his. "In some manner, we're going to remove the water from the ship's life-support system. We'll do it the easiest way, whatever that might be. We'll acquire approximately three thousand liters. Draining the somewhat less than half a load of water from the ship's fuel supply, and also the reserve that functions as protection against cosmic radiation, will pose no problem. The lock to which the ship is moored sports a standard connector, which automatically snapped to the ship's fuel line when we docked. The water in the double hull of the Vtorus can be pumped out into the station's main reservoir: the space below the deck of the corridor in the rim. As that water flows out, the pressurized gas in the H-torus will expand to force the water out of the bladders in the inner part of that section of the ship. That pressure will send it into the V-torus, from which we'll pump it."

Nods greeted that declaration.

"I've been studying the way water is distributed in this station. Marvel of engineering, that system. Both the water and the countermasses attached to the rim opposite each of the forty sections provide stability to the whole. If all the occupants were to assemble in one section, each bearing a considerable mass, delicate sensors would respond to the change, and water would get pumped from the main reservoir into the interior of the countermass opposite that section, to compensate for the strain. Every time a man walks from one section to another, the water distribution changes automatically. The station's reservoir isn't full. When the Gaeans' shuttle-section docks, it deposits its remaining fuel—over half of what it needs for the trip home—in the reservoir, where it becomes part of the stabilizing system."

Scanning six faces, Michael beheld intent interest.

"When we leave, we'll fill Eleven's tank, which holds considerably more than the amount left in our crippled ship's fuel repository. Eleven's countermass will also fill, when we do that. I've diverted a certain amount of water—isolated it, in effect, from the main system—by altering certain water lines, and lowering the level in the web of accumulator tanks. We've compensated for that water's being unavailable to the station-wide network of water lines, by our frugal use. I've calculated how much we'll need, to leave with a full load of fuel. With the ship's fuel, plus what I've hoarded, plus what we can recover from the ship's life-support system, we'll have enough. I intend to leave this station functioning, when we depart: habitable. It proved a sanctuary for us when we needed one."

On hearing that final determined pronouncement, Cleo glanced covertly at the others. No face registered disagreement. *Oh, Michael, I'm so relieved to hear that!* she exulted. *I'd hate to think of our people's returning some day to find a lifeless hulk!* 

Glancing at the Gaean, Michael divined the magnitude of her relief. *That's the least I can do for Cleo's peace of mind*, he reflected somberly, *even if the scientist in me didn't abhor the thought of destroying such a magnificent, irreplaceable facility geared to pure research—politics notwithstanding.* 

"Well. Since there's no way to run the water from the life-support system within the inner V-torus through the line leading from the space between the inner torus and the protective envelope, we'll be unable to route that excessive amount of water into the station's reservoir. The thought of our hauling three thousand kilograms of mass through the elevator seems a daunting idea, apart from the danger a spill would pose. I shudder to think of one of us trapped inside a shorted-out elevator. I've developed a different notion: one almost as chancy. I'll entertain suggestions. Maybe one of you will come up with a better idea than mine. Take a minute in which to think."

Nigel waited exactly sixty seconds before indicating a desire to comment. On gaining the floor, he observed, "Only one other way exists. We bag it, freeze it in the vacuum of space, float it to the rim, trail a line from the bag beside the sections, snag the line from Eleven's lock, pull in the ice, cut it up, melt the pieces, and run the water into the reservoir. A bit more than chancy, hm?"

Glacial eyes met those of the man tendering that suggestion. "I'll admit, you've outlined my idea exactly, and yes, it's more than chancy. I don't mind the thought of propelling a block of ice a distance of 980 meters with the jets of a maneuvering unit, but snagging the line from Eleven's lock will be downright dangerous for whoever does it. It'll be damned easy to be jerked out to fly off tangent to the rim, if that person proves the least bit careless. Marvin, you have an idea?"

No stuttering attended the expert's contribution to a purely professional discussion.

"Michael, if I had today and tomorrow to work on it, I think I could rig a remotecontrolling device, which we could attach to a frame containing a body-bag. I could program the device so that I could fly the bag to Eleven's lock, using tanks of liquefied gas as propellant. The builders guided each of these sections to the point in space where the station was assembled, by remote control. I admit to having taken time, while I was assembling the board, to detach and study the remote-controller I located in Two's electrical system. I could build the matching half: the one that would operate it, or any like it. I've built such, in the past—both halves. The hardest to construct is the half I found in Two. We'll still have to snag the frame, but I can make the outfit stay motionless relative to Eleven, right outside the lock, until we secure it, despite the station's spin."

Stunned, Michael stared with brows knitted at the man so casually making that

astounding offer.

Flushing at beholding evidence he interpreted as disbelief, Marvin nonetheless returned the Captain's glance squarely, driven at this juncture by confidence in his professional skill. As always, that latter quality proved considerably more robust than his perception of his ability to socialize acceptably with his peers. Even as he struggled to find words adequate to justify his belief that he possessed the ability to make his idea work, Michael exclaimed, "Suffering shades of defunct spacers, Marvin, if you can do that, take whatever time you need!"

Buoyed by his realization that he just mistook astonishment for incredulity, Marvin declared forcefully, "Two days devoted solely to that project ought to suffice."

"Well! If you manage to finish by Thursday night, we'll test your creation Friday morning, transfer the ice Friday afternoon, and cut it up on Saturday. I know there's at least one electronic ice-cutting tool in Central."

As he tossed off that last remark, the Captain swiveled his gaze to Cleo, who flushed deeply scarlet.

"One cutter ought to be enough," Michael opined. "It'll take time to melt that much ice, after we cut it, although we aren't in all that much of a hurry. I guess we could simply let the heat of the air in Eleven melt the blocks."

On seeing his two life-support specialists simultaneously gesture vehemently, he inclined his head. "Nigel?"

"We can't do that, chief. The cold would lower the temperature of the whole main deck drastically, at the same time that the air would be saturated with water vapor. The system isn't designed to condense water out of the air of the upper deck only out of the air in the vicinity of the three tanks. Before the heating system could overcome that degree of chill, enough cold, saturated air would get pumped into the lines carrying it to the compressors and photosynthetic exchangers to lower the temperature in the delicate secondary tanks. We'd almost inevitably cause severe damage, and end with the entire system's getting drastically out of balance. I consider it a bad idea even to leave the ice sit overnight, unless we cover the containers tightly, and wrap insulation around them."

"Cleo?"

"Nigel summed up concisely what I was going to say, Michael."

"Well, those observations invalidate my hasty suggestion. We'll insulate the ice Friday night, cut it up on Saturday, and melt it. Can anybody offer a better idea than heat lamps and buckets for doing that? Conrad?"

"I can rig a couple of electrically powered, jacketed metal coils that'll get hot enough while submerged in cold water to melt the chunks we throw in, Michael. They'll have to be kept submerged, or they'll overheat, and fry the wiring. I'll handle the melting job, while others pump the meltwater to wherever you're planning to tap into the water line running from Eleven to the reservoir."

"I'll rig a way to do that. We'll need tanks big enough to store the ice overnight. Even insulated, those big chunks will melt to some degree. Nigel?"

"I noticed two good-sized rectangular metal tanks in Nine, Michael. Nine's a general workshop. I think these must have been used to quench heated metal for certain metallurgical processes, but they'll hold that much ice. Those tanks will fit through the hatches, I'm almost certain."

"We'll appropriate those. Well. Justin, during the next two days, you'll cook enough ahead that you can serve something either cold, or easy to fix, on Friday and Saturday. Conrad, I know you've got work facing you both in Central and in Eleven's lower deck, to augment what you did on the hull yesterday. Do that first, and then build your heating coils. Leonard, you did such an outstanding job filling in for Conrad, I'll let you continue for two more days."

Noting with satisfaction that the youthful spacer smiled gamely, Michael issued new orders. "Conrad, when you finish with your work, if Marvin can use you, help him. Nigel, you, Cleo and I will move the furniture from the ship, and install it on Eleven's main deck, today and tomorrow. We'll need to raise one small wall, as well. I've got the panels ready to haul. I've selected seven lockers, which we'll detach and move from Eighteen, and install when we position the bunks. We'll set up the tanks for the ice, and prepare the space in front of the lock for the cutting and melting chores.

"Nigel, you and I will rig a way to run the water from Eleven's deck to the reservoir. Touchy, that. We can't tap into the lines featuring the sensors, so we'll be forced to run a temporary line to the nearest inlet port of the reservoir. We'll improvise one. Well. Let's get to work."

Four people strode purposefully out to begin their allotted tasks, leaving Nigel and Cleo awaiting Michael's orders. "First thing we need to do, is down a pill," Michael stated, producing three from a pocket. "My gut's still not recovered from yesterday."

To Cleo's surprise, both seasoned spacers swallowed the oversized medications without bothering to take a drink. Deciding that if they could do it, she could, the Gaean popped the elongated green tablet into her mouth, gulped a few times, and managed to swallow it while mentally comparing the feat to that of mythical Earthly snakes reputed to have swallowed sizeable animals whole.

Nodding approvingly, Nigel drawled, "You'll get used to doing without water, Cleo. A spacer can't run out for a drink when he's harnessed into a couch on the bridge."

"At least I know now that you take them too!"

"You sport an exaggerated notion of my invulnerability, hm?"

"You don't need air, and you never tire. I guess I did think invulnerable was the word, all right!"

The recipient of that left-handed compliment gave way to delighted laughter, in which the other man joined. "Well, my gut's definitely susceptible today," Michael admitted. "So let's start by fetching those tanks from Nine, and then the lockers from Eighteen, while we give the pills a chance to work."

The tanks proved easy to detach, and not as heavy to move as they looked, despite their bulk. Michael sent Cleo to Eighteen, with orders to empty the contents of the seven lockers he had marked, while he and Nigel transported the tanks.

Cleo found hers no hard chore. Employing tools from the kit she had brought

from Eleven, she set about unbolting lockers, freeing three before the two men arrived.

Having lifted a wheeled bin from another that he had pushed from Three, Michael set one of the narrow, eighty-centimeter-tall lockers inside the cumbersome conveyance. "Take that to Eleven, Cleo, and tip it out between the bridge and the bathcabin," he directed. "Then bring the bin back."

Upon completing the task, Cleo returned to find six lockers awaiting transport. Trading her bin for one containing a locker, she pushed the load to Eleven, ahead of Michael and Nigel. A second trip finished the task.

"Our systems should be fortified by now," Michael observed. "Let's fetch the couches. We'll tackle the worst job first."

Floating out of the elevator alongside Nigel, Cleo to her relief developed no nausea.

Those pills really do work! she marveled. I'll wager mine wore off before the spin increased, last night. Powerful as they are, if you get sick despite fortifying yourself with one before a lesson in operating a lifeboat, that must be a ghastly sensation. Brr. Imagine puking all over Nigel! I'd die of embarrassment.

Michael floated out of the elevator, as Cleo and Nigel shot in tandem down the well and through the hatch, to emerge on the bridge. Catching up to them, he directed crisply, "Cleo, fetch all eight mattresses, and maneuver them into the elevator. You and a mattress will fit. Just dump them out into the corridor, out of the way. Nigel and I will move the couches."

Propelling her petite self off the railing that half-encircled the hatch, Cleo shot across the bridge and down a corridor, angling her flight so as to reach the handle of the last door. Upon grabbing that, she discovered that her lower body continued its motion, turning a somersault as the torque peeled her hand off the handle. When her back slammed flat against the wall at the end of the corridor, the exasperated neophyte forgot she had companions, and exclaimed vehemently, "Damn!"

Laughter reached her ear. Oh, my soul, watch your mouth, she scolded herself,

reaching to the deck below her head, and pushing herself off gingerly, in an attempt to float upwards past the handle of the door. Succeeding, she managed to slide the door aside, wishing she had opened the second door of each pair of cabins on Monday.

This will be easier than trying to float a mattress through the bathcabin, she judged. Now, how am I going to get the mattress separated from the strips on the frame of the bunk with which they interlock? If I push up, I'll hit the deck. Why can't we just move the bunks with the mattresses attached? No...Michael's right. They wouldn't fit through the door of the elevator. Damn. What to do?

Surveying the bunk tethered to the wall, the novice frowned. Launching herself off the doorframe, she reached the tethered bunk, which rammed backwards into the wall, absorbing some of the momentum of her forward motion. Clinging to the mattress, the Gaean waited until she and the bunk stabilized. Calculating the reactions that her planned actions would engender, she unfastened the tether from the bunk, and managed to draw the bunk more tightly against the free-fall handhold, thereby freeing some line. From a pocket, she withdrew a folding knife, and cut off the excess webbing. Securing the shorter line, she pushed herself gently off the mattress, and managed to gain a hold on the side of the bunk. After a few wild gyrations, she succeeded in tying the bunk to the second bunk still bolted to the deck.

A vigorous kick sent her flying off the stationary bunk. Managing to grasp the mattress of the one floating, Cleo positioned herself astride of it. Placing her feet against the top of the frame, below each side of the mattress, she gripped the loops of fabric on the sides of the mattress with her hands. Pushing with her feet, pulling with her hands, she exulted as the bunk descended, and the mattress rose to the accompaniment of the sharp sound of the bands separating.

Borne aloft while kneeling on the mattress, the well-read intellectual experienced a flash of memory dating back to her childhood. *This is what it would have felt like to ride a magic carpet*! The sharp knock produced when her head collided with the inner plate of the hull banished that fanciful notion from her mind. Biting back the string of regrettable phrases that rose to her lips, Cleo twisted off the mattress, pushed her feet against the wall, and aimed her unwieldy prize towards the door. Sailing swiftly through the opening, she clung desperately to the mattress as it struck the wall of the corridor, cushioning her impact.

Redirecting her ungainly burden, she kicked off the end wall of the corridor, to float with her chest pressed to one end of the mattress, and her hands clutching the loops on its sides. Riding her bulky cushion, she slammed forcefully into Michael just as he emerged through the hatch in the deck of the bridge.

Cleo's forward motion scooped up the hapless victim of the collision, and bore him onwards, ramming his compact frame into the wall. As her momentum sandwiched the mattress between the spacer and herself, Cleo felt her upper arm grasped in iron fingers. Michael's other arm shot out, and clasped a vertical free-fall handhold.

"Let go of the damned thing!" he ordered.

Mortified, she obeyed. The man gripping her arm swung her around so that her back struck the wall, and her bulky burden floated gently away.

"I'm sorry!" the offender gasped. "I didn't know you were on your way in!"

"No harm done. I see you found a way to detach the mattress from the bunk."

"I did the easiest one first. The other cabins have two floating bunks each. I'll need some more line."

Reaching into a pocket, Michael withdrew a roll of webbing, which he thrust on her. "Here. Got a knife?"

"Yes."

"Better wait until Nigel comes back, or you'll drive him into the platform of the ship's elevator, or the deck of the lock."

"I'll wait!"

Grinning broadly, Michael pulled them both closer to the handhold. Cleo grabbed the bar as he pushed himself gently off, and wafted over to the hatch where he grasped the rail. Glancing down the docking module, he beheld Nigel float out of the elevator, and kick off the wall to soar towards him. When the Lieutenant appeared on the bridge, Michael directed, "All right, Cleo, carry on." His face she saw to be still wreathed in a broad grin.

Having observed Michael's expression, Nigel noticed the rosy blush suffusing Cleo's cheeks. His face changed no whit, but his eyes betrayed a fleeting flash of strong emotion.

Her full attention on the mattress, Cleo failed to notice. Pushing off gingerly, she floated out and embraced the ungainly item. A kick against the end of a stillanchored couch increased her speed, enabling her to maneuver the item to the hatch. Holding the railing, she propelled the burden ahead of her, and launched herself after it.

After a struggle, Cleo succeeded in maneuvered the mattress into the elevator. Reaching for the straps, she wrapped them around her waist. A touch on the switch set the car speeding down the cylindrical tube. The occupant's queasy stomach lurched, and her limbs grew steadily heavier, as the conveyance approached the rim of the station. When the door slid open within Central, the mattress tumbled out onto the deck.

Fighting an overpowering urge to drop on it, and relax for five minutes, the tired woman glanced at her watch. *Only 0650*, she groused. *I get more exhausted in free-fall than I do when I pack my fifty-three kilograms about! If I still mass that much,* she amended glumly.

As she dragged the mattress next to the couch reposing on the deck, Cleo heard the elevator leave. *Well, I'm stuck here till one of them arrives. I might as well sit down,* she concluded. Dropping onto the couch resting in its horizontal position, she waited, feeling weary to the bone.

Working in free-fall takes a lot out of me, she reflected dispiritedly. I'm not used to thinking out the consequences of every move. It ought to be easy. It would be, probably, if I gained enough practice. I certainly did whack Michael! I'm glad he smiled. I'm not at all sure that Nigel would've thought my barging into him

## humorous.

The door slid open, and a couch emerged, shoved out ahead of Michael. Rising in haste, Cleo helped him move the weighty item next to the other. As he strapped himself into the elevator opposite her, he inquired, "Innards calm?"

"Utterly placid. Those pills work."

Upon arriving on the bridge, Cleo found Nigel nudging a bunk towards the hatch. Hastily shooting back to the same cabin, she pondered her options.

I could fit two mattresses into the elevator with me, if I fastened them together, she surmised. Their bands won't stick, because each mattress features the same halves of the strips, but I could tie the two.

Utilizing the technique developed earlier, the engineer peeled the mattress from the stationary bunk, and rose with it, prudently raising an arm to prevent a collision with the plate overhead. Bracing her feet against the side wall, she gave her burden a push sufficient to send it floating into the corridor. More used to the task now, she quickly herded a second mattress out of the second cabin, which she entered via the connecting bathcabin. Within the narrow confines of the corridor, she floated two lengths of webbing, and managed to tie the two bulky items together.

Nigel and Michael arrived, to collect another bunk. Waiting until they entered the cabin, Cleo pushed off gently enough so that she avoided crashing into the far wall of the bridge. Redirecting her clumsy encumbrance, she traversed the well, reached the main lock, and stuffed the load and herself into the elevator.

When the elevator once again left before she finished separating the mattresses and dragging them out of the way, the novice sat down on a couch to savor pride in her accomplishment. *That will save time,* she congratulated herself. *Why not make sliding loops, and float them over the top of an upright pair?* 

Nigel emerged from the elevator to find her busily tying loops into lengths of webbing.

Having helped the Lieutenant set the bunk next to the couches, Cleo turned, intending to re-enter the elevator, only to find that it left just as she reached the door.

"Michael's on his way, Cleo," her companion drawled, dropping with fluid grace onto a couch. When the Gaean sat down opposite him, and resumed her self-imposed chore, he commanded, "Hand me that."

Startled, the improviser offered him the strip. Long, deft fingers swiftly tied a knot. When their owner pulled on the short piece, the knot unraveled. "This arrangement saves time later, when you want to get the knots out," the expert explained. "It's nonetheless as strong as yours. Watch." Once again, he demonstrated the tie.

Reaching for a strip, Cleo repeated what he had done. Tugging on the short end, she conceded as she watched the knot come undone, "Handy, that!"

"One of a number of handy ties. Now, if you want it to hold against considerable force, you do this." The long fingers looped a more complicated knot.

"That looks like a figure eight."

"Some call it that. It's what you fashion to hold yourself suspended over something you don't care to fall into."

Fascinated, the novice sought to imitate his movements. "No, Cleo, watch. The free end follows the first eight," the adept explained as he demonstrated once again.

Frowning in concentration, his pupil managed to duplicate the tie. Slipping a thumb into her loop, Nigel pulled on the double lengths issuing from the knot. "See? That would hold against almost anything, if you chanced to be using elastic-sheathed line having a stout core."

The elevator door slid open, and a mattress fell out, followed by Michael, who explained, "I figured I wouldn't waste a trip, Cleo. I see you managed pairs. You can finish now in two trips. Let's take a break."

Seated opposite the Captain and next to Nigel in the dining hall, the Gaean accepted a cup of coffee from the tray Leonard offered before he vanished back into the food-chemistry laboratory. His rugged face creasing into a grin, Michael observed, "I see you're improving your strategies for working in free fall." "I'm gaining. I don't know why I tend to overestimate the amount of force I need to push off a wall." Reminded of their collision, Cleo flashed him a vivid smile.

"You're used to thinking in terms of lifting a mass against Earth-normal g."

"But I know I'm not, up there!"

"Automatic response."

"Amazing, how different everything looks when I'm upside down. I gain a whole new perspective, uncomplicated by any rush of blood to the head."

"Don't remind me. I spent an hour and a half yesterday hoping a head-rush wouldn't black me out."

"Why are there only eight bunks for twelve men?"

"Military ships operate on three eight-hour shifts. Four men man the board during each one. Two shifts serve as sleep-shifts. Eight men share two cabins."

"As huge as that inner v-torus must be, why so cramped?"

"The inner torus rotates within an envelope filled with water, part of which serves as fuel, and part of which protects the crew from cosmic radiation. As water gets ejected through the thrust-orifices during a period when the propulsion is activated, an equal quantity—a replacement—gets forced into the V-torus from the H, due to the fact that the H-torus contains a pressure-bladder full of water. Compressed gas surrounds the bladder. That gas expands as water exits the thrustorifices. The ejected water, on being heated by reflected laser light, explodes into plasma to drive the ship. The bladder, of course, continually loses water, and eventually, a refill becomes necessary.

"Helium fills most of the inner V-torus. Its large diameter merely suffices to give the inhabited part Earth-normal gravity, when the inner V-torus rotates. If the whole thing were inhabited, the ship would be far too massive to lift with the quantity of fuel it holds. Three masses are located 120 degrees apart. Two are counterbalances for the third, which forms the inhabited part. The life-support system occupies two-fifths of that. Nigel could give you details as to what that part contains."

The engineer, lounging back in his chair while listening, frowned as he replied,

"I'll do that, some time, when you've nothing else on your mind, Cleo."

Something in the man's lazy drawl struck a warning note in Cleo's already acutely sensitized nerve-receptors. *Oh, my soul, Nigel* is *jealous, underneath that impassive exterior!* she concluded. Even as her gut contracted, she controlled face and voice. Smiling pleasantly, she replied, "I wish you would. My training didn't include hands-on work with the algal systems used in ships."

"It's a radically different type of system: one far harder to keep in balance. It requires constant monitoring."

"Nigel, can you suggest a way to strain the water we'll be running into the reservoir? Algae wouldn't grow in that darkness, but the particles might well damage the sensors." As he posed that question, Michael glanced interrogatively at his lifesupport engineer.

"I wondered whether you had considered that aspect. I'd both sterilize the water and strain it, given that bacteria might prove as much of a problem as the algae. I'll devise a way to do both: irradiate the water, and then pass it through a filter."

"I'd appreciate that. What would be the easiest way to drain all the segments of the system?"

As Nigel launched unhesitatingly into a technical discussion to which Michael listened intently, Cleo sat back, outwardly calm, but inwardly distraught.

That wasn't a passing pique, caused by the stress of those two dreadful days last week! I can sense that Nigel's hotly jealous of Michael. He reacts differently when the Captain forms part of our company, than he does when it's just he, Leonard and I.

*Oh, Michael. Do you sense it, as well? Is that why you engaged him in this discussion? I feel as if I'm walking barefooted among shards of glass. We face problems enough, without this. I do! I'm losing sleep as it is...losing mass...having bad dreams, like those last night. I can't remember them well, but I know they weren't pleasant. Is that why I wake early? My blistered soul, I'm going to be strung* 

out between these two touchy duelists all week. I didn't appreciate that peaceful twelve hours alone in the tertiary tank while I lived it!

When the break ended, the woman concealing her agitation rose with the others. Michael remarked blandly, "Better use a latrine, Cleo. Avoid having to devise a special strategy."

Flushing scarlet, the Gaean mutely retreated to the nearest facility, her imagination supplying a daunting picture. *I'm glad he pointed that out*, she acknowledged, flushing hotly, *but to say that right in front of Nigel! I spend half my time red as the rose in Justin's print!* 

An hour later, five more bunks and the last four mattresses lay ranged behind the others in the main corridor of Central.

"Nigel, fetch the tables and the exercise sets, and we'll start hauling this stuff to Eleven," Michael directed. "Bring that case of practice foils, and the bag of masks and plastrons."

As Nigel stepped back into the elevator, Cleo prepared to lift the foot of a bunk. "They're not all that heavy," Michael assured her. "The drawer at the foot contains the harness used in lifts and descents. They're ungainly, is all."

"Want to stick a mattress on it?"

"Think you can lift that too?"

"Let me try. If it's too heavy, I'll say so."

"Switch to the head. That end is less massive, and it provides a better handhold."

Waiting until the Captain positioned a mattress onto the bunk, Cleo lifted the head, keeping her back straight, and taking the weight on her legs. Positioned so that his back faced her, Michael walked away. "When you need to rest, say so," he commanded.

The petite hauler lasted until they reached the rim. "Michael, please stop," she gasped.

Her plea prompted the other bearer to lower his end to the deck. Turning, he

frowned as he remarked, "You don't have to set a record for distance, woman!"

"I'm all right."

"Stay that way."

Grateful for his concern, Cleo called a halt when she needed to rest. When they reached Eleven, Michael stopped just inside the entrance to the main deck. "We'll leave this one here," he directed, inclining his head towards the space between the exterior wall and the bathcabin. "Sit down for a minute, and catch your breath," he ordered, observing that his assistant panted from the exertion. No distress complicated his even respiration.

"I'm all right."

"You heard me. Sit down."

Hearing the tone of command, Cleo sat. "You're as invulnerable as Nigel," she exclaimed ruefully.

"I mass at least twenty-five more kilograms than you do, and most of that mass is finely conditioned muscle."

"I used to think I was in shape."

"You are, but you're neither swordsman nor martial expert. You haven't even completed the rugged course of physical training any spacer undergoes. Besides, you're fine-boned, even for a woman. You needn't feel ashamed that you can't match Nigel and me in hauling ability, Cleo."

Waiting until his companion's breath again came evenly, Michael rose, and the pair departed back down the rim, arriving at the door to the elevator in time to see Nigel step out bearing the two tables, to which he had strapped four bulky bags containing exercise sets, a fifth bag of fencing gear, and a long case of foils.

"Pack a table, Cleo. Nigel and I'll haul the next bunk," Michael directed.

Hefting a massive, rectangular slab of metal, Cleo preceded the pair to Eleven. Puffing from the exertion, she set the table on top of the lockers, as incipient aches throbbed in the muscles of her arms. Retracing her steps, she passed the two men striding by bearing a bunk topped by a mattress, upon which rested two exercise sets and the bag of fencing gear.

Michael's right, she admitted bleakly. I'm not in any shape to match theirs. I'd like to watch them try each other in a bout with those practice foils. A chill succeeded that transitory wish. Imagine witnessing their dueling each other in earnest! Or worse—knowing that they intended to fight to the death. Oh, my shattered nerves. Matters could come to that, if Nigel gives way to flaming jealousy!

Having hauled the second table to Eleven, Cleo fetched a tool kit from the lower deck. When the men arrived bearing the third bunk, which they placed lengthwise along the curved exterior wall between bridge and bathcabin, she asked, "Would you like me to start bolting bunks where they're to go, Michael?"

"Given that I attached brackets to the walls, Cleo, you can start on this one. Four bunks double as benches in the dining hall. You can fasten four lockers in place as well, along the wall separating the dining hall from the bathcabin. What did you do with the bolts you took out of the bunks?"

"They're in the tool kit I used. I brought it here yesterday when I came back from lunch."

Flashing the engineer a glance plainly conveying approval, Michael left her attaching the bunk, and strode away with Nigel.

By mid-afternoon, Cleo finished the task. Standing, she surveyed the layout. All but three of the bunks now reposed on Eleven's deck.

After setting down the fourth, Michael stretched, and called a break. Dropping onto the burden the movers had just lowered to the deck, he watched as Nigel hooked the heel of his boot into the side rail of the bunk already fastened in place, clasped his bent knee with both hands, and leaned back to rest speculative dark eyes on Cleo, who seated herself next to Michael. Turning to the woman, Michael asked, "How long did it take for your team to travel here in their section, Cleo?"

"Five weeks."

"You should have adjusted to weightlessness by then."

"Our section wasn't weightless."

Both men's bodies lost their relaxed aspect. Michael demanded, "Was it tethered to something?"

"No, not tethered in the sense you mean. Our section has a countermass, which docks with it, to provide stability to the rim. These sections all have one, on the opposite side of the rim from where they're moored, but after a lift, ours is programmed to home in and attach itself to the hull, on the side of the section below the main deck. Once the two lock together, section and countermass spin, giving just enough pseudogravity to keep a person's feet on the deck.

"Wallace said the rate of rotation could be increased, but when they tried that, everyone got frightfully nauseated. So now, they content themselves with that minimum g. It took us all some time to get used to the station's gravity after we arrived, even though Wallace made everyone exercise four hours a day during those five weeks."

Michael and Nigel exchanged startled glances. Shaking his head, the Captain declared emphatically, "Whoever designed and programmed that outfit, I'd judge to have been a genius!"

"This whole station is a marvel of engineering," Nigel agreed. "Amazes me, that Gaea built it."

"Our ancestors included scientists, technologists and engineers among their number, if not as many as came on the Columbia," the Gaean retorted tartly.

"This station's hard evidence of that, I agree," the Lieutenant replied equably. "What I meant was, it amazes me that they used those skills to build this station, and yet they've stayed so insular throughout the last hundred forty Earthyears. They've built no ships capable of interworld flight, simply because they're so dead set against engaging in interworld trade."

Biting back the acid words that rose to her lips, Cleo said nothing, for a span of seconds. Gamely, she exerted the rigorous control over her temper she only recently told Marvin that she had worked to perfect over the last fifteen Earthyears. When she finally ventured a reply, her voice remained creditably level. "My ancestors were a self-reliant, tightly knit group strongly influenced by a traditional belief in pacifism, Nigel," she declared. "Once established in a world of their own—a world they claimed after withdrawing from yours, when your forebears failed in their attempt to wrest the *Flagship* from Johann with a view to controlling any and all worlds that might become inhabited in this system—they never trusted Columbians again, deep down." *And they were right!* she qualified her statement hotly, refraining from adding that belief aloud.

Divining the depth of the captive's anger, Michael spoke crisply, changing the focus of the discussion. "Whatever their motives, this station testifies to their mastery of engineering. Minimum g helps, but you undoubtedly did encounter difficulty in walking after you arrived. The longer that near-weightless state lasted, the more trouble readjusting would pose, exercise or no exercise. It's hard enough staying fit aboard a ship, on a transit lasting eight weeks, with twelve men taking turns working out on four ship-sets."

"It's doubly hard for new recruits, given that on a military ship you're adjusting to the effects of an angular velocity of four revolutions a minute, plus those originating in a Coriolis effect more noticeable aboard a ship than on this station. That's one reason for the potent power of the green pills, Cleo." The mild amusement in Nigel's voice seemed devoid of either malice or anger.

Forcing her anger from the forefront of her mind, the Gaean acknowledged candidly, "Those pills form hard evidence of your producing some accomplished chemists in Columbia."

"That inner security makes free-fall almost enjoyable, hm?"

"It would be, I think, once a person got used to working in that state."

"You can perform some wild acrobatic feats, in a less cramped space."

"I performed several fairly spectacular ones in what space was available, today and Monday both!"

Both men laughed, and the tension that had charged the air vanished. Bestowing a wicked smile on the novice, the Lieutenant remarked, "Too bad we haven't got a lifeboat, Cleo. I'd offer to give you lessons."

"Nigel, you know what would happen! And afterward, I'd expire of embarrassment, even if I avoided vaporizing us both."

"Hazard of the job. That possibility wouldn't keep me from persuading you to try. I'll wager you'd equal in aptitude, or outperform, a good many of the recruits I've trained. You don't lack daring, Cleo."

"Well, thank you!" Detecting a note of passion in the sibilant voice, Cleo divined that Nigel had not spoken in jest. Of a sudden, she recalled the circumstances under which he had said those final words to her, the first time. That realization lent a potent sexual overtone to the seemingly innocuous remark, and set a flush rising in her cheeks.

Michael spoke with deliberate, steely force. "If we did chance to possess a boat, Cleo, I'd exercise the prerogative deriving from my rank, and teach you myself."

The focus of both men's attention beheld the flash of hot anger that glinted in Nigel's eyes.

Admirably controlling the fear that smote her, the woman answered with a firm, wholly impartial force of her own. "But we haven't got a lifeboat, and so the question of who would teach me is academic. What's more, given that I'd undoubtedly reward such gallantry with an unpremeditated but nasty shower, that's probably a good thing."

Smiling radiantly into Nigel's rigid face, she watched his anger fade. Turning her vivid smile upon Michael, she saw admiration unmistakably light the eyes riveted to her petite person. She rose to her feet, thereby plainly signaling to each man that as far as she was concerned, the break was over. Both of her companions rose.

"Is this bunk in the place where it'll remain, Michael?" Cleo inquired in a matterof-fact tone.

"It is. I welded two small brackets onto the deck, here, at the head and foot. You'll have to drill new holes in the bunk-frame."

"I'll do that." Opening her tool kit, Cleo removed a drill, and occupied herself in

finding a bit of the proper size.

Michael inclined his head to Nigel, and the movers departed.

Once they passed out of her view, the focus of their rivalry sat back, emotionally drained.

My battered soul, what next? she queried of an unfathomable universe. Michael says what he pleases, despite his knowing that Nigel could kill him! The Captain drove a telling thrust into his lieutenant's vitals, just now. Does he realize how deeply it penetrated? Is he really aware of the dual nature of his second officer's jealousy: envy of any special friendliness I show Michael, and that more fundamental resentment of Michael's higher rank, and ability to dominate? Surely, Michael must know! But he deliberately irritated his dangerous subordinate! Oh, my heart. I'd be more rested if I had taken no break. Michael, take care. You might be underestimating the virulence of the emotion churning beneath Nigel's heavily armored exterior!

Having drilled the holes, the depressed object of two dangerous adversaries' jealousy sat tightening the last nut on the bunk as the two men returned with another. Turning, she watched as the movers set the new one lengthwise against the long, inward-curving wall, its head a few centimeters from the head of the first bunk.

Michael dropped a heavy metal framework on the deck. "Mounts for tables," he explained, in response to the woman's questioning glance. "I'll install those. After you secure this bunk, fasten the two behind the bathcabin. That'll be your bedcabin, Cleo." As Michael's eyes impacted hers, his voice somehow projected a sexual overtone in its turn. As she nodded mutely, the movers departed to fetch the last bunk.

Her pulse pounding, Cleo drilled the necessary holes, and fastened the second of the pair of bunks. That new pair the movers had set head-to-head, their sides parallel to the pair running along the exterior wall, a table's width away from the latter set. As she worked, her agitation subsided.

At length, curiosity mastered the observer. Rising, she fitted the mounts

between the two parallel rows of bunks doubling as seating.

I see how these work! she exclaimed to her alter self. The two tables extend out from these. They fold up perpendicular to the deck, and then slide sidewise in opposite directions, at night. Each table then forms a divider between two bunks set head to head.

How clever! Michael avoided the slightest waste of space in this area, which serves a double purpose: combination barrack/dining hall between bridge and bathcabin. My cabin is situated on the opposite side of the bathcabin, which sports double doors, opening into this barrack and my cabin. I wondered why that area featured double doors. I'll have to grow accustomed to making sure the opposite door is locked, before using our facility.

Walking around the bathcabin, Cleo surveyed the bedcabin that would be hers. The expanse lacked a wall. *Easier to move the bunks inside, before installing that,* she acknowledged. *Two curved walls...head of the double bunk against the end exterior wall, and the foot of the bed towards the bathcabin. They've left a locker over there, outside the boundary. That must fit between the bed and the wall they'll build across here, she conjectured. Thoughtful of Michael, his including that, even if I own no possessions to store in it.* 

By suppertime, six bunks had been fastened into the places they would occupy. The seventh reposed in the space opposite the bridge, the extra table and eighth mattress lying on top of it. While Cleo had installed the locker next to her double bunk, Michael and Nigel had hauled the heavy dividers, which lay on the deck close to where they would be raised. The exercise sets rested beside the unattached bunk. The two movers had fastened the two tables in place.

Michael now surveyed his handiwork with manifest satisfaction. "Easier task, this, than arranging a connection to the reservoir, and a means of sterilizing the water. We'll tackle those chores tomorrow."

Frowning, Nigel observed, "They'll take considerable time." "So they will." Exerting herself to walk fast enough to keep up with the long strides of her companions as they headed down the rim, Cleo employed all her intuitive powers, but detected no outward signs of friction between the two men. That observation failed to reassure her.

Both are masters at hiding their feelings, she conceded glumly. If an explosion occurs, it'll likely come with no prior warning.

Owing to the anxiety nagged at her mind, she failed to muster the vivid smile she normally bestowed on Justin when he filled her bowl. That glaring omission caused the medical technician to stare narrowly at her as he served her a generous helping of stew. "Hard day, Cleo?" he asked solicitously.

That query brought a return of the smile. "I found that working in free fall took more out of me than it ought, Justin," she confided. "I'm an apprentice spacer."

Leonard, standing next to the technician, shot her a rueful grin. "You do all right, Cleo. You aren't nearly as much an apprentice spacer as I am an apprentice cook!"

"Dinner smells good regardless, Leonard."

As Cleo bore her dinner to the table, where her face remained in the view of the two cooks serving the food, both detected lingering signs of strain despite her smile. Apprehension tore at the younger man throughout the dinner hour. Justin made a firm resolve to speak to Michael later in the evening.

Rising as soon as she decently could, Cleo retired to rest, profoundly glad that Leonard would be the partner arriving to spend the night.

When the youngest of the crewmen walked in to sit facing her on the edge of the bed, he saw that the shadows remained.

"Cleo," he urged gently, a slight frown wrinkling his brow, "something—or someone—keeps worrying you badly, lately. When I had a problem, I confided it to you. If you could bring yourself to confide in me, I'd try to help."

Grateful warmth swept over the woman flayed by nagging fear. Grasping her companion's arms, she declared emphatically, "Leonard, you're such a good friend!

But my problem arises from a totally different sort of situation. I don't feel free to discuss one of you with another of you! It's not such a big problem, and even if I told you, there's nothing you could do to change things. I'll work it out. Mostly, I'm tired. I somehow don't sleep as soundly as I should, but that'll pass."

Leonard's frown deepened. "Perhaps I couldn't help. But Michael could."

Fear showed nakedly on the face that had only seemed anxious earlier. "I can't go to him, for the same reason I can't tell you! Don't worry about it. Please." Sliding her hands around his neck, she whispered, "Leonard, make love to me. I'm never so tired as not to want that."

"I'd like nothing better, but a full eight hours of sleep would likely do you more good."

"I won't fall asleep right away even if I tried, but I'll slip off after you make love to me."

Taking a few seconds in which to weigh that statement, Leonard judged it to be accurate. Rising, he peeled off his uniform, and slipped in beside this woman he loved. With practiced, gentle hands, he strove to give her pleasure, convinced that her problem must be more severe than she would admit, but unable to conceive of any way in which he could help.

Worry nagged constantly at him now. Certain that he could put a name to the individual causing her distress, he deeply admired Cleo's sense of honor, even as he wished her courage would falter to the point of allowing her to confide in him, or in Michael, or in anyone who could help.

His unselfish, deep concern finding no outlet, he compensated by exerting himself to satisfy her, intuitively sensing the magnitude of her exhaustion. When his effort succeeded, he savored relief. Lying spent in Leonard's arms, the stressed Gaean relaxed against him. Her eyes closed. His every sense alert, the youth listened to the sound of her breathing. Only after the slow, regular rhythm of her respiration convinced him that she had fallen asleep, did he relax and let himself drift into unconsciousness.

## **WEEK FOUR: THURSDAY**

Cleo managed almost six hours of unbroken sleep, untroubled by any disturbing dreams. Awaking at 0220, she opened her eyes to glance at the digital face of the clock. *My blistered soul, why can't I sleep until it's time to get up?* she fretted wearily. Leonard, sprawled on his back, never stirred as she tossed restlessly for another hour. By 0325, she managed to achieve a state of sluggish relaxation, ceasing to turn over every few minutes. Lying curled on her side, she debated how late she should wait before waking her bedmate.

Her partner put an end to her doubt by opening his eyes, stretching, and turning to meet her wide-awake gaze. "Damn the luck, Cleo, did you get any sleep last night?"

"Six hours. Nice, deep sleep! Owing to your considerate, highly effective lovemaking." Snuggling close to him, Cleo whispered, "I love you, Leonard."

Sighing even as he thrust an arm around her, the youthful spacer replied, "I know you do, Cleo. I wonder why, sometimes, even while I'm congratulating myself on having somehow earned your love."

An overtone of sadness, which the sensitive Gaean instinctively knew arose from her refusal to confide in him the night before, tugged at her heart. Taking time to order her thoughts, she spoke, her tone reasoned. "Why do I love you, Leonard? For your courage; for your gentleness; for the perceptiveness—the wisdom—so unusual in a man as young as you are; for the kind heart that has been my refuge from the beginning, and which comforts me now more than you'll ever know." That patently truthful reply extinguished the nagging pain born of the stressed captive's unwillingness to discuss her problem. Touched to the core, her lover replied softly, "If I've been all that to you, woman, it's because you thawed what was frozen inside me when I met you." Slipping an arm under her, he held her in its curve, and stroked her wavy brown hair.

Wordlessly, Cleo lay enjoying that gentle touch, the lines of care smoothing out of her face for a blissful twenty minutes, which restored her almost as effectively as another hour of sleep would have done.

Over a generous helping of rhubarb cobbler, Michael minutely studied the Gaean's expression, noting the shadows under her eyes, and the hint of strain in the face of the woman whose vivid smile and mobility of expression so often deepened attractiveness into beauty. Pensive now, she ate, staring into empty space. Michael had seen her flash a most revealing smile at Leonard when they entered together, and pass a joking remark about his role as temporary cook, so he divined that the problem lay elsewhere than with the lad.

Something's bothering her, though, this week, he conjectured bleakly.

Damn! I've got to remember to speak to Justin, today. Tomorrow morning would be a better time for him to determine what in hell is clawing at her. He'll be cooking three days' worth of meals, today. I hope that Nigel and I can rig a foolproof entry into the reservoir. A spill on the order of thousands of liters doesn't bear thinking about!

As the technical aspects of the daunting tasks looming ahead rose to occupy the Captain's full attention, his uneasiness regarding his prisoner of war submerged below the surface.

Shortly after the end of the meal, Cleo stood thrusting bolts into the divider raised by Michael and Nigel.

"Secure those eight, Cleo, and then we'll set the other two panels in place," the Captain ordered. "You can fasten the remaining bolts in the wall, and then in that other bunk. You'll have to drill holes in its frame, as well. After Nigel and I haul the two couches in the corridor by the elevator, bolt those to the brackets Marvin built for them. When we finish hauling, Nigel, we'll see about constructing a water line."

Occupied in the tedious chore of tightening the myriad nuts recessed into the metal walls of her cabin, Cleo succumbed to a new onslaught of anxiety.

Nigel seems more than a little grim today, she mused uneasily. I find it so hard to read that inscrutable face! What I'm assuming to be grimness could merely be tiredness. If he ever gets tired, that is. I wish I could sneak away into the tertiary tank on my break, but I'd likely offend both officers.

When the movers arrived back, transporting a heavy couch apiece on makeshift wheeled frames, they observed with satisfaction that the wall neared completion.

"I don't know whether pushing something as unwieldy as this is worth the bother," Michael grumbled to his fellow athlete. "Except these would be the devil to carry."

"There's no place to get a decent grip," Nigel agreed. "Well, they're here. Be a tight squeeze, manhandling them through the door."

"They'll fit."

Thirty minutes later, the two couches reposed in the brackets earlier installed by Marvin. Having made the electrical connections to the board that would allow the seats to be raised or lowered at the touch of a switch, Nigel emptied his pockets of sacks of bolts, nuts and lock washers, providing a sizeable collection to which Michael added. Soon after the two men repaired to the rim to locate a place into which they could route the water, Cleo finished the wall.

I wonder why one bunk in this space? she mused idly as she began the second onerous chore. Only four occupy the dining hall, so someone will have to sleep here. Where will the eighth mattress go? Will somebody have to sleep on whatever it cushions, on Sunday? How do they manage now, on that night?

Not my problem, that. Michael knows what he's doing. Meticulous planner, this captain. Perfectionist. Ambitious. A born leader. He maintained admirable control of his face when I let him know that I've guessed what his ultimate goal is, but he never

denied my assertion. He'd be a vast improvement over Leon, whose own countrymen castigate him as ineffectual.

Michael would find it necessary to attain the rank of commander, before he'd stand a chance, I suspect. The Columbian military I know to consist of five corps. Evidently, each of those five commanders strives to gain an edge over his four peers, in the hope of attaining absolute power over Columbia.

Norman commands Third Corps. Brr. Imagine that vicious brute in absolute control of his world! Even though he'd undoubtedly have to go home to wield supreme power, I wouldn't wish his dictatorial rule on the general populace of Columbia. Perhaps Galt would prove a better ruler than Norman. He surely couldn't be worse! As for the other three commanders, I don't even know their names, let alone their propensities for wreaking harm on their own world, and ours.

Having finished the bunk, Cleo set to work to secure a couch.

My word, what a lot of bolts for one item! she mused. No chance of this massive outfit's ever shifting, no matter how violent the ship's motion. Well. I sincerely hope that Galt doesn't take this mess out of Michael's hide. Surely he'll realize what a monumental accomplishment Michael's making it home with all his men safe will represent! I wish I knew what Galt will do with me. I wonder...would Michael consider leaving me here, when they go? Or would I really want him to agree? I'd be utterly alone...for three Earthyears, at least...marooned here...

Depression fell like a pall. *Michael wouldn't hear of that*, she conjectured morosely. *He'd conclude that I intended to space myself.* And if the loneliness got to me...I might. Or I might not be entirely sane, when someone finally does return, if anyone ever does. The uncertainty would be devastating. No, I'll just have to face whatever comes, when I pass out of Michael's custody. Quit worrying about that. You've got far more pressing problems facing you, today. This morning! Save your mental energy for that necessity.

Having finished the couch, the Gaean began on its mate. When the time arrived at which she normally took her break, she continued working, hoping desperately that her teammates would take theirs together, elsewhere. As time passed, and neither Michael nor Nigel summoned her to join them, she applied herself vigorously to her tedious task, savoring relief.

Her serenity proved short-lived. A rasping of metal caused her to whirl, and glance at the entry. Michael strode in, letting the door bang shut behind him. "Do you think you have to wait until I dismiss you, to take a break, Cleo?" he inquired sternly, frowning.

"No. I just thought I'd finish this..."

"You've plenty of time. Sit down on that blasted thing, and relax. Nigel went to detach a device from Two, to irradiate the water, so he'll likely take his break in the dining hall. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all."

"Back away, and I'll let the couches down. No, move to the rear. Watch." Touching one of a number of switches integral to the arm of the couch, Michael lowered first one, and then the other to the position used during a launch. The board automatically slid up, curving to hang almost directly overhead. Touching a second switch, he caused the board to return to its original location. A third adjustment resulted in the couches' flattening completely.

"Easy to get whacked on the head, if you grow careless," he commented.

"I see what you mean. Amazing, what Marvin has accomplished!"

"What's not obvious to a casual glance you'd judge more amazing still."

"Are you managing to solve your technical difficulties with the ice?"

"I'm working on them. I located an intake valve fairly close by, in the rim, but I'll need to fashion a bleed: a way to let the air out of the line, so that the water will flow smoothly. I've collected enough flexible pipes to allow running a line around the corners. Those tanks had drain valves, so we don't have to siphon the water out of them. We'll need to sieve out as much of the algae as possible. Would cloth work, if we changed it often? That slimy stuff would clog fabric rather quickly."

"That's not what I'd use. I'd rig a filter containing gravel covered by twice the

depth of sand. On top of the sand, I'd form a layer of aluminum hydroxide gel. I'd add potassium aluminum sulfate to water, and let the gel coat the sand before letting the melted ice through. That would trap about ninety percent of the organisms, and any other suspended matter. The irradiation will zap algae and any bacteria, but you're right, you don't want an excess of dead organisms in the reservoir, gumming up the sensors."

"Mmm. Build us a filter, Cleo, after you finish bolting this couch."

"Are you sure Nigel hasn't, already?"

"When he gets back, I'll ask him. I doubt that he found time. We'll need to pack all the ice into one of those tanks. It'll rise half again as high as the top, so we'll be forced to leave it in the bags overnight, and be damned careful while unsealing the ends of the bags on Saturday. We'll use the second tank for the job of melting. It'll take time for the water to drain through a filter, won't it? We can hardly pump it without disturbing the gel."

"Why not elevate the tank used for the melting, and let the water drain through the filter into a smaller reservoir from which we pump it intermittently? That'll take quite a while, but so will the cutting and melting. Nigel could rig the irradiator in the pipe leading out from the reservoir, and reduce the pipe after it emerges. We'll have to switch the irradiator on and off manually, wherever it's located."

"Good idea, that. Long, tedious process, we face, any way we do it. We'll rotate the chores. It'll be tiring, cutting ice, and lifting the chunks into the other tank. I'll rig a support to hold Conrad's coils, and let him watch them. Running that much current through anything submerged in water strikes me as an invitation to electrocution, but he knows what he's doing."

The door slid open to admit Nigel. Although the entrant raked the Gaean with a penetrating glance, no emotion registered on his face.

Michael, seated on the couch opposite Cleo, rose with fluid grace. "Time to get back to work," he remarked airily. "Nigel, have you rigged a way to get rid of the algae?" "Not yet. I just pried the irradiator loose, and improvised a manual switch. We can't install the damned thing in our line. It sports too small a pipe. I'll need to rig adaptors, and a way to support the bulky outfit, and then run an electrical line." Exasperation set the ugly face creasing into a black scowl.

"Tell Nigel your suggestion, Cleo."

Dutifully, the engineer outlined her idea. "If you consider that satisfactory, Nigel, I'll build a filter," she offered noncommittally, hoping that her suggestion would fail to strike him as an attempt to upstage her team leader.

To her relief, Nigel evinced only relief at her volunteering to solve one of the problems vexing him. "That'll work. Carry on. Do you know offhand where there's some vessel we could press into service as a reservoir?"

"There's a tank in Fifteen...a good-sized one. Its outlet's the same size as the pipe from which you detached the irradiator. That'll save messing with adaptors on one end at least. I'll fetch it, if you wish. I stashed it in a closet, after I used it, five weeks ago."

"Do that first off."

"Leave the rest of these bolts until later, Cleo, and help Nigel," Michael directed. "I'll work on the far end of the line." Turning, the Captain strode out.

Grown aware that Nigel's eyes impaled her as she rose to leave, the object of his scrutiny met his glance squarely and coolly. *I'm not your possession!* she railed in silent but virulent wrath. *So don't give me that look!* Head held high, she stalked out past him.

My frazzled nerves, she reflected angrily as she walked swiftly down the rim, I should have slipped into the tertiary tank at the time I normally take a break! I'll do that, this afternoon, if neither man demands that I provide him company. I don't need friction! With Nigel, or Michael, or between the two of them! Damn, but I wish this week were over!

Having hauled the bulky tank out of the closet in Fifteen, the former researcher rummaged through a drawer, and withdrew several reducers, which she slipped into a bag that she hung from her belt. *I ought to add a layer of activated carbon to my filter*, she decided, forcing herself to concentrate on the work at hand. Tying a strip of stout webbing to the handles of a canister of activated carbon, she slung the webbing over one shoulder and across her chest, so that the burden hung suspended over one hip.

Gazing around, she recalled the project she had commenced, in what now seemed an eon ago. A sigh escaped her. *Don't dwell on your postponed project*, she chided herself dolefully. *Likely it'll be twenty Earthyears or more before you can get back to it. Somebody else might have done it by then.* 

As depression spread like a fast-growing mold through the stressed captive's mind, her throat tightened. Tears burned behind her eyes, and threatened to spill.

Will I ever know a carefree day again? A day with no stress, no worry, no press of work, even? How long has it been, since I had a day free to enjoy a novel, or to browse through the world's bank to catch up on my professional reading? A day to myself? I'm bone-weary! Sick to the death of Nigel's glowering glances!

Is Michael trying to force a confrontation? Can't he see that his second officer's jealous? Maybe not. Nigel hides how he feels from everyone but me. He deliberately lets me catch an occasional glimpse. To warn me? What does he expect me to do? Rebuff the man in charge, when he asks to spend his break with me? And Michael did ask, each time! A formality perhaps, but he asked!

The tears became harder to fight down. Cleo's eyes smarted. Her throat hurt. *Get hold of yourself*! she commanded, appalled at her nearness to breakdown. *You're acting like a baby*! *Wallowing in self-pity*! *Things could be abysmally worse. Pick up that blasted tub, and get moving*!

Shoving the awkward burden up through the hatch, the woman hurling acidic self-recriminations at her alter ego replaced the cover, and lifted the tank. Balancing the ungainly load on her head, she walked out to the rim.

This ought to work. Sand. Gravel. Will I be forced to raid a primary tank? Think. Where did I see sand? In those lockers we emptied in Thirteen, where the meteoroids were stored. What it was doing there, I can't imagine, but I can use some of those small stony meteoroid samples for gravel. What else... I can't think efficiently when I'm this tired...this badly worried. Why can't Nigel accept what everyone else has? Why?

Cleo arrived at Eleven to find her nemesis gone. Michael knelt on the deck some distance away, surrounded by lengths of pipe and an array of fittings. Having unburdened herself of the items she carried, she headed for Thirteen. Looking up as she emerged from Eleven, she saw Michael jauntily wave at her. Managing a brittle smile, she waved back. As the Captain's eyes followed her departing slim figure, two deep creases appeared across his brow.

The harassed engineer found the sand among the meteoroids dumped in the biochemistry laboratory where Marva once conducted the bulk of her research. After righting a wheeled bin that still reposed on its side, the still-distraught woman stacked cans full of sand inside it, and sorted through the pile to collect several more cans of gravel-sized specimens. Her consciousness of the disorder created in the midst of Marva's immaculate workspace further depressed her.

Forcibly thrusting from mind memories of her Gaean comrades, Cleo tried to order her thoughts. *I need a giant filter column with a porous base*, she reminded herself. *Look in the chemical supply lockers, in Nine. Do that on the way back. Get the potassium aluminum sulfate, and calcium hydroxide, which will speed up formation of the gel.* 

When at length she returned, heavily burdened, to Eleven, Cleo found Nigel building a platform on which to raise the melting tank. Glancing up at the entrant, he smiled at her, evincing no sign of smoldering anger.

"That tank's perfect, Cleo," he commended her. "I never noticed that outfit, when I inventoried what was available. I appreciate your offer to build a filter, given that I face problems enough to fill my day, and then some."

Surprise mingled with a sudden upsurge of warmth. "I stashed quite a few items away when I worked in Fifteen," the former researcher confessed.

Surrounded by the gear unloaded from the bin, the Gaean fitted supports to her filter column. Having measured its height, she made certain that Nigel's platform reared high enough to allow the tank to drain into the top of the filter. Assured that her setup would serve, she set about packing the column.

Engrossed in their tasks, the two engineers worked side by side, passing an occasional comradely remark. Conrad arrived, spoke briefly in greeting, and vanished through the hatch to the lower deck. Michael finished the line, and descended below, burdened with a spool of electrical cable, to ask the expert whether the gauge would be heavy enough for the load it would carry. At length he reappeared, and strode away to fetch certain other electrical components. To Cleo's relief, no invisible currents flashed between the Captain and his second officer.

Engaged in a less tedious task than tightening endless nuts, the Gaean found that the morning passed quickly. When the time arrived for the midday meal, the tank reposed on its platform, and the column stood in place below the drainpipe of the tank. A heavy power cable ran directly from the box on the lower deck to the platform, and the water line leading from the reservoir now reached the vicinity of the tanks. Four people surveyed the state of the work with satisfaction, and went to lunch.

Fortified with baked stuffed eel, baked potato, and a spicy salad, Cleo walked back with Nigel to Eleven, feeling less agitated than she had that morning.

Michael vanished into the food-chemistry laboratory, and summoned Justin to the privacy of the conference cabin, where he arranged for Cleo to be given a physical examination on Friday morning. Finding that the technician had removed the medical supplies from the ship, Michael ascertained what fixtures Justin considered essential components of the infirmary Michael intended to equip in Eleven. That discussion led to requirements in the way of food, and the layout of the food-chemistry laboratory. The Captain took time to make careful notes, and ask pointed, pertinent questions.

Seizing on a prime opportunity to discuss his area of responsibility, Justin summarized his reasons for concluding that he would soon achieve his goal of

providing meals the nutritional balance of which matched those of the standard meals issued by the government.

"At least, on a daily basis, the food consumed will provide perfect nutritive value," he assured his superior. "I'm developing a fourweekly schedule of meals repeated periodically. I've achieved enough variety that the offerings won't seem repetitious. I'll add new dishes as I develop them, but I've got a large file of basic recipes, now."

"Justin, you've worked a minor miracle," Michael stated emphatically. "You've far exceeded my expectations. Don't think I won't give your accomplishment high praise in the detailed account I'm keeping of our work here."

Warmed by the Captain's words, Justin smiled as he nodded. "I appreciate that, but I know you to be utterly fair, Michael, in any report you submit to Galt. Something else you need to address, while we're discussing fitness: regularly scheduled exercise sessions, aboard. If you depend only on the ship-sets, the monotony will invite shirking, even though the shirker may not be conscious of slacking off. I've listed some pieces of equipment Nigel stripped out of Eleven, which served the Gaeans as an exercise hall. You might want to include those."

"Make me a copy, and I'll add those items to what I'll build in and store. Well. I'll feel relieved when tomorrow's task lies behind us. Have you found time in which to cook enough ahead, without having to work late, tonight?"

"Everything's under control, Michael. I suggest that you locate a supply of gloves for whoever will be handling the ice. I'd hate to have to treat frost-bitten fingers, when injury can be avoided."

"I'll do that." Rising, the Captain departed, deciding to locate gloves while that need occupied his attention. Judging that Nigel and Cleo ought to be able to finish the line, the officer stopped in Two, so as to ascertain the extent of Marvin's progress.

Cleo, meanwhile, helped Nigel install the irradiator in the line to the reservoir. She finished the line, while he fastened the device into the stand he had built for it, and wired the manual switch into the junction box of the power cable that Michael had run.

The Gaean felt far less tense while working solely in the company of the man whose jealousy so worried her.

Nigel is easy to collaborate with, really, she admitted to herself. He has come to trust my professional ability. That still amazes me, given his agreement with his society's relegating women to an inferior role. Perhaps he's just glad that woman or not, I can take some of the burden off him.

Nigel finished mounting the irradiator. Sitting back on his heels, he surveyed the line. "I ought to test it, when Michael gets back," he muttered. "We need a pump. That one we used to empty the primary tank would work, but we'll need to sterilize it, after running the ooze through it. You do that, Cleo, while I rig a place to mount it."

Pushing her bin to Three, Cleo again savored satisfaction that Nigel issued no specific instructions.

Haul the pump to Nine, and sterilize it there, using phenol. Better soak the line well, and rinse it thoroughly. Dismantle the pump, and check the impeller. I'd hate to have it malfunction on Saturday, with all that icy water chilling the atmosphere. I need my gloves. I wonder whether anyone has thought about that necessity. Gather up the ones in the tertiary tank, and lay them out. Wear your small pair under a larger one, if we find enough pairs to go around.

Having done a thorough job of checking and sterilizing the pump, Cleo pushed her bin back to Eleven. "Nigel, we're going to need gloves, on Saturday. Do you wish me to gather the collection I've hoarded in the tertiary tank?"

The team leader engaged in lifting the pump onto the stand now reposing next to the tank into which the filter drained, nodded. "Give me a hand with these bolts, first. It's about time for a break. Shall we take one together, in the tertiary tank, Cleo? Rest our eyes, looking at the greenery?"

"That thought occurred to me, too." Flashing him a more vivid smile than any she had mustered all day, she helped him bolt the pump into place.

Just as the pair completed the job, Michael arrived, bearing a pot of coffee and a stack of recyclable cups. Blandly, he announced, "I figured you both could use a drink. I'll have one with you, if you're ready to take a break."

Cleo's gut tightened. Nigel's eyes glinted, but his face changed no whit. Mastering her apprehension, the Gaean effused brightly, "How thoughtful of you, Michael! Nigel and I were about to repair to the tertiary tank, so as to feast our eyes on the greenery, and take our minds off the job. Let's have our drinks there."

Nodding, the Captain picked up pot and cups, and allowed the two to precede him through the hatch, and into the tertiary tank.

Over the rim of her steaming cup, Cleo smiled at Nigel with disarming warmth. "Good idea, relaxing in here. When I was a student at the University, I used to take a bagged lunch to the University Plant Reserve, and eat on the grass. Restful, I found those lunch breaks."

"How big a reserve does Gaea possess?"

"It takes up a square kilometer of space. It's housed in a dome large enough to allow trees to grow in the center. The exhibit includes all the species our ancestors brought with them on the *Gaea*."

"Hm. Ours is twice again as large. It would be interesting to determine whether either has varieties the other doesn't, and do some trading."

"I brought along a listing of the species cultivated in ours, as well as one of all the plants I've known to grow in Gaean tertiary tanks. I found several here that seem to be unique to this station. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that they're mutant varieties."

"Left to seed themselves, and sprawl wild, these plants could have thrown mutated offspring. Would you be willing to supply me your list, Cleo? I couldn't return you the favor until we arrive back to Columbia..."

"I'd be glad to, Nigel. And perhaps some day...far in the future...you and I could negotiate an exchange of seeds, root stocks, or whatever."

"We could try." A flash of some strong emotion flickered in the dark eyes

riveted to the prisoner of war. "Form a productive partnership." The sibilant voice, with those last words, managed to hint at more than merely professional collaboration.

Cleo caught Nigel's double meaning, and the knot in her gut tightened. If Michael read anything deeper into the second officer's words, he gave no sign. Ruminatively, he inquired, "How's the asparagus coming, Cleo?"

"See those thick stalks, just starting to push through? By next week, you'll find out, although I warn you, it takes a while to develop a taste for asparagus. I'm going to remind Justin to try artichokes."

"Ominous sounding name."

"They're supposed to be a delicacy, too. I've never eaten any, so I can't confirm that. You cook the blossom whole, pick the petals off, eat the base of each one, and discard the rest. Earthmen dipped them into lemon sauce. The hearts are the best part."

"Mmm. True of some people as well, that last, Cleo." As Michael passed that remark, his voice held every bit as provocative a double meaning as had Nigel's.

Raw energy charged the air between the two men, manifesting itself to the woman who cried in silent dismay, *Oh, my soul, what next? Michael, take care!* 

Returning him a strained smile, she requested a refill of her coffee. The pot reposed on the deck closer to Nigel, who obliged, and then softly inquired whether Michael would care for more. With elaborate politeness, Michael replied that he would. The second officer filled Michael's cup, and then his own. Two pairs of eyes regarded Cleo intently over portions of steaming brew, as electricity continued to energize the air between the two rivals.

Hoping to turn the conversation back into a prosaic topic, Cleo remarked, "I've got five pairs of gloves stashed away in here, Michael. One's really small. It probably won't fit anyone but me, but you might want to hand out the other pairs to whoever carries ice, Saturday."

"Justin reminded me to hunt up gloves, but I found only half a dozen pairs. I'll

borrow yours, so that we can wear them double. Nigel, take time before supper, and cast an appreciative eye on what Marvin just finished building. It's fantastic, even for him! Would you agree that his intellectual endowment equates with genius?"

"Most definitely, even though our usual team projects have never fully challenged Marvin's power of mind. We'll see prodigies now, though."

"Damned right we will!"

They agreed on something, the woman noted with profound relief. Intrigued, she speculated.

Did Michael purposely make a statement with which he knew Nigel would concur? Subtle tactic used by psychologists to defuse anger, that. Did the Captain use it instinctively, or does he employ psychological techniques in calculated fashion, in his role as leader? That wouldn't surprise me. He has depths to him I'm just beginning to plumb.

Draining her cup, she rose, and set the empty utensil by the pot. From the wedge-shaped cabinet built under the bottom loop of the rising spiral, she withdrew the gloves. Reaching for the empty pot and soiled cups, she offered, "I'll rinse these, Michael."

A pair of hands firmly took them from her. "I'll do it, Cleo. Host's job, that. Nigel, if you two will test the water line, I'll take on the chore of hooking up the pressure sensors in that wall we just installed, and testing them."

"Suits me." The frown that instantly creased Nigel's brow at hearing Michael's describing himself as host, faded, given that hooking up pressure sensors ranked high on the list of exasperating, tedious tasks.

Following the Lieutenant to the far end of Eleven's deck, where the tanks reposed, Cleo again felt drained rather than relaxed by her break. Tension still knotted her gut, and only slowly diminished as she helped her companion haul buckets of water from the bathcabin to pour into the reservoir below the filter.

"That should do it," Nigel declared. "Start the pump, when I call to you. Watch for leaks. I'll inspect the line crossing the rim." Waiting until he gave the word, Cleo switched on the pump, and gazed narrowly at the line extending away across the full length of Eleven's deck. No ominous puddles, or jets of spray, caught her eye. Nigel shouted no hasty order to throw the switch. As the last of the water gurgled into the intake line, she shut off the pump.

Nigel stalked back in, his ugly face expressing satisfaction. "No leaks anywhere, Cleo. It'll do. Now, we need to hunt up something to use for insulation. Something voluminous and efficient. Do any ideas strike you? I've racked my brain for an hour, and haven't come up with one I like."

Having pondered that question, Cleo frowned. "My word, Nigel, I can't either. Let me think for a bit."

"While we're both thinking, I'll help you finish bolting in that second couch."

"What gallantry!" his companion joked.

Even as the man shot her a smile, his sibilant voice took on a vibrant intensity. "Gallantry to you could become a way of life, Cleo."

Suppressing a gasp, the startled Gaean smiled exactly as she would have at any joking remark. She knew that Nigel had not spoken in jest. The knot so recently relaxed clenched more tightly than ever as she faced him across the width of the couch, and tightened nuts.

Insulation. Think of that, she urged her alter self. Gathering her scattered wits, she concentrated on the problem. We need something thick, to hold in the cold, and reflect away the heat. Something big. Something bulky...like those damned mattresses I wrestled into the...

"Nigel!" she exclaimed, her eyes lighting with rueful amazement. "Right before our unseeing eyes! Why not use the eight mattresses, covered with something silvery?"

"Foil-backed glass-cloth! Yes! We removed a roll from the ship! Cleo, you fill me with absolute chagrin. The mattresses—of course! And they'll repel away any water. My mind's failing me, that I didn't think of them."

"You didn't herd those damned bulky things all that long weightless way to

Central!"

Nigel broke into a peal of delighted laughter. "No, but I watched your exuberant flights. Like riding the mythical magic carpet, hm?"

Astonishment gripped the Gaean intellectual. "You've read those ancient tales?" "Hasn't every child lost himself in those, at some point?"

"Why...I never thought..."

"Never thought I'd enjoy them, or never thought I'd ever been young?" "Nigel!" Giggling, Cleo shook her head.

This man, too, has depths I've not yet plumbed, she admitted to herself in wonder. Imagine Nigel curled up before a terminal, reading the Arabian\_Nights! A vivid vision of a dark-eyed, ugly child losing himself in a fantasy-world of enchantment and adventure rose to smite her. Did Nigel's unprepossessing face set him apart even as a small boy? Did he have to fight to overcome a problem as serious as mine? Learn to live with his ugliness—to accept that facet of himself, and act as if it didn't matter? Until it actually didn't? Until he became swordsman, scientist, spacer, lover? What kind of women taught him what he knows?

Setting down ratchet and socket, the Columbian regarded his companion out of reflective eyes. "Yes, I've read the *Arabian Nights*," he informed her softly. "Among other tales. Not every Columbian schoolboy did that, and no girls, to my knowledge. You're right. You've trod a far different path to being what you are, than any woman I've ever known. We've a great deal in common, you and I. I sense that more surely, every hour I spend in your company. Think about that, Cleo. Weigh it, against other considerations that might be occupying your thoughts."

Fear clamped a sudden icy hand around the listener's heart. Mutely, she struggled to master that surging dread, and control her face. Rising, Nigel observed traces of agitation she failed fully to hide. "Well, we're finished here, for today, as soon as we stack the mattresses next to the tank, lay out a roll of foil-backed glasscloth, line, and bags stout enough to hold the water against hard vacuum," he drawled. "I know what will work for that last." Striding to the bank of lockers against the wall of the bridge, he removed the roll of cloth, a spool of line, and seven large, thick, opaque, self-sealing, and all but indestructible bags, a meter wide and two long.

"What are those used for?" Cleo asked, curiosity winning out over the disquiet still shattering her peace.

"Body-bags. If you go down fighting, and your corpse doesn't end up vented into space, your remains get sent home in one of these Chemically preserved, so as not to be a burden to your surviving comrades."

"Oh..."

"Fact of life. Or...fact of death. Chancy profession, military spacer. The bags come in handy for other purposes, at times."

Nigel's blunt explanation added to the woman's inner turmoil. *Oh, my soul, don't talk so matter-of-factly about death, Nigel*, she begged mentally.

Unbidden, the picture of Michael's sturdy frame filling out a bag scrolled onto the screen of her consciousness. Fighting to banish that dismal image, she picked up the spool of line, toted it out the door of the bridge, and across the open space of the deck, to set it down next to the tank that would hold the ice.

Nigel followed, bearing the heavy roll of cloth, and the seven bags. Striding to the newly furnished dining hall, his teammate detached a mattress, and hauled it to a place beside the other items. Nigel followed, bearing another. Having stacked all eight next to the tank, the two workers regarded the setup.

"Anything we've forgotten, Cleo?" Nigel drawled.

"Nothing that I can think of."

"I can. I need a hooked bar, to snare the frame from the lock. I'll have to build one, in Nine. You can find something to occupy you in the tertiary tank, while I do that, hm?"

"Nigel, I can find any number of things to occupy me there, on any occasion."

"Well, carry on. I'll collect you on my return, and we'll look in on Marvin's accomplishment, on the way to supper." With that parting directive, Nigel strode

away.

Cleo descended to the lower deck, and strode into the tertiary tank. As she gazed at the greenery, she strove valiantly to decide what to do in the hour and ten minutes remaining before supper, but her mind fragmented. The difficulty she encountered in trying to concentrate frightened her.

Whatever's the matter with me? she agonized. I can't remember ever feeling as I have today! Strain, that's what's shattering my ability to think. Fatigue. Marvin, tonight. No stress there. I must tell him how proud he has made me. He tried so hard, all week. You need to do the same. Think, now!

Still befogged, Cleo took her claw from the locker beneath the spiral, and a box containing bags of seed. *Fava beans:* Vicia. *Dislikes extreme heat. It'll have to go fairly low on the spiral. Forget that, until later.* A vigorous vine caught her eye. *Train this sprawling* Basella up a trellis, and plant more soybeans around it. Remember to ask Justin what he'd like to see growing in here.

Selecting a wire tower from those nesting within a locker, Cleo stuck it into the mix of soil and fibrous mat. Standing on the ladder, she wove long, pliant stems through the metal framework, deftly tying tendrils here and there with strips of soft glass-cloth. Work so familiar as to require no conscious thought soothed her nerves. Stubbornly refusing to dwell on the events of the day, she tried to plan further changes in the tank, but her brain felt sluggish: ominously fatigued.

*I simply can't think clearly!* she admitted, fighting a resurgence of gloom mingled with dire fear. *I need eight hours of unbroken, deep sleep!* 

When Nigel arrived to collect her, he found her hanging precariously out from the ladder, planting the last of the soybeans. "Let me just put away my tools," she called down.

"Hand them to me."

Having obeyed, Cleo descended the ladder. The act of wiping her brow with her sleeve left a smudge of soil on one cheek. Reaching out, Nigel brushed the mark away. "You don't want to sport a dirty face," he chided, smiling, but the touch of his

hand sent a jolt down the distraught engineer's hypersensitive nerves. The potent masculine appeal the man radiated impacted her vulnerable psyche, but produced as much fear as pleasure. Mutely, she watched as he put away her tools. After climbing the ladder in his wake, she accompanied him to Two.

On hearing the door slide open, Marvin looked up from the worktable on which lay his creation. A thin but strong harness of webbing and a framework of a light, strong, rigid, composite material, the whole designed to fit around a fully inflated body-bag, the observers saw to have been equipped with the same sort of lightdensity, super-strong, perfectly insulating tanks holding liquefied nitrogen, as were employed in maneuvering units. Remotely controlled apparatus, designed to release gas from those, connected to the device from Two, which also attached to the frame. On the counter nearby lay a bulky extension connected to the terminal.

Minutely, Nigel inspected the invention, taking no pains to conceal profound admiration. "Will it fly, Marvin?" he inquired.

Flushing, the inventor yet managed to meet the second officer's glance squarely. "It does. I was just going to give it a final test. Better stand back. Over there, by the door."

Obediently, his visitors retreated. Seating himself at the terminal, the nervous expert touched the keyboard of the extension. Donning a helmet, he waited for a time, evidently allowing his eyes to get used to whatever virtual reality he now observed. Of a sudden, the device rose off the table, accompanied by the loud hissing produced by the escaping gas. Gracefully, the frame made a right-angled turn, swept in a tight circle around the perimeter of the table, and landed once again in the same spot.

Marvin removed the helmet, laid it down, and sighed audibly.

"I had to use compressed nitrogen just now," he explained. "The molecular weight's lower than that of propane, which I'll use outside, but propane's flammable, so I couldn't release a cloud of it within the station. I've found quite a few portable gas tanks capable of regulating the temperature and pressure so as to keep the propane liquefied, outside. I had to expel quite a volume of nitrogen to raise the frame, light as it is, against the centrifugal force of the station, in addition to giving the thing sideways thrust. It'll take far less propellant to move the same mass in free fall, in the vacuum of space, than it does here. It'll encounter no aerodynamic drag, out there, either. I'll run a test flight, with no precious water aboard. I'll use rocks, or something similar in mass. All this test accomplished was to prove to myself that I can guide the outfit by the remote controlling device I built."

"Marvin, how magnificent!" Cleo's voice breathed wonder.

"It is indeed. Marvin, what a craftsman you are, with anything to do with computers!" Nigel exclaimed, admiration evident in every subtle nuance of his sibilant voice.

Marvin met his shipmate's eyes directly, as he replied softly, "Why, thank you, Nigel. You, too, Cleo."

If that unwonted manner of responding startled the second officer, no evidence surfaced. "I built a hook to snag the frame, and draw it into the lock," he informed his colleague. "Could you fashion a rigid ring, somewhere where there'd be no danger of my puncturing the bag?"

Reaching into a pile of surplus parts on the counter, Marvin withdrew four metal rings. "Would these be big enough?"

"Perfect."

"I'll attach all four, to the four sides. The frame will seem to hover outside the lock. It'll be programmed to match the station's spin, but I'm not sure which side will be easiest for you to reach."

"Marvin, I honor your genius." The sibilant voice seemed merely to state a fact.

"I'm just utilizing training I never encountered any need to use, prior to now," the man struggling valiantly to repair his relations with his comrades replied with unwonted graciousness.

The pride inflating Cleo's chest showed plainly on her face.

"You're knocking off for supper, I trust?" Nigel asked. "Come along with us."

The creator of the unique apparatus switched off the terminal, gave a final few nervous touches to his creation, and walked with his visitors to the dining hall.

Supper passed uneventfully. Cleo ate for the most part silently, hoping the tomato-flavored casserole full of unidentifiable fragments would rejuvenate her. Catching Marvin gazing worriedly at her, she flashed him a smile that seemed to reassure him.

Damn, but I'd hate to have him mistake tiredness for lack of enthusiasm for his presence this evening! she reflected nervously. He's so sensitive! I could easily if inadvertently hurt his feelings. Exerting considerable effort, Cleo joined in the general discussion, and smiled once again at her partner for the night.

Thrusting her fears to the back of her mind, the tired woman rose up and beamed at the entrant as he walked in to sit on the edge of the bed and gaze shyly down at her. Impulsively clasping him around his neck, she exclaimed, "Marvin, you possess a wealth of courage, and such admirable determination. I'm so proud of you!"

The man's arms tightened convulsively around the woman who had so inexplicably befriended him. "I tried, Cleo. You noticed?"

"Of course I noticed! Your efforts made a big difference. Don't you sense that?"

"I felt better about myself all week. You told me to put myself in other people's boots...so I did. I've been putting myself in yours. Cleo, do you have a husband... Children... In Gaea...?" The questioner's pale face creased into lines of acute anxiety, as he awaited the answer he dreaded hearing.

*Oh, Marvin,* the Gaean silently chided him in a rueful blend of amusement and chagrin, now you think of that! As if I wouldn't have died rather than consent to sleep with six men if I had a husband whose honor lay in my keeping!

But you're changing. Better late than never, your concern.

Allowing no trace of reproach to surface in face or voice, Cleo replied evenly, "Not any more. My husband fell in battle an Earthyear and a half ago, fighting Norman's corpsmen. My five-year-old son died annihilated, along with my sister, my brother, my uncle, and my cousins—my whole family—an Earthyear before that, when Yancey wiped Davis Station. I have no family left."

A sharply indrawn breath hissed through the lips of the man shocked to his core. "The brother you told me about...?"

"Glendon. Yes."

"Oh, Cleo..." Marvin gripped her shoulders, his eyes reflecting naked pain. "And you can still call a Columbian spacer...friend?"

"You didn't loose that blast, Marvin," the prisoner of war replied bleakly. "None of you six men did. If I hold anyone responsible besides Yancey, I blame Norman, for unleashing such horrors on my people. I hate Norman and Yancey, but not you. Not six men whose invasion of this station came about by accident, in a sense."

Clasping her against his chest, the shaken expert held her, words momentarily failing him. Cleo felt his heart hammer, beneath his thinly fleshed ribs. Touched by the man's sincere if belated sympathy, she sought to reassure him. "I've done my best to put my loss behind me, Marvin."

Relaxing his grip, the Columbian stared intently into the face in which even he had noticed strain, lately. When he spoke, his voice, still husky with feeling, conveyed an unusual amount of decisiveness. "Cleo, I know that in no way could I ever replace what you've lost. Probably none of us could. But I know now what you meant when you said you knew all about loneliness. Cleo, I'd like to think...that once a week...for however brief a time...I could stand between you and that loneliness."

Never able to conceal his feelings with any degree of success, the social misfit betrayed a yearning that went straight to the bereaved widow's heart.

"Marvin, you do," she assured him earnestly. "Not just once a week. Every time you smile at me in the corridor...every time you visit with me on my break...every time you talk to me over lunch. Your friendship...your caring...truly has helped. Now, don't let what can't be changed take the joy out of your night."

Smiling warmly into the man's troubled eyes, Cleo deftly undid his tunic. Her

caresses inevitably aroused the urgent passion he still failed utterly to control. Used to him, liking him more with each new glimpse into his mind and heart, Cleo found even his first swift penetration pleasurable.

Lying back relaxed afterwards, she gave herself up to his assiduous attempt to give her satisfaction, discovering that he had forgotten nothing of what she had taught him a week earlier, despite the emotional trauma that night had dealt him. Sympathy lent an extra gentleness to his caresses. Strain and exhaustion notwithstanding, Cleo's body responded, as much to that gentleness as to the physiological stimulation of his touch.

His partner's unmistakable arousal drove the shy Columbian to redouble his efforts, inducing new passion in him. As Leonard had done, Marvin developed approaches of his own. Even though his problem had severely curtailed the pleasure he formerly sought to achieve from coupling with courtesans, Marvin had nonetheless had gained a modicum of experience from those prior encounters. On this night, Cleo attained a height of bliss that astonished her. When her lover's final thrusts culminated in a most satisfying climax for both herself and him, an ecstasy of the spirit eclipsed in the afflicted spacer's mind the flood of sensual pleasure his effort produced. Lying happily in the warmth of Cleo's embrace, filled with triumph, he fell asleep knowing exactly how he felt about her.

## **WEEK FOUR: FRIDAY**

Cleo floated up out of sleep troubled by dreams she could recall only dimly. Not fully awake, she felt the pressure of Marvin's body against her legs and hip, and lay unmoving, sensing that it was too early to rise.

Go back to sleep, she ordered her alter self. You've gone too short on sleep, for too long. Marvin always wakes early, and he isn't stirring. He'll rouse you, when it's time.

Marvin...so gentle, last night...so troubled by your loss, once it occurred to him to inquire. No jealousy. So undemanding. If only Nigel could accept what the others have! Don't think of that now. Go back to sleep.

Forcing all thought of the day ahead from her mind, Cleo slipped once more beneath the gray veil, and drifted back to the brink of unconsciousness.

Propped on his elbow, Marvin lay gazing down at his sleeping companion, not daring to move lest he wake her. Observing that sleep had not erased the lines of care from around her eyes and mouth, he frowned in perplexity.

Something has been preying on Cleo's mind lately, he ruminated as anxiety burgeoned. She works too hard! She does a man's job with all a man's energy and nowhere near a man's strength. Even mine. She looks exhausted, right after a night's sleep. I kept her up too late! But how could any man resist that appeal she made me, last night?

She needs a day off! I wonder if that has ever occurred to Michael, work-addict that he is.

Emotion rose to break over the introvert like a storm surge in the proverbial ocean of Earth. Used to talking aloud to himself as he worked in solitude—a habit that loneliness had reinforced—he couched his thoughts now in an audible, low voice. "I know you'll never feel about me the way I feel about you, girl. I'm lucky beyond all belief that you call me friend. But I love you, Cleo. I love you!"

Poised on the brink of sleep, his bedmate heard him. Shock brought her wideawake. "What makes you think I'll never feel the same way about you?" she demanded.

A crimson flush darkened Marvin's whole dismayed countenance. "Cleo," he exclaimed hoarsely, "I thought..."

"You thought I was asleep, or you'd have been too shy to say that!" Speechless with embarrassment, Marvin dropped his eyes, and averted his face. Sitting up abruptly, Cleo reached out, and enfolded him in arms grown far stronger of late. Hugging him hard, she commanded, "Marvin, look at me." When he forced himself to meet her eyes, she declared emphatically, "I *do* love you. You're not the only one of you six men to whom I've said that, and I'll likely end by loving all of you. But I love *you* no less than I do the others, Marvin. That admission you didn't think I'd hear most definitely stands between me and the loneliness that has devastated me ever since Max fell fighting. Marvin, believe me...I do love you."

The recipient of that impassioned admission saw nothing in guileless brown eyes, heard nothing in the earnest warm voice, which lessened his faith in the woman uttering it. Happiness more intense than any he had ever experienced in his lonely adulthood flooded his being. Folding the widowed Gaean into his embrace, he held her mutely, unable to speak. His trust in her absolute, he proved incapable of entertaining any agonizing doubts born of jealousy.

On beholding the joy radiating from his gangly frame, her own heart melted. Realizing exactly what her words meant to this hypersensitive lover, she knew with certainty that truth, not pity, had prompted them. Aware that her emotions were fast enmeshing her in a complicated net of relationships for which she would at some point pay a fearful price in mental agony—her own and that of her companions—Cleo nonetheless remained powerless to change what was happening to her. Fear lanced through her, even as happiness flooded her mind.

What a tangle I've gotten myself into! she cried in silent agony, scourged by acute fear. Will five of these men to whom I've made that assurance grow to regret ever having known me, when we arrive in Columbia, and I can't pair with more than one? Or none, if I'm sentenced to serve in a penal work force for twenty Earthyears or more? Oh, Marvin. I hope this fleeting happiness turns out to be worth the price you'll eventually have to pay, in mental agony!

The slight tension appearing in Cleo's slim body—tautness generated by her thoughts—registered on the man clasping her close. Holding her away, he looked searchingly at her, wondering what passing thought had prompted that sudden stiffening. Her smile reassured him. "I'm going to walk in to breakfast without touching the deck," he declared, dark eyes sparkling.

Pain jolted the hearer anew. Beholding fear flicker across the delicate, attractive face so unable to hide its reactions, he queried anxiously, "Cleo, what is it that has been bothering you lately?"

Given that her acute awareness of the dilemma complicating her emotional life forced her other problem for the time being out of her thoughts, Cleo's answer constituted the truth. "Marvin, I never intended to fall in love with six men at once! I know what a terrible price in emotional pain all of us may eventually have to pay for what I've done. That worries me, even while I'm helpless to change things!"

His face brightening, Marvin actually laughed. "Cleo, you talk as if you were the sole perpetrator of a crime," he chided her gently. "You're not, girl. We forced you into a life that by rights should have made you hate us. You returned kindness for selfishness and gentleness for arrogance, and now you worry about the effect of our act on *us*! Don't, girl. Nothing that conceivably could happen will ever make me regret today, or last night, or any of the precious hours I've spent in your company. I love you, Cleo. Knowing that you return that feeling, even if five other men share in

it, confers a sense of self-worth that nothing will ever erase. Now, put that fear to rest, for good."

Grateful for his understanding, relieved by his logic, Cleo leaned forward and kissed him full on the mouth. Holding her firmly against him, Marvin returned her kiss ardently, passionately, and thoroughly, evoking amazement in his partner even as she yielded to the erotic force of his salute.

"Oh," she breathed, when he released her. His eyes dancing, his thin, pale face wreathed in that transfiguring smile he so seldom employed, Marvin regarded her with open affection for a full minute, before reluctantly rising and fetching her uniform from the adjuster.

Preceding her escort through the breakfast line, Cleo smiled at Leonard as he offered her one of the green motion-sickness pills, and a glass of orange juice. "The spin will be slowed, this morning," he reminded her. "You need to down this now." Nodding, the novice swallowed pill and juice, and held out her bowl to Justin, who filled it with a heaping portion of the bland, sweet, imitation cereal for which she felt little appetite on the best of days.

Bearing the despised offering to the table, Cleo seated herself, and greeted the others. As Marvin sat down in his usual place, Michael immediately noticed the happiness suffusing the face so unable to hide what the man within felt.

No problem there, he conceded wryly, as pain stabbed him. What in the sifted stars of the spiral galaxy keeps bothering her? Nigel has been paying her compliments, damn his rakehell charm! Fascinates women, he does. Always has, despite his sporting that face. Well, mine's no gift, and I've done all right over the Earthyears, but I wish to hell I knew where I stand now, when Cleo's regard means more to me than anyone else's ever has!

As if he possessed a dual personality, the man lost in reverie heard his alter ego offer a bleak assessment, and conduct a painful interrogation. *She loves you, Michael. She wouldn't lie to you. But she openly admitted that you aren't the only one! Can she honestly love six men equally? Be truly unable to choose? Do you*  really want to know that answer to that question?

Covertly, Michael studied the pale face opposite, as his alter selves resumed their unsettling dialogue.

Maybe Justin can figure out what's eating on her. He has noticed, just as you have. She looked exhausted, last night, even though she didn't put in a hard day yesterday. Perhaps she has figured out what you have, about our return, and what you're seeing is fear slowly escalating into terror.

Damn! I fervently hope not!

Figure an angle, spacer-captain. Time's getting shorter! That insidiously appealing fantasy that keeps recurring simply isn't a practical solution! Witness this week, spacer-captain. You deliberately, repeatedly, jabbed barbs under Nigel's thin skin. You simply couldn't resist goading your arrogant rival. Cheeky bastard! He thinks he's any woman's dream-lover! Well, Cleo handled herself marvelously, just as she has, all along. Sharp mind, hers.

Damn, but I enjoy her company. I wish I'd finagled as much opportunity to spend time working with her, as I've given Nigel! She'll end by falling hardest for him, I'll wager. Damn my luck! And damn my lack of foresight!

Just before the end of the meal, Michael rose, riveting all eyes.

"First thing this morning, Marvin will integrate the device that allows him to control the bags, into the board in Eleven. Justin, you'll slow the spin, and then Marvin will test-fly a bag of rocks. If that flight proves successful, Conrad and Leonard will drain the water from the ship's life-support system, and fill the bags. In the weightless state, the bags won't present too much of a problem to float into the lock.

"Justin, you'll suit up, and shove the frame out the lock. Nigel, you and I'll suit up as well. You'll snag the ice from Eleven's lock, and I'll work the come-along to drag in the frame. Inertial mass will of course remain unchanged, though massive objects will be easier to lift against reduced centrifugal force. We'll tether ourselves with stout line to a handhold, so as to avoid being jerked out. We'll have to exert extreme care.

"Cleo can wear the pack, monitor our movements, and help us maneuver the bags to the tank. That'll be harder than lifting them in. While Marvin's readying his remote controller, Cleo, you're to see Justin in the infirmary. Conrad, Nigel brought seven body-bags from the bridge on Eleven. They're in the conference cabin. You'll wait for Justin, and help him suit up there. Nigel, Marvin can help you suit up, and then me, before he makes the trial run."

On hearing Michael's unexpected order, Cleo winced, and her gut tightened. What brought that on? she asked herself. My loss of mass? I hope that's all! Rising with the others, the woman thus singled out unwillingly headed for the infirmary.

Composing her face, the Gaean walked in to greet the medical technician with a smile that she hoped concealed her anxiety. Justin smiled back, but directed in a tone that admitted of no refusal, "Take off your clothes, and step on the balance."

Awash in apprehension, his patient complied, knowing without having to look what the dial would show.

"You've lost another kilogram." No accusatory note entered the technician's voice, but his eyes mirrored acute concern as he directed, "Step over here to the monitor." When the results of an examination as thorough as the last he had made appeared on his terminal screen, he ordered his patient to dress. Scanning the figures before him, he compared them to those he had recorded previously.

Having hastily pulled on her uniform, the Gaean watched him out of wary eyes.

Turning to her, Justin gestured her into a chair, and seated himself opposite. Sitting back apparently relaxed, he studied the woman's drawn face for a time, well aware of her nervousness.

"Cleo," he announced firmly, "I know what you've been eating. I've made sure that you haven't chucked any of it into the rough-processor. If food were the only factor, you should have gained mass, but you've lost a full kilogram."

"Justin, I've been working hard! I've tackled considerable heavy lifting. That caused the loss of mass!"

A brisk shake of the head greeted that claim. "If physical exertion were causing you to build muscle, you'd gain mass. No, that hasn't caused the problem. Stress has."

Pausing, the keen observer narrowly scanned the face his patient sought to keep expressionless, noting the flash of dismay she failed to conceal. In as gentle a tone as he could manage, he remarked, "I think I can imagine how difficult you've found it, adjusting to this life. I know you've taken one person's problems on yourself to boot, for the simple reason that you did it before us all. I rather suspect that you performed a similar kindness earlier, for another. Lately, you've run into a difficulty that you haven't been as able to resolve as successfully as you did the two prior ones, and that new problem is causing you considerable distress." Leaning forward in his chair, the technician urged in his most persuasive tone, "Tell me what's bothering you, Cleo."

Affection blended with anxiety in the distraught mind of the hearer. *Justin, you're such a kindly soul,* she commended him wistfully, *but you can't help*. Bracing herself, she replied levelly, "I feel acutely uncomfortable discussing one of you with any of the rest of you. And even if I did that, there's nothing you could do to help. It's not a major difficulty. I'll handle it. Please, don't build it up in your imagination to more than it is!"

Pain stabbed the sensitive listener's heart, and showed in his eyes. "Handicaps a medic when he's part of the problem, doesn't it, Cleo?" he replied in a tone of bitter self-reproach.

"Justin, you're not part of the problem! You never have been!" the Gaean retorted vehemently. "Don't ever think that!"

Stroking his chin reflectively, the worried caregiver raked his patient's troubled, tense face with a penetrating glance. Resolutely, he stated exactly what he thought. "Cleo, you're likely right that even if you discussed your problem with me, I couldn't do much to alleviate it. But Michael could."

"Justin! You won't say anything to Michael, will you? Please, don't! I'll work it

out!" The voice gone disconcertingly hoarse now betrayed a hint of desperation.

Justin beheld stark fear look unmistakably out of wide, shocked eyes—fear for which he accurately assigned the cause. Bluntly, he retorted, "I find it devastatingly ironic that you refuse to take your problem to the man who forced you into the life that caused it, owing to your fear of the consequences to him if he confronts the person responsible. That fear is driving you to ignore the damage the problem is causing *you*: damage that will worsen, if the difficulty isn't resolved."

Sheer fright leaped plainly into view on the haggard face of the Gaean. Tense as a wire stretched to the breaking point, she exclaimed shrilly, "Justin, you won't *ever* say such a thing to Michael, will you? Say you won't! Please!"

Leaning forward, the technician took both of his agitated patient's hands in his. Gently, he strove to reason with her. "Cleo, I have no wish to add to your burdens, or cause you more worry than torments you already. No, I won't say that to Michael, but I won't promise not to inform him that you have a problem—and tell him with whom—if you can neither resolve it nor live with it. I'd much prefer, however, that you took it to Michael yourself. He has handled worse, girl."

Pushed to the wall, Cleo faltered in her resolution, but stubbornly clung to her determination not to give in to the temptation to let this compassionate caregiver argue with the Captain on her behalf. "Justin, give me more time," she pleaded. "It's not as bad as you suspect. I'll solve it. Please, don't say anything yet."

Reluctant admiration blended with weary chagrin on the lined, brown face of the man conscious of having failed to gain what he sought. After deliberating for a full minute, he arrived at a decision.

"All right, Cleo, I'll wait a bit," he agreed, "but not long. Monday will offer you a prime opportunity to approach Michael, so consider doing that. I want to see you back here on Tuesday. If you haven't confided in him, I'll take the initiative, and arrange a conference: you, myself, and the Captain."

Feeling pressured, even though grateful for the man's kindly concern, Cleo eyed him reproachfully, but made no further protest. Perhaps I can reason with Nigel on Saturday night, she surmised in desperation. Perhaps I ought to tell him what I told Michael, so long ago. Or was it only a few weeks ago that I first explained to Michael how I felt? It seems an age!

Why can't Nigel understand? If Michael jumps him about his personal relations with me, Nigel will kill him. So touchy a duelist would inevitably demand satisfaction for what he'd class as a gross insult. Oh, Max, how did I ever get myself in such a mess? Poetic justice, would you say if you knew? Serves me right, for doing what I've done to stay alive, and...unbrutalized?

Or...civilized, Michael would say...but are we, really? Or have we simply regulated our indulgence of carnal desire that none of us could sternly repress in himself? Even me? Or am I imposing a strictly Gaean point of view on men conditioned by Columbian mores far more permissive than anything I've been raised to accept? Are they exquisitely civilized, according to their standards, and I'm the main problem? I can't think logically, any more. If I ever could!

Forcing her mind back to her present reality, Cleo smiled wanly at the man regarding her anxiously, and rose, determined to leave.

Coming swiftly to his feet, Justin gripped slim shoulders, and looked deeply into haunted eyes. "Cleo, I've a notion that you've been having trouble sleeping, or that you haven't been firm enough about retiring each night at a reasonable hour. You change that, girl. Your eyes look like burnt holes in a bedcover, this morning. I'd play the heavy medic, and tell Michael that I'm committing you to the infirmary for treatment, if I thought by so doing I'd get you caught up on your sleep. But if I did that, I'd be postponing a solution, not achieving one. You think over what I just told you, Cleo, and trust Michael to help, on Monday night."

*Oh, Justin, nothing escapes you, does it?* the harassed captive admitted ruefully, regarding the shrewd observer in wonder. "I'll consider it, Justin. And thank you, for your concern."

"You needn't thank me. Now, lie down in your cabin. I'm delegated to slow the spin." Giving her shoulders a final squeeze, Justin escorted his patient to the door.

Lying tautly on her bed, the woman so direly afflicted mentally braced herself to endure the uncomfortable physical sensation, reflecting wearily, *Justin has seen what I have. He knows Nigel well. He knows what Nigel's capable of doing to Michael, and he guessed with uncanny accuracy why I'm worried. He seems to think that Michael could resolve my problem. How? By reasoning with Nigel? Threatening? Whatever tactic the Captain tried, I can't imagine any outcome other than Nigel's issuing Michael a challenge.* 

And in any case, I shrink from the thought of discussing any of my lovers with Michael. Doesn't so capable a leader see that Nigel's jealous? If he has noticed, that observation doesn't seem to worry him. Nigel issued me an ultimatum of sorts yesterday. Damn his overweening assurance! If he demands more than I can give reverts to hating me, and treats me as he did that first night—Michael will notice that, and take drastic steps!

My perishing soul, what can I do? Act a lie? Give Nigel what he wants? Hurt everybody else drastically and irrevocably? Damned if I'll do that! I'll space myself first. But damn! Just think of the pain that act would cause the others! Selfdestruction's no longer an option. I'll simply have to find a way to explain to Nigel how I feel. I've got to reach him/ Somehow!

Cleo grew tense, as the unsettling sideways thrust intensified. *No nausea, anyway,* she comforted herself. *I hate this feeling. There. Oh, my battered body! Watch how you walk. Hell of a spacer, you are!* Treading with exquisite care, she made her way to the rim.

On arriving at Eleven, the woman still moving gingerly headed for the bridge, and saw Michael stride with seeming ease around the corner of the wall, and intercept her. "Nigel's suiting up in there, Cleo. He'll have shed his uniform." Flashing her a broad grin, he added, "It wouldn't shake his aplomb if you burst in, but it might embarrass you."

A hot blush suffused the Gaean's cheeks. *I'm not thinking, this morning,* she chided herself savagely. "Thank you for warning me!" she exclaimed.

"You can help me, out here. I'm making tethers to hold us both. Take this come-along, and fasten this end to that free-fall handhold"—Michael gestured—"and run the cable out, to here. We'll use the outfit to winch the ice to the tank."

Nodding, Cleo picked up the heavy-duty winching device, and the piece of line Michael handed her. *If they fill six bags*, she reflected, *the ice will mass five hundred kilograms a bag. I had better make sure that this thing is securely tied.* 

A memory surfaced. Frowning in concentration, the engineer looped the line around the handhold, and through the hook on the device. Slowly, her fingers formed an eight in the line, and then wove a second eight through the first. Pulling on both ends, she tightened the knot that Nigel had taught her to tie. Pressing her thumb down on the puller's quick-release mechanism, she ran out cable enough to reach the designated place.

The door to the bridge opened, and Nigel emerged, encased in a pressure suit. Marvin followed, wearing the communications pack on his back. Slipping out of that, he held it while Cleo thrust her arms through the straps. Having shortened those to fit her slender frame, he showed her how to operate the pack. Michael vanished into the bridge, followed by Marvin.

Nigel's sibilant voice issued from the pack. "Cleo, hand me that hook. I can't bend over in this outfit."

Picking up the long bar he had fashioned for snagging the ice, from where it reposed on the deck, Cleo placed the handle in Nigel's gloved hand. "Snap that hook in the bar's tether to one of the rings at my waist," he ordered. When she did so, he added, "Pick up that harness Michael fashioned."

Holding it spread out, Cleo studied it. "Snap that part around my waist, with the ring in front," the Lieutenant directed crisply. When she finished doing that, he ordered, "Now reach between my legs, and pull up the other loop. Fasten that into the same ring. Good. Take the metal end of that line on the deck, and hook it into the ring. So. Hand me the coil of line in my other hand."

As Cleo stepped back, the suited officer holding hook and coil directed her to

open the door of the lock. Traversing the open expanse of deck, the assistant touched the switch that caused the heavy door to swing open, and watched as Nigel walked into the lock.

"Take this other end of the line from my harness, and let me see you tie it to this handhold with an eight," he commanded.

The startled recipient of that crisp order silently thanked the Powers that she had practiced the tie on the puller, earlier. Acutely aware of the Lieutenant's scrutiny, she unhesitatingly formed the double eight, and stood back to await his comment.

"I'm glad to see my lesson wasn't wasted on you. Sure I won't fly away, hm?" "I hope not, Nigel."

"I admit to hoping the same."

The door to the bridge opened, and Michael's silver-clad form emerged. Nigel drawled, "Cleo's a practiced hand now at harnessing a man to a tether, Michael. Let her help you, and Marvin can begin his test."

Surveying Nigel's harness, the Captain nodded. "All right, Cleo, carry on," he ordered.

Picking up the second harness, Cleo fastened it around Michael's waist, drew the loop between his legs, and secured it. After attaching the safety hook on the end of the line to the ring in his harness, she placed the coiled line in his right hand.

"Pick up that other come-along, Cleo," he directed. "Put the ratchet in my left hand. Now, tether me to the opposite side of the lock from Nigel."

Watching her fashion the eight, Michael asked, "Who taught you that tie?" "Nigel."

"Mm. Fasten the frame of the come-along to this horizontal handhold. Good. Pull out some cable. No, I can release it. That's far enough. Now, hand me the hook." Having watched Cleo place the hook on the cable attached to the puller in his gloved right hand, Michael gripped the ratchet that would allow him to winch the bag, in his left. "Well, Nigel, are you ready?"

"Ready. I can reach the panel. Cleo, go on out, and close the door. It'll latch

automatically. Keep your eye on the panel outside. Marvin, we're ready."

Marvin's voice issued from Cleo's pack. "Let me make this open. Justin, are you ready?"

"Ready here," Justin replied.

"Launch the rocks, then."

Having hastily touched the switch that caused the heavy door to swing shut, Cleo glued her eyes to the panel. Her gut churning, she watched the change showing that the air was being withdrawn, and the second change indicating that the outer door had opened. Tensely, she asked, "All right, Michael? Nigel?"

"Just fine, Cleo," Michael replied. "Enjoying the view. We can't see the bag yet. It'll come on a diagonal to our line of sight, and be hard to spot, against the stars. Ahhh. There it is, on its way. It'll take a bit of time for it to get here." Michael paused, causing Cleo to wait anxiously. "Look at that thing! It's hovering steady as a gambler's glance. Can you..."

"I've snagged it. I can't seem to pull it in. It's traveling away from us, actually."

Marvin's voice interrupted. "Hang onto it, Nigel, and I'll give it a thrust towards you. I won't be able to see it clearly then, so I'll have to guess. Be careful, hear?"

"Thrust away. Damn! It nearly bowled me over!"

"I've got it hooked. Let go, and don't get tangled in the cable. I'll winch the frame down. Back away from the damned thing! Marvin, cut the power, and let's see whether the frame falls to the deck. It did. Beautiful! Marvin, your creation's a whopping success. Nigel, can you reach the panel?"

"There. I've touched the switch."

Tautly eyeing the outer panel, Cleo waited. The door swung open, revealing a flattened bag clinging like a glassy skin to an array of lumpy objects: the test-burden lying on the deck within Marvin's framework. On either side stood a silver-clad figure.

Justin must have pressed most of the air out, before sealing that bag, or surely it would have exploded from the pressure of the expanding air, Cleo deduced accurately. It must have arrived fat, and deflated as the pressure increased to normal, compressing what air remained.

My word, if Nigel had missed the ring, and poked a hole in the bag, rocks flying outward would have struck both men! That danger won't exist, with the ice, unless it doesn't freeze into a whole block. It should, if the water stays in one long continuous blob while in the bag.

"Cleo, unfasten this come-along, let the cable out, and refasten the frame to the handhold opposite this door."

Having quickly obeyed Michael's crisp order, Cleo stood back as he arrived to stand in her place, and work the ratchet to winch both frame and bag into the space before the lock. "Now, release the hook, and attach the one on that other cable."

Nigel walked over to grasp the ratchet of the puller Cleo secured earlier. Working the ratchet, he winched the test-mass down the deck towards the tank. "Cleo, open the frame, and we'll lift the bag out," he directed.

Having done so, the Gaean next placed a loop of webbing in each of four outstretched hands. Lifting together, purely with the strength of their arms, the two rigidly upright figures raised the bag the height of the tank.

"It'll work, Nigel," Michael declared in a satisfied tone. "We won't have to unsuit until we're finished. We'll leave the last two or three bags on the deck, and lift them afterwards."

"That'll be all right, if we don't delay."

"I'll shove the frame out of the lock, Marvin. Cleo, snap the hook of my tether back onto my harness. I'm not taking any chances." Having done that, Cleo dragged the frame back into the lock. "All right, shut the door."

Eyes glued to the panel, the assistant waited. Nigel's amused voice issued from her pack. "Practiced your eight on this puller, hm?"

"And glad I did, Nigel."

"I'll give you another lesson in handy ties, one of these days."

"I'll look forward to that!"

The pressure-proof door opened to reveal the silver-encased figure standing in the lock. "The frame flew like the proverbial bird, Nigel. Imagine that: little winged creatures darting overhead."

"Or big ones, hm? Like the roc, Cleo."

"The ice will look as big as its egg, no doubt! Just don't imitate Sinbad, and get borne aloft," Cleo admonished.

"All I remember about that poor sod was his dire propensity for getting shipwrecked," Michael observed wryly. "I hope to hell our luck proves better than his!"

Conrad's voice boomed from the pack. "Of all the blasted loads I've ever floated, this takes the pot. Justin, you be careful. We're ready, Michael."

Marvin urged, "Justin, tell me when."

"The air's evacuating. The water's starting to freeze." Marvin waited, tensely. Time seemed to all concerned to hang in stasis. Finally, Justin affirmed, "Marvin, I've headed it out."

"Michael, get ready."

Cleo hooked Nigel's tether into the ring on his harness, passed him his hook, and placed the end of the cable in Michael's gloved hand. Retreating out the door, she shut it behind her, and anxiously watched the panel. "All right, Michael? Nigel?"

"We're not borne aloft yet, Cleo," Nigel's sibilant voice assured her mockingly.

"There it is. Easier to see—it's gone! What in the hell..."

"Marvin's taking care not to hit the elevator shaft, chief. He caused it to spiral it out again. So. Here it comes."

Silence fell, and persisted. A sibilant voice exulted, "I've snagged it!"

"Hang on! Don't let it knock you down!"

"Damn the slime-rotted issue of a mutant mother! I'm caught on the frame!"

"Just stand still, and hold onto the bar. There...you're free. I've hooked the frame. Let loose of it, and get out from under the damned thing. Back away farther! Marvin, shut it off. Ahhh, what a lovely docking!" Tense as a wire stretched to the limit of its tensile strength, Cleo waited until the door opened. The bag of ice filled the frame, which reposed on the deck. Needing no repeat of orders, the Gaean released the tethers, unhooked the frame of the puller, pressed the release, and let cable run out as she walked to the handhold and fastened the frame of the puller.

Michael arrived to work the ratchet, and winch the massive load out of the lock. Having unhooked one cable, Cleo snapped the other onto the frame. Nigel winched the frame alongside of the tank. The woman unencumbered by a pressure suit released the frame, and handed both suited spacers the loops of webbing. With eerie ease, the two haulers raised the mass, walked it over the tank, and dropped it in.

"Nice if we could do that in normal gravity, hm?" Nigel drawled.

"Reduced g makes this bag no heavier to lift than Cleo ordinarily is."

"New standard of measurement, hm? A Cleo-unit."

Dragging the frame to the lock, the listener savored relief. They're joking with each other! she rejoiced. I sense no tension between them this morning. Shared danger must act to mute petty concerns. I hope their accord lasts. No breaks this morning, I'll wager. Thank the Powers!

A second delivery of ice worked as smoothly as the first. As the Captain emerged from the lock, having sent the frame back, Conrad's growl issued from the pack. "We've hit a snag, Michael. We pumped the water out of the ship's galley and bathcabin lines, and the water heater. We've started on the algal system, but I think the job would go faster, and work better, if I pull myself through the crawl space, and shut off the lines from the heads to the circulating pump, and between the urine desalting tube and the pump, and then reroute the water around the centrifugal separator. Those chores won't take too long, with Leonard to hand me tools."

"Do that, Conrad. Let's sit on the bunk opposite the bridge, Nigel. We'll unhelmet, and see if we can relax for a bit."

"Suits me."

"Cleo, unfasten my gloves," Michael ordered. "Now, my helmet." Having

obeyed, the novice assisted Nigel.

Two silver-clad, bulky forms moved towards the lone bunk, and sat stiffly down, side by side.

As Cleo lowered herself cautiously to the deck, and sat clasping her bent knees, opposite the two suited men, Marvin emerged from the bridge, wiping his brow with his sleeve, his pale face taut, strained.

"So far, so good, Michael," he observed. "After this next flight, I'll have to take the tanks off the frame, and refill them. I'd hate to run out of propellant, and have the damned frame coast off into the void."

Michael frowned. "What time is it?"

"It's 0805."

"It'll take Conrad a while to reroute the water, Marvin. We'll wait, and make the third run. We'll be halfway through the job, then. We'll insulate what ice we've got, shed these suits, and enjoy a long lunch break. Then we'll come back and finish. That'll take most of the afternoon, time we suit back up, do three runs, stack the last of the ice, and insulate it for overnight."

"That sounds good. Keeps me uptight, maneuvering that outfit. I've worked while acutely conscious that if I let it slam into the elevator shaft, I'll maroon Conrad and Leonard. I don't even know whether Justin took a maneuvering unit. I never thought to ask, earlier. I messed up, there." Guilt showed nakedly on the lean, nervous face of the expert.

"I'm the one who should have thought of that, and sent suits with Conrad and Leonard," Michael acknowledged grimly. "I'll do that, this afternoon. Sit down and relax, Marvin."

Having settled his gangly frame onto the deck next to Cleo, the inventor confided, "You know, Michael, if it weren't for the danger to those of you working the locks, and that of hitting the elevator, I'd enjoy this chore. I haven't flown a remote vehicle for a long time."

"I'm amazed at the way you make it hover!"

"I programmed it to do that. I could have programmed it to make each entire flight, and eliminated any need to guide it across, but that would have taken me a far longer time. Eleven would be in a different position relative to the lock on each launch, and that would drastically complicate the job. I've had practice enough guiding remote vehicles manually that I felt certain I could do it safely. I wish I had time to play with that device from Two. Marvel of engineering, that Gaean-built outfit."

Having digested that information, Michael remarked thoughtfully, "Take time, Marvin. I might put what you learn to use, later on. It wouldn't be a bad idea to locate a second Gaean device, and see if they're identical. Likely they are, given that the hulls of the sections are identical. This achievement gives me ideas for solving other problems looming ahead."

Marvin's thin face lit with one of his rare smiles. "I'll enjoy that assignment!"

"I see your point about a flight path from despun axis to spinning section." Knitting his brows, Michael calculated aloud, plugging figures into equations, rounding off figures, and estimating answers, prompting Marvin to add computations of his own.

"What would be the chances of synchronizing two such devices?" the Captain asked.

The expert thus challenged frowned, pondered, and launched into a highly technical summary, interspersing his conclusions with calculations. Having followed intently, Michael asked a series of questions that elicited thoughtful answers.

Of a sudden, Marvin shot the interlocutor a vivid smile. "I think I see where your questions are leading, Michael. You've got me intrigued, but I need to sit down and calculate exactly. Let me do that, after I locate a second device, and tinker with the two awhile."

Conrad's voice, conveying suppressed exasperation, issued from Cleo's and Marvin's packs. "We're ready, Michael. Lovely job, that. Leonard and I reek of piss and sh... We're ready." Responding to Leonard's dig in the ribs, the blonde spacer bit back an unfortunate expression, remembering just in time that he addressed a mixed audience.

Grinning broadly, Michael winked at Cleo, and rose. Marvin checked two helmets, and two pairs of gloves, before returning to his post. The three crewmembers on duty at the lock repeated their now practiced routine flawlessly.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the assistant tried to relax her knotted gut and jangled nerves. Marvin's admission had intensified her fear. While Marvin assisted Nigel to divest himself of the pressure suit, Cleo wrapped the ice in foil-backed glasscloth, stacked mattresses around it, laid one on top of the ice, wound more cloth around the whole, and secured the insulation with Nigel's easily loosened tie. She stepped back, to find him standing behind her, observing that last touch.

"You'd put a few recruits I've known to shame, Cleo," he remarked, his habitual mocking tone hiding none of his satisfaction.

Cleo shot him a wan smile. "I expect you're used to shaping up whatever raw human material your superiors send you."

"We are, but you possess a core of expertise on which it's a pleasure to build." "Why, Nigel, what a compliment!"

"Simple fact—no compliment. Well, let's see if Michael's ready to go to lunch, hm?"

"You'd better ascertain that."

Chuckling, Nigel vanished into the bridge, to emerge shortly afterwards accompanied by Michael and Marvin. Four people glad of the break strode towards the dining hall, and met Justin's suited form heading for the conference cabin. Conrad and Leonard flanked him, trailing a lingering fetid odor in their wake.

"I trust the apprentice cook will scrub adequately," Nigel muttered, eyeing the pair with frowning intentness.

While constructing a sandwich, Cleo wondered whether the food would navigate its way through the knot in her gut. *Three more scary runs*, she reflected wearily. *I wish this day were over. Justin tonight. No stress there, unless he pressures me* 

again. Surely he won't! No tension's evident today. Maybe I'm exaggerating the danger.

Leonard, freshly scrubbed and clad in his spare uniform, bearing a pot of steaming coffee, poured her a refill.

"Pill work all right, Cleo?" he inquired.

"No problem, Leonard. But the one I took last time wore off."

"Justin said to give you this. Take it around 1500."

"Thank him for me. That was thoughtful of him."

As Cleo ate the last bite of her sandwich, Michael studied her, over his meal.

I wonder whether Justin found out what's bothering her, he mused. If he did, he doesn't seem to have brought her any relief. Still looks worried, she does. Probably entertains an exaggerated notion of the danger to the three of us working the locks.

See whether you can persuade her to confide in you on Monday night, spacercaptain. But if she's worrying about our arrival in Columbia, what in hell can you say? You can't lie to her. You'd better not risk her quizzing you regarding that aspect of our voyage—not before you've figured an angle that'll work. Get your brain in gear! Find a foolproof ploy, and stop indulging in impossible dreams!

Rising, Michael stretched, gamely resisted an urge to scratch his belly in full view of his crew. *Damn, but I hate the thought of five more hours in that suit!* he groused. *Better stop in the latrine, and tend to all your needs. Scratch everything likely to itch, where you won't compromise your dignity.* 

Sipping the last of his coffee, Marvin gazed with transparent affection at the woman who had so cheered his day.

I still can't believe she said what she did! he marveled. She meant every word. I've won a place in her heart, though I can't think why. I've been nothing but a problem to her. She knows how I feel, now. Heart as big as the galaxy, Cleo's, and she made room for me in it. She looks worried, still. There's got to be more weighing on her mind than what she told me. I surely do wish I could straighten out her

## problems, whatever they are.

Marvin left the dining hall promptly, to fill the tanks. Acting on a comradely impulse, Conrad went with him to help. When the head cook emerged from his workspace, looking tired, Cleo urged, "Sit down and relax, Justin. Did you eat?"

"I grabbed a bite, while I attended to some last minute chores."

"Your sandwiches are as good as your hot meals."

"They make a change, but thank you."

"Justin, one of these days, when we've time, I'd like you to tell me what plants you'd most like to see growing in our tertiary tank."

"I've been meaning to consult with Nigel and yourself. I'll get to that, shortly. Don't forget your pill at 1500."

"Don't worry, I'll remember."

Seeing Michael rise, and walk purposefully to the door, Cleo rose abruptly, and left, followed by Nigel. Michael disappeared into a latrine. Nigel, who had done the same ten minutes earlier, caught up with Cleo, and walked by her side to Eleven. Arriving on Eleven's main deck, he stroked his chin, and declared ruminatively, "I ought to go below to monitor the secondary tank and check the temperature. That ice chilled the air some, before you covered it."

"I noticed. I felt the cold on my hands and face, where my uniform doesn't regulate the temperature. I think I'll pocket that small pair of gloves, in case my hands get cold."

"I'll fetch them."

"Thank you, but don't bother. I'll go with you, and check the temperature in the tertiary tank."

Having followed her team leader down the ladder, Cleo hurried as fast as she considered consistent with her determination to keep at least one foot at a time firmly planted on the deck.

It's cold in here, she acknowledged, her anxiety mounting. Down to fifteen degrees—below comfortable room temperature of twenty-one or so—and really

humid. I feel the chill more, because of the air's being nearly saturated with moisture. No danger, though, she assured herself. The humidity will help. No problem in here.

Rummaging in her locker, Cleo failed to find her gloves. *I never gave mine to Michael, did I? No. I handed them to Nigel, the other night. Where might he have put them? In the drawer, perhaps. No...yes, there they are.* 

Nigel opened the door, and walked in. "Everything all right?"

"Fine...no danger. Nigel, at lunch, I mentioned to Justin that I—or perhaps both of us—ought to sit down with him soon, and discuss what the head cook would like to see growing in here. I'd be willing to spend some time planting or transplanting whatever else he counts as staples, on my own time."

"I'll give you time, Cleo." The admiration reflecting all too plainly in Nigel's suddenly intent glance filled the Gaean with burgeoning dread. Tautness in his lithe body attested to the intensity of an emotion that struck the beholder with fear even as she felt flattered by it. That feline tightening of rippling muscles evoked memories of the violence to which this man so readily resorted, and produced an answering tightening of the woman's own muscles.

His sibilant voice vibrating with passion, Nigel asserted, "Cleo, you're the only woman I've ever known who attracted me with her brain as well as her body. You lack the power to do other than couple with all of us, in this arrangement Michael continues to force you to accept, but your mind remains free.

"Oh, I know what you've tried to tell me—that you care for all of us—but this life won't last indefinitely. When we dock in Columbia, you're going to need a protector who can fight for you. You'll have to choose, at that juncture, so you might as well do so openly now. No, don't say anything. Words aren't necessary. You need to think about choosing, and then make a choice, hm? Clearly express a preference, by your actions."

Raking with glittering eyes the pale, wide-eyed face mirroring deathly fear, Nigel declared forcefully, "If you choose me, Cleo, I'll take care of you, fight for you, see

you through whatever happens, and cherish you, afterwards. Give my offer careful thought, hm?" Turning on his heel, the limber swordsman strode back out the door, walked to the ladder, and ascended to the main deck.

Appalled, scared to her cold grue, Cleo stood gazing after him. As she reviewed his offer, outrage boiled up, displacing that ghastly fear. Succumbing to rage, she shook with the intensity of her emotion.

Well, of all the unmitigated gall! she shouted in her mind. Not one word expressing the least affection, much less love! Not that the arrogant bastard knows what that word means! He thinks I'm a prize he can take pride in defending, and enjoy possessing! Damn him!

Hot ire produced an adrenaline rush that set the Gaean's heart hammering. I'll show you, you cocky bastard. Express a preference! You can't fight all five of your comrades! I'll make it more than plain that I care equally for each. Starting with Michael!

Fear rose uppermost, to clutch at Cleo's heart, and drain the blood from her extremities. Faintness all but mastered her. A transparent veil seemed to isolate her from her surroundings: a tenuous barrier that lent her walk back to the main deck of Eleven the surreal aspect of a dream.

Ever since Michael brushed death so closely, he has gone out of his way to seek my company, she reminded herself bleakly. It's as if something fundamentally changed him, out there. Surely he recognizes that Nigel's jealous of him! Doesn't he see? Or doesn't he care? Why is he so sure he can avoid a challenge? Even a confrontation?

Did Nigel mean that he'd fight Galt, or his officers, to possess me? Or...Michael? Oh, my heart. What did he mean? My perishing soul, I've got to pull myself together. I've got to get through the afternoon. I'm late now! Should I warn Michael? I won't be able to change Nigel's mind, tomorrow night! What can I do?

Her own mind verging on fragmenting, Cleo automatically took up her station, and awaited the reappearance of the two men between whom she felt so bitterly torn. During six minutes spent standing motionless next to the pressure-proof door, fighting desperately to master her fear, the stressed assistant regained control of her expression. *Don't let Michael see that anything happened,* she warned her other self, as his silver-clad form emerged from the bridge. Silently, she fastened the Captain's harness around his hunchbacked, potbellied, suited form.

Justin's voice, seeming preternaturally calm by contrast to her own inner turmoil, issued from her pack. "Conrad and Leonard brought the frame back with them after they filled the tanks, Michael. Marvin, they're floating a bag down now. Are you ready?"

"I'm helping Nigel suit up. We'll be another five minutes, Justin."

Exactly five minutes later, Nigel opened the door of the bridge, and walked out. Without waiting for any order, Cleo hooked him into his harness, and handed him his bar. Both suited men entered the lock. Their assistant snapped them into their tethers, closed the door, stared at the panel, watched it change, and listened to the flow of comments and orders passing back and forth among the men manning the three work stations.

The fourth bag arrived safely. Mechanically, the traumatized woman performed her duties, focusing conscious effort solely on maintaining a rigid control over her face. Despite her abstraction, she noticed that Conrad's rearrangements seemed to have speeded up the chore of filling a bag. Owing to Marvin's skill and unfailing care, no ghastly accident to the elevator occurred. After the haulers deposited the fifth bag on the deck, a joking reference to motion sickness tossed off by Conrad penetrated the cloud of fear still fogging her mind, and reminded her to take the medication. Groping in her pocket, she found the pill, and swallowed it dry.

Gradually, the fog dispersed. The Gaean's power of logic commenced to function normally. The hot anger cooled. The desperate fear subsided into a settled, numbing anxiety. Her monosyllabic replies to Michael's remarks gradually lengthened into sentences.

Having seen her down the pill, the Captain assumed that the distress he sensed

behind her hard-held control originated in motion sickness.

The pill's working, he surmised. She looks a little better, now. They must wear off her quicker than they do off me. She'd drop, before she'd complain. I see the makings of a first-class spacer in that wiry body and quick mind. Tough, she is, under that ultrafeminine exterior!

Several times during the afternoon, Cleo caught Nigel's eyes boring into hers. She met his glance squarely and coolly.

Whatever you do, don't let him see your fear, she counseled her alter self. You need to think this new development through. All seven of us will be working here tomorrow. Likely all of us will take breaks together, so I'll find it easy to avoid any situation where I'm alone with anyone on my break.

If I can keep from angering Nigel before tomorrow night, perhaps I'll be able to phrase an argument that'll reach him. He's a product of his male-dominated, fiercely competitive, violently militaristic society. You're something new in his experience. Don't give way to anger the way you just did. That's a prescription for disaster! Whatever happens, hang on to your temper. Oh, Glendon, I've never appreciated what you did for me any more than I do now. And oh, Max, I haven't thought of you all week. What a mess I'm in. I wish I were with you, wherever you are!

The seemingly interminable afternoon finally drew to a close. Three more bags of ice rested on the deck. No accident, no injury, no disaster, had befallen anyone. A fraction of the numbing worry afflicting the Gaean vanished. Waiting for Michael and Nigel, who she knew to be shedding their suits on the bridge, she debated whether or not to sit down.

Likely I'd have trouble getting back up, she railed bitterly. I'm drained...wrung out...squeezed dry! I can't wrap the ice until they stack those other bags, so I'll simply have to wait. I can't seem to concentrate. Hurry up, in there! Maybe supper will revive me...if I can hold it down. I took the pill...remembered that...thanks to Conrad.

Michael emerged, followed by Nigel and Marvin. Having taken one look at the

pale, strained face of the woman, the Captain barked out a command. "Cleo, march straight back to the dining hall, and eat a slice of bread. Lie down and relax, before the spin increases. You can't afford to miss a meal, or lose one."

"I'm all right..."

"That's an order!"

Warmed by his concern, the sorely stressed assistant nodded. "Thank you..." Turning, she headed for the rim.

*Oh, Michael...maybe I'll survive the night, now.* A new fear rose to smite her. *If Michael noticed that something is wrong, Justin will as well, and he'll likely figure out the true cause! Get hold of yourself! Justin's hard to fool, but you're going to have to manage that!* 

On stumbling into the dining hall, the woman strung to her emotional limit relayed to the technician what Michael had advised. Nodding, Justin ordered her to sit down. Having warmed a generous slice of bread in the microwave oven, he spread on it what the diners erroneously called butter, laid the snack on a plate, and handed it to the woman he knew to be highly susceptible to motion sickness.

"Michael's right," he informed her. "Having something in your stomach helps, if you've taken the pill, and can keep everything down. You did take it, I trust?"

"I remembered."

Watching until his charge consumed the last bite of bread, he instructed, "Lie down, now, on your bunk, and relax. It'll be a while before I change the spin. Let the snack settle. You'll be all right."

"Thank you, Justin."

"I'm glad you came."

Leonard squeezed the sufferer's shoulder in mute sympathy, evoking a ghost of a smile. Hastily, Cleo retired to her cabin, and stretched out on the bed. *I wish I could just skip supper,* she reflected wearily, *but I don't dare.* 

By the time the spin changed, she had actually managed to relax enough to endure the discomfort without giving way to the queasy protest from her stomach. Rising shakily, she encountered the illusion of being infinitely heavy, and oppressively unwieldy. Her flesh seemed to sag on her bones.

Actually, it is sagging, she acknowledged ruefully. Low g does amazing things to one's figure. Weightlessness must do even more spectacular ones yet. I never noticed that, on my flights through the ship. Good thing—I can feel myself blushing right now. My blistered soul, no support's needed, up front, in the weightless state!

Managing to smile brightly at Justin as he helped her to vegetable casserole, she heard him assure her earnestly, "No fish, girl. Just potatoes, cheese, and vegetables."

Seating herself, she repeated her smile for Michael, and assured him that all seemed well, within. "And no fish," she added. "That reassurance boosted my confidence immensely!"

To her considerable surprise, Cleo found herself actually enjoying the food. Striving for normality, the novice dissembler achieved sprightliness. Entranced, Marvin engaged her in conversation, to the astonishment of the others. Grateful for his aid in disguising her underlying anxiety, Cleo responded animatedly. When she rose from the table, she felt certain that Michael had failed to detect her fear.

Lying undressed under the bedcover awaiting Justin, Cleo wondered desperately whether her mastery of her expression at supper had been adequate to keep the profoundly observant older man from recognizing that her problem had taken on a deeper and more dangerous dimension.

Justin unerringly noticed everything that has affected me, she fretted. He somehow knew that I helped Leonard. Did he guess what Leonard's problem was, as accurately as he guessed that I'm strung out between Michael and Nigel? Will I be able to hide my new fear from a man that perceptive? Surely he won't grill me about my problems in bed! Or might he? He suggested I consult Michael on his night. Damn! What a mess I'm in!

At that juncture, Justin strode in. Smiling down at his partner for the night, he undressed. Having slid in beside her, he drew her unresisting body into his arms, and kissed her, his salute expressive of tender concern, and a wealth of deep affection. When he withdrew his mouth from hers, he declared in a voice that warned that he would brook no objection, "I couldn't resist a kiss, girl, but now, I'm going to tuck your head onto my shoulder, and you're going to sleep, for eight hours. I'll wake you. You needn't fear oversleeping. So. I don't want to hear one word out of you."

Touched by her gentle lover's totally unselfish concern, the tired woman let him settle her body against his. Irrepressibly, she defied his edict. "Three words, Justin. I love you."

Unable to suppress a smile, he murmured, "I'll allow those. Now go to sleep." Snuggled into the hollow of his shoulder, Cleo relaxed, warmed by his caring act.

Justin, you're such a comfort, she commended him warmly, if silently. Even if you are fully as tough as Michael, in your professional capacity. I must have hidden my fear well enough. I'll simply have to reason with Nigel tomorrow night...find words that'll reach him.

Oh, Max. If you knew all that I've done, would the love you bore me cease to exist? Would you develop contempt...hatred? You were the soul of honor. I'd have died to preserve yours, but I simply can't bring myself to feel...soiled...by Justin's love, and certainly not by Leonard's. Nor by Marvin's...or even Michael's, despite what he did initially. Conrad has grown to care deeply for me, even if he finds it impossible to say so outright.

And Nigel? He makes me angry—furious, today—but I could care for him too, if only he could accept what the others have. When he wants to please, he does. He's a difficult man to understand, and yet at times I've thought how easy it would be to love him...if he'd let me do it the only way I can. Max...if we meet again in another plane of existence...please don't hold against me what circumstances and my own incorrigibly impulsive nature combined to drive me to do despite my upbringing! Please!

Falling asleep with her thoughts fixed on the memory of the husband she had

loved, Cleo's overworked mind again played her the cruel trick it had perpetrated earlier. Two hours before the end of the shift, her bedmate came rudely awake, jolted out of deep sleep by shrill cries.

"Max! Oh, Max! Rollin's dead!"

Sitting up abruptly, Justin regarded the distraught woman. Her wide, haunted eyes remained fixed on some harrowing inner vision as Cleo knelt in the center of the bed, her hair wildly disheveled. "He's dead!" The words seemed wrenched out of her by an overpowering mental anguish.

Justin's vehement words and forceful grip having finally penetrated to bring the dreamer back to her present reality, she refocused her eyes confusedly on her bedmate. Responding to the tone of command in the man's voice, she tried to get hold of herself, the bitter memory still vivid in her mind.

Realizing that she had come out of it, her partner folded her into his arms. "Max was your husband, Cleo?" he asked, knowing the answer.

"Yes."

"And Rollin was your son?"

"Yes. It's all right ... I'm sorry I woke you."

"How often do you have these nightmares?"

Wearily, Cleo admitted, "Every six or eight weeks. More often than that, lately. Four weeks ago...I woke Conrad..."

"Always the same dream?"

"Yes."

Pity suffused the seamed face of the medical technician. His voice gentle, soothing, he strove to console this bereaved widow he so deeply loved.

"When we lose those closest to us, Cleo, it's always hardest on the one who has to go on living. Those who died are at peace. It's possible that they're experiencing a richer life than before, but the one left alive has to bear the pain of the loss. That person often has to contend with a feeling of guilt at being the survivor, even while aware of the irrational nature of such a reaction. Cleo, knowing you, I'd be willing to guess that you never let yourself grieve long enough for the son you lost. I expect you were too bent on comforting the husband whose pain equaled yours, so your mind has exacted a price for that omission.

"Grieve for the boy, Cleo. Think about Rollin. Think of him as happy. His short life was full of happiness, I'm sure, and death was instantaneous. Think of him now in the company of all those you lost, still happy, if conscious life does continue. I've always been certain that it does. Grieve, Cleo. When you grieve your fill, your mind will fully accept what happened, and cease plaguing you with these dreams."

Clasped against Justin's chest, enfolded in arms the wiry strength of which conferred a sense of her having reached a safe haven, Cleo dwelled on the words spoken with such gentle assurance. The realization dawned on her that while she had addressed Max constantly in her mind as though he were still her living companion, she had shrunk from visualizing the brown-eyed, curly-haired son she had so loved.

*I consciously sought to avoid reliving the searing pain of that loss,* she admitted dolefully. *Justin's right. I've never fully accepted losing Rollin. I couldn't bear to think of him...to remember...* 

Gently, Justin drew her down beside him. Having tucked her head once more onto his shoulder, he pulled the bedcover over them both. Pressing his lips to her ear, he whispered, "Go to sleep thinking of Rollin happy, Cleo. That thought will give you release."

Yielding to his gentle insistence, Cleo pictured the boy in her mind: his brown eyes dancing, his imagination fired by the poem she had just read to him, as her mother used to read to her. "How big is a horse?" he had asked. "Could a man as tall as Father sit on one?" Dwelling on her search in her world's bank that produced video clips of horses taken in the distant past, on Old Earth, she recalled the boy's fascination. With no thought for order, she ramblingly recalled the varied array of factual information she had gleaned from the bank in response to each new question her son had raised. The memory returned of the pride she had taken in his lively intelligence. From there they had passed to the horses that had appeared in the archaic poems and tales her mother had collected. They both had sensed the romantic appeal that horses and their riders once presented to the people of Earth. Musingly, the researcher dwelled on the well-remembered face of the boy as he eagerly related what he had learned to her uncle.

As though some floodgate long stuck had suddenly opened, other images of Rollin crowded into her mind, and sorted themselves into sequences. She banished none of them. Her last thought as she fell asleep was her fond recollection of how closely Rollin resembled in face and manner the brother who had meant so much to her.

## **WEEK FOUR: SATURDAY**

Cleo drifted up out of a shadowy realm at 0315, conscious of a sense of relief for which it took her a bit of time to assign a cause. As she grew fully aware, the memory of her dream, and Justin's words, returned to explain the state of her mind. A vivid image of Rollin rose, evoking no concerted effort to banish it. She dwelt on the memory, until it faded.

Raising herself on her elbow, she looked fondly down at the peaceful brown face still relaxed in sleep. Her movement woke her bedmate. Opening his eyes to find Cleo regarding him gravely, Justin smiled up at her. Impulsively, she kissed him. Gratitude, affection, and relief all blended in her gesture. Passion followed as she remembered his firm refusal to satisfy his own needs in his concern for her.

Justin found himself unable to resist the open invitation posed by the hands caressing him intimately, even as their owner withdrew her mouth from his. With all his wonted care, no less considerate for the depth of the desire she aroused, he made love to the bereaved widow with an ardor that evoked a matching fervor in her.

Lying breathlessly in strong arms afterwards, Cleo whispered, "Justin, you were right in what you said last night. I took your advice, and it helped. I'm more grateful than I can say."

No whit insensible of the penetrating force of the glance with which her lover raked her, she shivered, hoping no inquisition would follow, but as he studied the face still worn by care and lack of sleep, he merely stated equably, "That's a plus, Cleo. A friend can help you, at times. Keep that in mind today, and give Michael a chance to do what he can for your peace." Rising, he smiled down at her, before retrieving her uniform from the adjuster. To her relief, he made no further reference to her problem. Warmed by his tact, she accompanied him to breakfast, loving him more deeply than ever.

The peaceful glow lingering in warm brown eyes, and illumining a pensive, ultrafeminine face, reassured Michael.

Cleo looks better, this morning, he reflected in relief. She must have fought a queasy gut all day yesterday, pills or no pills. She's not used to changes in g, but she kept her mind on what she was doing, nonetheless. She impressed Nigel—I could see that. She worried about us, too, no doubt, which would have aggravated the nausea. Long, tedious job facing the lot of us today. I'll be damned glad when it's behind us.

Upon arriving on the deck of Eleven, Cleo noted coolness in the air, but no inordinate dampness. Slipping down to check on the tertiary tank, she beheld Nigel standing, chin cupped in one hand, eyes fixed on the monitoring equipment beneath the primary tank. He turned as she passed, and remarked, "The mattresses seem to have done the job, Cleo. No damage occurred."

"I'm glad of that. I'll look in on the plants." Hurrying on by him, the Gaean entered the tank, where an even more pronounced coolness registered on shivering skin. *Sixteen degrees*, she noted. *Warmer than at noon, yesterday, and not as damp. I'll check it again, after we finish melting the ice.* 

Having returned to the workplace, she listened as Michael made work assignments. "Conrad, mount your coils, and do whatever's necessary to use them. None of us will mess with those. Justin, you and Leonard will start as ice handlers. Wear the doubled pairs of gloves I've laid out. Nigel, you and Cleo take turns running the pump and the irradiator. Keep an eye on the filter. Meltwater will accumulate in the ice tank as soon as we unseal the bags.

"Marvin, you and I'll spell each other at ten-minute intervals, cutting. Damned heavy cutter, that Gaean outfit, but it's got a phenomenal power pack. It'll last all day, I expect. The three pairs of us will switch jobs every hour, so that none of us sports a numb arm or frozen fingers by noon. All right, carry on."

With Marvin's help, Michael unwrapped the ice, and stacked the mattresses. Carefully, the two men broke the seals on the bags, allowing the meltwater to drain into the tank. Picking up the heavy electronic cutter, Michael aimed the tracer-beam across the top end of the block of ice, taking care to point the device away from all of his crewmembers. As he held the cutter steady, a sharp crack split the air. Repeated short, powerful pulses quickly melted a channel across the block from which a cloud of condensing vapor rose. Lowering the device, the wielder deepened the channel, until the end of the mass separated, and slipped off the block to fall on the deck, prompting Justin to take a step forward.

"Stand back," the Captain warned. "I'll halve it." After dividing the block, Michael stepped back.

With gloved hands, Justin and Leonard each picked up a chunk, mounted the steps Nigel had improvised around the melting tank, and slid the pieces into the water.

Meanwhile, Conrad hauled enough water from the bathcabin to cover coils designed to extend parallel to the bottom of the tank, at right angles to their supports. Switching on the power, he watched bubbles arise from the vicinity of the device, as the water in contact with the hot metal boiled. Noting that the chunks of ice bobbed in the warming water, not noticeably affected, he muttered, "Melting the blocks will take a while." Thrusting a rod composed of stiff laminate into the tank, he stirred the contents. Even as the temperature of the water rose steadily, two more blocks splashed into the tank.

Michael went on cutting and dividing. Block after block tumbled into the liquid. Having drained enough water into the filter column to fill it, Nigel watched in satisfaction as the level dropped slowly but steadily above the gel-coated sand. Picking up the end of the flexible hose attached to the drain on the tank holding the ice, Cleo waited until the water barely covered the gel before handing the nozzle to Nigel, who filled the column with the cloudy green algal suspension. "We might have to scrape that gel off and re-form it, at some point today," the originator of the idea commented nervously.

"We'll keep an eye on the color of the filtrate," her team leader announced equably. "That intensity of ultraviolet will kill all the organisms. It's just the sliminess we want to avoid. Switch the light on, and pump the reservoir."

Cleo obeyed, noticing with relief the clarity of the filtrate. Michael cut a block, handed the cutter to Marvin, and stood back, flexing his arm. Conrad stirred the water, from which a cloud of steam arose. Turning his head, the engineer checked the meters he had installed to monitor current, voltage and resistance in the heavy electric cable serving the metal-jacketed, high-resistance coils.

A tedious hour dragged by. At its end, Michael gave the word to switch jobs.

Having picked up the cutter, Nigel separated a block, and divided it into three parts, as Cleo watched. Michael and Marvin, their hands encased in doubled gloves those thin gloves were never meant to act as insulation, the engineer reminded herself worriedly—carried blocks up the steps to the tank. Justin rubbed his hands together to dispel the chill before running the column full of cloudy water.

Flashing a grin at his partner, Leonard joked, "Too bad this irradiator's closed. I'd warm my hands."

"And burn yourself severely in the process!"

"Strange. Frosting your skin feels the same as burning it."

"A burn dehydrates your tissue, and then chars it. Freezing the water in your cells ruptures the cells, creating a similar effect. We don't need either sort of injury. There, the level finally dropped above the filter. Run the pump."

His ten minutes up, Nigel handed the cutter to Cleo. Holding it steady in both hands, she melted a channel, and then deepened it. Steam rose in clouds.

The humidity in here must be over ninety percent, she surmised as she wielded the heavy device. And the temperature has dropped. I hope nothing dreadful is happening to the fish! At the rate we're going, we'll still be doing this long past the time for lunch. Nigel tonight. My shriveled nerves, what will I tell him? He won't believe the truth. Why can't he understand? So touchy, he is. Proud. Arrogant. Jealous. Dangerous combination, those traits. I've got to reach him...somehow!

At the end of her ten-minute span, Cleo stood ready to hand the bulky cutter back to Nigel. Rubbing her leaden arm, she decided that she would never make an ice prospector.

Imagine wielding one of those things for hours at a time, blocking ice out of buried drifts from which you'd previously cut and mechanically removed the overburden of rock, she mused. Dense, metallic rock! You'd work while encased in a pressure suit, or sitting within a cramped surface rover. My word, what a way to earn a livelihood! Tough men, those.

Shivering, she watched Nigel hold the cutter with one hand, seemingly tireless.

Nigel would be right at home in such a crew, she admitted, but Columbians don't need ice prospectors. Columbia consists of two worlds: binary bodies orbiting the same point in space, within a sparse Group clustered around one of two stable libration points in Dyson's orbit around the gas giant. One of those binary bodies is an ice world: a rock covered with a frozen sea of water ice.

Imagine that: a world-sea of ice! Cutting the ice there must be almost as bad a chore as ice-prospecting in the Gaean Group, nonetheless. They're only spared the searching. Loading ice onto a cargo ship...brr. That job must be automated, though, I'd think. Maybe the cutting is, too.

*Our world's so water-poor. The Columbians have plenty, but lack the denser metals. Trade makes perfect sense, except for that deep-seated distrust our people harbor—with good reason.* 

I've come thoroughly to enjoy Nigel's company. If only he weren't so possessive! So prone to anger...to violence! But...admit the truth: Nigel holds no monopoly on anger. Damn, but I'm tired. My turn again already? Buck up, woman.

At the end of the second hour, Michael called a halt to the work. "We're taking two breaks, this morning," he declared. "An extra twenty minutes shouldn't make a big difference. The heating system's adjusting. It's not drastically cold in here, but my hands are frozen. Cleo, you and I'll walk back to Central, and fetch a couple of pots of coffee."

Startled by that unexpected invitation, the Gaean could think of no graceful way to refuse. Mutely, she rose, and accompanied Michael out into the rim. Exerting herself to keep up with his long strides, she reflected agitatedly, *Surely Nigel realizes that I could scarcely refuse such a blunt request! Michael, whatever has come over you, lately?* 

"Those extra gloves were a gift, Cleo," the Captain remarked, his tone purely conversational. "We needed two pairs, given the thinness of the material. If they weren't doubled, we'd frost-burn our hands, instead of just chilling them."

"I'm glad I remembered them."

"Feel better today?"

"Much better, thank you."

Having heated a large quantity of coffee, Michael poured the liquid into two insulated pots. Handing Cleo one, he took the other. Each grabbed a stack of recyclable cups. "That'll be enough for two breaks," he observed. "It'll warm everybody up."

Upon her arrival on the deck of Eleven, Cleo set out cups while Michael poured. As she handed Nigel a cup, she met his unsmiling eyes squarely. Seating herself on the deck, she sampled her drink.

Michael sat down between the prisoner of war and the second officer, and sipped his own.

Instantly, Cleo sensed a renewal of tension between the two men. Justin, seated opposite the Gaean, glanced thoughtfully from face to face, and made a sociable remark. Leonard passed a cheerful comment, and Conrad added a pithy observation. Nigel maintained a frosty silence. His eyes exerted a palpable force on the woman who felt a familiar knot tighten in her gut.

Michael let the break run overtime. We'll finish in the early afternoon, he

ruminated. No sense driving them until they drop. Tiring work, cutting and carrying. We put in a tense day yesterday. It's the end of the week, and they've worked hard. Ease up a bit.

At length the Captain rose, and reached for the pots. Cleo stacked the soiled cups. Deciding to wash them, she walked past the bridge, and around the bunks in the dining hall, to the door of the bathcabin. Running a frugal stream of hot water into the sink, she rinsed the cups under the faucet. Michael set the two pots on top of the shaving cabinet, just inside the entrance, and stood in the doorway between the bathcabin and the dining hall, waiting for his companion to finish.

Having picked up the stack of cups, Cleo walked towards the Captain, intending to set her burden on the cabinet beside the pots. As she passed over a wet place on the deck where Conrad had spilled water earlier, she slipped. Her foot shot along the deck, throwing her off balance. The stack of cups flew out of her hand.

As she stooped to pick them up, she failed to see Michael do likewise. Her head struck his with jarring force. Rising despite the sharp impact, the man mentally cursing his clumsiness instinctively reached out, caught his companion under both arms, and lifted her up with him. Holding her briefly to ascertain whether she was all right, he joked, "Two minds with a single thought, right, Cleo?"

Even as she covered her embarrassment with a laugh, the woman beheld a sight that set her heart hammering. Framed in the side door of the bridge, opposite the one Michael's bulk still filled, Nigel stood with rigid face and glittering eyes, a spectator of the encounter. As she watched, he vanished.

Cold fear gripped her. *Did he see me drop the cups?* she asked herself. *Or did he only see Michael lifting me to my feet? Holding me? And what Michael said! If Nigel heard, what must he have thought?* 

Michael assumed Cleo's sudden loss of color to be due to the forceful bump. "All right?" he inquired solicitously.

"I'm all right, Michael. Not hurt. Are you ...?"

"I've a hard head." Turning, he walked by her side back across the bridge, to

where four of their shipmates sat talking, and one stood with expressionless face but ominously glinting eyes.

The fear fogging Cleo's mind blended now with hot anger. *Damn you, Nigel, it was an accident!* she raged. *My head still hurts! Were you spying on me, you jealous bastard? Likely you were. Serves you right!* 

Drawing on her gloves, the fuming woman waited while Justin melted a channel through a block, and divided the piece. Picking up a chunk, she ascended the steps, and dropped the ice into the water. Nigel's eyes scorched her back, as he did the same. Exerting all her self-control, she turned, and met his glance with a face as expressionless as his, but her gut clenched harder.

It would be his night! she groaned inwardly. He's furious! At me, not at Michael. Or at least, he's angrier at me. Oh, my soul. I simply can't face another night like that first one! I can't! Not this week. I'll lock him out. I will! But that would tear it. He'd likely challenge Michael. What can I do? Think!

Two hours dragged by. Michael called another break, and fetched pot and cups himself. Cleo sat wearily on the deck, exquisitely conscious that Nigel's ire had diminished no whit. Sipping her drink, she replied automatically to a joking remark of Leonard's. Raising her head, she saw Justin's narrowed eyes search her face. A more fundamental fear gripped her. Making a supreme effort, she smiled warmly at the medical technician, and engaged him in conversation. Relief surged through her when the questioning look faded out of his eyes, to be replaced with his usual pleasant warmth.

Michael got to his feet, conscious of the dampness on face and hands, and the ominous chill in the air. "Nigel," he suggested, "perhaps you and Cleo ought to check the tanks. It's colder in here, and damp."

"I was just going to do that." Rising, the angry engineer stalked to the opening in the deck, opposite the couches in the dining hall, and stood back with an elaborate show of politeness while Cleo descended the ladder, feeling trapped. Giving him no backward glance, she walked briskly towards the tertiary tank. Having stopped to scan the monitoring equipment under the primary tank, Nigel waited, blocking her path back to the hatch. Cleo read the temperature, noting that it was a degree lower than at noon on the previous day, but she saw no drooping plants. Mustering all her courage, she walked out to face her wrathful lover.

Nigel's insolent glance seemed in her fevered imagining to undress her. "Michael has been your choice all along," he hissed venomously. "You hid it well. You played us off, one against the other, and led me on. You've had him eating out of your hand from the start. Practiced charmer, you are!"

Having mastered her fear, Cleo fought her fury. Exerting a valiant effort, she managed to keep her voice level. "Nigel, you witnessed an accident this morning," she informed him coldly. "Michael and I bumped heads really forcefully, when we both stooped to pick up the cups I dropped when I slipped on the wet floor. That's why he helped me to stand up. I've made no choice. None! I can't make one. I told you that."

"That polished act today gave the lie to everything you've ever told me!"

"Nigel, you spied on me! Actively looked for something with which to accuse me! You've misinterpreted what you saw, and hardened your mind. You've deliberately refused to believe what I've told you. It's the truth! I don't lie to anyone, for any reason. If I were a man—a swordsman—I'd ram that insult down your throat, and make you eat your words. But I'm not. I'm a *woman* to whom you've offered unforgivable offense. Get out of my path! I'm going back to work!"

Shaking with fury, Cleo glared up at the face suddenly expressive of wrath matching her own. Two hot-tempered adversaries fronted each other, each radiating pure rage. Cleo expected a blow. In the state her mind had reached, she cared no whit whether this man struck her dead then and there. Nigel stood motionless, clenching his right fist, but he raised no threatening hand. Abruptly, he turned, and preceded the prisoner of war back to the deck.

When Cleo reached the upper deck, she saw Nigel stride back to the work area. Taking a few minutes in which to try to compose her face, she grew aware of the pounding of her heart.

I'll lock him out tonight, she resolved, still shaking with rage. I don't have to face that anger! I won't, again! The hell with him! Accused me of playing them off against each other! What utter gall! The insolent bastard! Michael once declared that he'd have killed me if I had brought sexual tensions into the workday! Look at what Nigel just did! At what Michael himself did, matching provocative remarks with his rival! Damn them both! Michael has broken his own rules! He has played Nigel's game at my expense, and let me bear the brunt of the consequences of their rivalry! Damn them both to the mythical fire!

Fighting to control white-hot rage, Cleo forced her mind to stop hurling epithets. You need to calm down, she berated her wrathful alter ego. Pull yourself together! You just lost it, again! Never mind tonight. You've got to get through today...the next five minutes! You're late. Watch your face. Keep your mouth shut. Mittens, Cleo. Mittens. I hear you, Glendon. I haven't forgotten. Stay by me!

The semi-transparent veil fell once again between the distraught woman and her surroundings, as she walked back to pull on her gloves, and await Leonard's division of the block he had cut. Her mouth clamped into a grim line, her face under rigid control, she picked up a chunk of ice, and mechanically stepped up to drop the heavy burden into the tank.

Her mind achieved a schizoid division. She saw the ice, the tank. She turned and repeated the task, but perceived her surroundings though the gauzy veil. Glendon's image filled the screen of her inner vision. With hallucinatory clarity, she relived their confrontation—her last lapse into uncontrollable anger—and its resolution. Her brother's face grew more real than Leonard's, staring in puzzlement at her as he straightened after dividing a block. Glendon's words echoed in her mind. The scene in her imagination superimposed itself over the reality of the deck, the ice, the tanks. Time passed. The hour at which the crew normally stopped for lunch arrived.

Michael surveyed the dwindling mound of ice. Frowning, he made a decision.

Raising his voice, he asked for his crew's attention. "The heating system's running overtime, contending with this cold," he announced. "The temperature's down a bit in the secondary tank. We've had two breaks. We'll go on working until all the ice melts. That won't take long. Then we'll stop, and enjoy a leisurely lunch. It'll be safer to finish."

Cleo took the heavy cutter from Nigel, who strolled to the melting-tank to watch Conrad. Marvin walked over to stand next to Cleo until she finished cutting, so that he could reach the nozzle of the hose that drained the meltwater. Leonard dropped a chunk into the tank. Turning, he saw that the woman had yet to cut and divide a block. He leaned nonchalantly against a wall, watching Conrad. Michael pumped water from the reservoir. Justin hastened back from the bathcabin, where he had gone to answer a call of nature.

Conrad spoke, the tedium of his task rendering him a trifle edgy. "It'll take us forty minutes more to finish," he declared, challenging a fellow gambler to disagree.

Unable to resist the bait, the irate officer drawled, "We'll be done in twenty." "Care to bet?"

Dark eyes smoldered. Pitching his voice to carry the length of the deck, Nigel replied in a bantering tone, "I'll wager you my night with Cleo—tonight—against your bottle, Conrad, that twenty minutes will do it."

Cleo heard. The rage that suddenly engulfed heart and mind finished the slow fraying of her hold over herself, even as Conrad, his eyes grown instantly hard, responded scathingly, "Nigel, that's a hell of a thing to suggest!"

"That's all I needed." Cleo's face changed from ice-white to scarlet. Her shrill voice radiated a lava-hot anger of which none of these men, prior to now, had believed her capable. Her body shook. Her next words fell on their ears like the crack of a hull commencing to disintegrate. "Damn you, Nigel! Damn you! I'm not your possession! You bastard! I'm not a stake for your blasted gambling! Damn you to hell! For two credits I'd...I'd..."

Cleo stared at her nemesis through a red haze in which consciousness wavered

on the brink of dissolution. The hands holding the bulky electronic cutter lost none of the force of their grip. Convulsively, the traumatized Gaean raised both arms to point the deadly device directly at the man guilty of the offense. Six horrified beholders saw that her eyes widened, and glassed over.

Nigel had faced death too many times not to realize with ghastly certainty that he faced it now. Michael's frantic, "Cleo, no!" drowned in the roaring filling her ears. Standing immobile, knowing that any movement would intensify the likelihood of her activating the cutter, Nigel faced the woman pointing the lethal weapon at his wholly vulnerable self, his face rigid. No sound passed his lips.

Even as Michael determined on rushing the Gaean, Marvin moved first, acting almost simultaneously with her taking aim. Stepping directly between Cleo and Nigel, full in the path of the tracer-ray, facing her, he spoke in a tone of potent, unwonted authority. "Mittens, Cleo! You hear me? Mittens!"

That single word penetrated. Glazed eyes focused now on Marvin. The hands holding the device trembled. The man determined to avert catastrophe commanded imperiously, "Point the outfit at the deck, Cleo. Now!"

To his vast relief, he saw the arms slowly drop as the bereaved widow obeyed the voice she heard in her mind as her brother's. Closing the distance between himself and the distraught woman, Marvin wrenched the impromptu weapon out of her grasp. Laying it on the deck, he folded her against his chest.

"It's all right, Cleo. All right," he declared emphatically. Visible shudders coursed now through the slim frame molded to his body. Still holding her, Marvin turned, and faced the Captain. "I'm taking her to her cabin," he asserted firmly. "I'll tend to her. She needs rest." Picking the swooning woman up bodily, he bore her past Michael, past Nigel, past the other stunned witnesses of what all recognized as a hair's breadth's escape from tragedy, and vanished.

Still in shock, Michael stared after the departing crewman for a few seconds. Turning, he glowered at Nigel, who had not moved. The Captain's voice cracked like a lash. "Whether you realize it or not, you thrice-damned fool, Marvin just saved your miserable life!" he thundered. "And hers: she'd have turned that thing on herself the instant she realized what she'd done. She stayed behind prepared to die! I took a poison tablet off her that first night! This is the only week since we arrived that I didn't coerce her into giving me her word not to space herself if something happened that she couldn't face again!"

As icy blue eyes stabbed into Nigel's with brutal force, the grim voice issued a flat order. "You take the rest of the afternoon off, and spend it figuring out how you're going to make this up to her, Nigel. Then you do that."

The man thus publicly reprimanded never moved, never spoke. His eyes still riveted to his second officer, the Captain snapped, "Conrad, pull those coils out of the tank." After the engineer quickly obeyed, Michael barked, "Now, help me lift what's left of the last block and drop it in." Hastening forward, the man thus adjured assisted his superior to raise the ungainly, heavy mass, carry it to the melting tank, and lower it into the hot water.

Having pulled a length of foil-backed glass-cloth over the tank, Michael secured it with a piece of line. "We'll break for lunch," he rasped. "After that ice melts, we'll finish the job." Turning on his heel, the Captain strode away.

Before following the Captain, Conrad directed a withering glance at the second officer.

Justin and Leonard stayed. Neither man moved. Each glued anxious eyes to Nigel's rigid, frozen features. The same thought crossed both minds: men had been known to space themselves, following a breach with friends brought on by too close confinement under heavy stress, in too small a place, for too long. Breathlessly, the two inwardly agitated witnesses of the near-tragedy waited.

The object of their concern stood riveted to the spot for five minutes, thinking. Suddenly, the ill-favored face limned by lines etched by habitual arrogance lost its rigid impenetrability. Stricken, troubled, shaken, Nigel demanded in a low, tense voice, "Justin, what *happened* to her?" The medical technician answered firmly and honestly, sparing his shipmate no whit.

"Nigel, if you'd stop to reflect, you'd realize that Cleo has undergone deeper, constant, and far more severe stress than has any one of us, since the Gaeans lifted. Mental and physical stress: emotional strain all the greater for the cultural programming her society instilled into her. Because she has exhibited such courage and self-control all this time, none of us fully realized how great a toll the shock to her emotional balance of adjusting to the life we forced on her, took on her. When she lost control, she lost it completely. I suspect that you've been pressuring her to make a choice that I assure you, she truly cannot make. Your mocking her in public constituted the final blow that tipped her over the edge, into hysteria."

Nigel's face nakedly mirrored anguish. "Justin...you've been married. I never meant to... What can I do...to let her know...I'm sorry?"

Shock leaped into the eyes of the recipient of that appeal. In all the Earthyears he had served with this arrogant swordsman, Justin had never once known him to render anyone, man or woman, an apology. A legendary duelist, Nigel had occasionally offended men who had retaliated by seeking satisfaction in blood, only to end with Nigel's shedding their own. No woman, Justin well knew, had ever gained a hold on that coolly self-possessed nature.

An upsurge of pity for a man whom he had long ago accepted as a friend prompted the outspoken technician to reply with less accusatory force. "I rather think that if you could simply bring yourself to tell her that, Nigel, your admission would go a long way towards winning her forgiveness."

Silent until now, Leonard ventured to offer a suggestion. "Nigel, if we were back in Columbia, you could bring her flowers, or a gift of some sort, to offer when you tell her you're sorry. But here..."

"Flowers." As he echoed the word, Nigel turned a taut, troubled face to the youthful spacer. A memory impinged. Inspiration lanced out of the black, to reflect in tormented eyes. "Justin. Among those holographic prints of yours, you had one of a rose. Could I...borrow it...for a time?"

"Certainly." Justin's eyes searched Nigel's face, uncomprehendingly, but he added gently, "I'll get it."

"Bring it to Nine...if you would..." Moving for the first time, Nigel rubbed the back of one hand across his forehead.

Instantly, Leonard divined his team leader's intention. "I'll give you what help I can, Nigel, if you'll let me," he offered eagerly, uncomfortable at the idea of letting Nigel out of the sight of all of his comrades. Aware that the expert would need no help, he experienced relief when the chastened second officer replied dully, "Come along, then."

Leonard's eyes met Justin's briefly, and a wordless exchange took place. As the older man hastened away to fetch the print, his comrade followed Nigel, who strode purposefully towards the rim and Nine.

Marvin carried his trembling burden to her cabin, where he sat down on the bed, still holding her fast in his arms. "Cleo," he reminded her firmly, "you told me once that tears were nothing to be embarrassed about. You said they bring emotional relief. So let yours come. Let what you've pent up inside you all this time out. I'll understand." Gently, Marvin stroked wavy hair, even as he clasped this woman he loved tightly against his chest with his other arm.

Coming out of her state of near-blackout, Cleo heard his words. What she had told him recurred to her mind. Sensing his deep concern, she realized with stark, horrified clarity that he had just prevented her from committing outright murder. Pressing her face onto his shoulder, she let the tears that brimmed slide down.

Of a sudden, the trickle became a torrent. Deep, racking sobs shook her slim body. Uncontrollably, she wept. The initial fears that had lessened, but had never truly vanished; the pain of personal loss for which she had never let herself grieve her fill; the physical stress of the past weeks; the emotional trauma caused by the tangled web of bonding which her physical intimacy with her six comrades had engendered; the concern for the problems of others which had prompted her to take actions she saw as fraught with danger to those she was trying to help, due to her lack of the requisite training; her worry regarding what would happen to her on their arrival in Columbia; her deep-seated dread of the tragic consequences Nigel's jealousy might produce; the boundless hurt that had succeeded the violent rage engendered by his words: all those factors combined to flatten the defenses she had erected around her inner citadel of the self. She could no more have stopped the flood of tears than breathed hard vacuum. Clinging to Marvin with desperate strength, she cried for twenty minutes.

Marvin's hand left her hair to stroke her back with long, rhythmic movements. Awash in pity, he murmured a string of mindless phrases, his tone rather than his meaning penetrating to soothe brutally lacerated nerves. No whit did he relax his grip.

Held pressed against his chest, Cleo remained aware of his warmth, his strength. Gradually, the flood of tears ebbed, and the sobbing subsided. Spent, numb, emotionally drained, the traumatized woman passed the point of being able to think coherently.

Marvin felt the fierce grip on his body loosen. Rising, he laid his exhausted charge on the bed, and folded the bedcover over her limp, still form. "Go to sleep, Cleo," he whispered. "When you wake up, you'll find that things will work out. You'll see."

Seating himself on the edge of the bed, he gently stroked her hair until he felt certain that she slept. For a time thereafter, he studied the pale, worn face on the pillow. Dark lashes curled down onto tear-streaked cheeks. The dark brown hue of the wavy hair accentuated the unnatural pallor of the skin.

In a scarcely audible whisper, Marvin addressed the unconscious form on the bed.

"You've got more guts, and more decency, and more unselfish warmth, than any human being I've ever known, girl. You didn't deserve this rotten break, being stranded in the company of six bastards like us! But I for one can't help being glad that I've known you. I love you, Cleo. Whatever else happens, you can be sure of that. I love you! I wish there were some way that I could solve your problems." Lapsing into silence, he sat for a long time, watching. At length, he rose and left.

Having closed the door to Cleo's cabin, Marvin walked slowly down the corridor, giving no thought as to where he ought to go. Out of habit, he headed for his workspace in Two. Seating himself before the terminal, he stared unseeing at the dark screen, making no move to turn it on. His shoulders hunched into his old, rounded slouch. Sinking into a profound reverie, he sat motionless, his nervous hands for once utterly still.

Forty minutes later, Michael found him sitting in that attitude. "Marvin," he called out crisply.

The Captain had walked in silently. Startled, the spacer thus addressed swiveled around to face the superior whose rugged face displayed acute puzzlement.

"What was that word you used that got through to Cleo?" Michael queried.

"Mittens."

"What does it mean?"

"Hand coverings. Thumb, but no separate spaces for fingers. It's an obsolete term once used on Old Earth. It has a private meaning for Cleo and her family."

"Have you seen her do this before?"

"No. She told me that she could, but deep down, I didn't really believe her. I do now. Better remember that term. It brings her out of it."

Michael stared at the man whose utterly fearless act had undoubtedly saved Nigel's life. "How did you know it would?"

Marvin straightened his shoulders. His eyes met those of the Captain unflinchingly. "I'm not about to tell you or anyone else private matters that Cleo told me in confidence," he replied with asperity. "We've put her through enough, the six of us, without bandying her secrets about. Just be glad that nothing dreadful happened, Michael. For her sake, more than for ours."

Respect filled the hard blue eyes of the officer thus baldly admonished. A

sudden sense that the man he faced was not the Marvin he had known pierced him. "Without any doubt, Nigel owes you his life," he admitted forthrightly. On impulse, Michael thrust out his hand. Unhesitatingly, Marvin gripped it.

"I owe you, as well," the Captain added huskily. "We all do, for your quickwitted, courageous act that prevented a tragedy."

Marvin's pale, thin face flushed, but his glance never wavered. Michael added anxiously, "Should she be left alone?"

"I stayed until she fell asleep. I think she'll sleep a long time. I'll look in on her every so often."

"Do that. Marvin...thank you. For everything you did."

Meeting his superior's eyes squarely, Cleo's protégé replied firmly, "You're welcome, Michael."

Bemusedly, the Captain turned and walked out, marveling at the magnitude of the change that had overtaken a subordinate whose irritating ways he had for the most part trained himself to overlook, for the sake of the man's intellectual brilliance.

*Cleo's doing*, he concluded in wonder. *She obviously confided things to Marvin that she has never told the rest of us, and he paid her back in full, today, for what she has done for him!* 

Burgeoning depression threatened to overwhelm the leader who had clung so tenaciously to command over this crew of castaways.

Our veneer of civilization slipped clean off, today, he mourned as despair assaulted him. Marvin's right. We asked too much of Cleo. Or rather, you did, you selfish bastard, right from the start. You raped her, coerced her, forced her into a life that grossly violated the ethical code by which she lives, and callously used her for your own selfish ends. She gave her all...worked herself ragged. Damn Nigel to hell! If she had used that ghastly outfit on him, he'd have gotten no more than he deserved. But if she did deal him that ghastly death, guilt and shame would have driven her permanently over the edge.

Unable to banish the unutterably bleak thoughts tormenting him, the man

himself flayed by guilt turned into the food-chemistry laboratory adjoining the dining hall. Conrad he discovered to be working alone, putting away the lunch no one had eaten.

"Where is everybody?" Michael demanded.

"Damned if I know." Scowling grimly, the assistant cook banged a pot down on the counter. "Is Cleo going to be all right?"

"Marvin stayed till she fell asleep. He says we should let her sleep. He promised to keep an eye on her."

Emitting a monosyllabic grunt, the spacer pointedly went on working. Taking the hint, Michael left.

At that moment, Nigel entered Nine, followed by Leonard. Striding to an area in the rear, the repentant offender switched on several refractory containers, into which he cast handfuls of glass marbles. Having activated other equipment, he frowned as he reached into a cabinet, and set out jars of metallic oxides, and other chemicals. Taking infinite care, he added measured amounts of different substances to each vessel.

Within the refractory containers set into a bench, the solids subjected to unimaginably intense heat began to glow. Selecting an array of tools from those lying on the adjoining bench, the engineer laid out the implements close at hand.

To Leonard's relief, Justin arrived, bearing the print, which he handed to his shipmate.

"Thank you," the recipient rasped.

Propping the print on a shelf, level with his eyes, the adept at glass blowing studied the three-dimensional image intently, while the solids slowly fused in the four containers. The temperature rose in the cabin, causing powerful fans to switch on automatically. Having inspected the fusing materials, Nigel eyed the temperature gauges, and then studied the print.

No one spoke. Time passed slowly, as an endless file of seconds emerged one by one into being, only to encounter annihilation. Nigel watched broodingly over the four vessels, observing the now molten contents, and withdrawing samples at intervals for inspection. At length, he changed the settings regulating the temperature.

In the silence that persisted, Justin studied the craftsman, minutely observing the ugly features illumined by the glow from the hellishly hot liquid in the vessels. Ancient representations of the prince of the proverbial nether regions rose in the spacer's mind, inviting the inevitable comparison. Arrogance seemingly had fled the unprepossessing face. Determination and concentration ruled in its place, but pain lurked as well in the brooding dark eyes. The two worried witnesses watched the proceedings, patiently, silently, their motionless bodies projecting a potent message of comradely solidarity.

A glow became visible from the mouth of an oven. Reading the temperature displayed on the dials attached to the four intensely hot containers, Nigel waited. At length, he selected a long iron blowpipe, which he plunged into the first receptacle of viscous liquid. With extreme care, he withdrew a shapeless blob of luminous molten glass. Holding the pipe perpendicular to the container, the craftsman let the liquid run downwards. Having raised the narrow cylinder parallel to the deck, he rotated it.

Putting his mouth to the end, holding the long implement at an angle, he blew into it, causing the molten mass to expand. A small, pear-shaped globule formed, which he rolled on an oiled surface on the bench, worked with a tool, and blew again. Holding that globule on the end of the pipe, the expert picked up a second gather of glass on a long pontil. With a practiced motion, he drew the new blob upwards against the blown globule. Alternately blowing, rolling, shaping with tools, brushing on new glass, and re-heating his creation every two minutes in the glowing small aperture of the furnace, he modeled petal after petal to fashion a delicate, exquisite, blood-red, full-blown rose.

Utterly fascinated, Justin and Leonard watched as the glass blossom identical to the one in the holographic print took form before their eyes. No one spoke, as Nigel cut the still-soft object sculpted of hot glass from the blowing iron with shears. The creator of the marvel added gathers of glass from the second container, to the rose now adhering to the pontil. A long stem took shape.

With excruciating care and expert skill, the artist swiped small dabs onto the stem with deft, upward motions, to create tiny thorns. From the third container, he lifted gather after gather which he blew, rolled and shaped to form delicate green leaves. Those he welded to the stem. Reheating, he added a final touch. From the fourth container, he withdrew a tiny sphere of glowing, untinted glass. That minuscule addition he deftly set in place. On one green leaf now reposed a sparkling droplet of dew.

With deft motions, Nigel scored the glass where it joined the pontil. Enlisting Leonard's help, he charged the willing assistant with holding the rod. Deftly, the craftsman tapped the rod lightly once, twice, and watched as the delicate sculpture broke free from the metal, to drop into his gloved hand. After the exquisite creation vanished into a precisely adjusted, laser-heated annealing oven, Nigel wiped his forehead with his sleeve, and stared intently at his two companions. In a strained, husky voice, he asked, "Think that'll serve?"

Leonard replied softly, "I can't imagine anyone's refusing it."

Justin remarked judiciously, "I don't think *I* could resist it. Nigel, what a master craftsman you are!"

"And what a bastard. Just as she said."

"That can change. It has, already. Nigel, listen to me. I want your assurance on one point, with regard to your approach to what you're intending to do...out of your trust that I'm your friend."

"Assurance of what?"

"That if Cleo won't open the door to you...won't listen...you won't smash that glass masterpiece on the deck and do anything else equally drastic. I want your word that you'll come back and tell me. I'll get her to listen...to let you in. I promise you. Give me your word that you'll preserve the rose, and let me help."

Nigel's unprepossessing face creased into a mask of raw pain. "Justin...I won't

even ask...myself...for an opportunity to see her. If you can manage that...do it. Send Leonard to get me. Tell her...I want no more than a few minutes...a few words...nothing else. Tell her I gave you my word."

"I'll tell her, Nigel. At 2000. Show up at that time, at the bend in the corridor. Now, I had better help Conrad."

Nigel spoke softly, but feelingly. "Justin...I thank you. I won't forget...what I owe you...both of you."

Wordlessly, Justin laid a comradely hand on the shaken offender's shoulder. Turning, he left, accompanied by Leonard. Nigel's eyes followed them out of sight. For a long time, the tall, lithe figure stood in that exact spot, his eyes remote. Strong hands clenched, and unclenched, repeatedly. Finally, their owner put away the tools, checked the apparatus, and left. He made no appearance at supper.

No one went to the recreation hall. Marvin had silently looked in on Cleo every hour during the afternoon, observing each time that she lay deep in sleep, and seemed not to have moved.

After supper, he stopped in again to find her awake, lying supine, staring at the upper plates of the hull. Hearing him enter, she regarded him out of eyes sunken into sockets deeply shadowed by dark circles. Her hair hung damply, limply, around a face that seemed to the stricken observer to have aged ten Earthyears since morning.

"Would you like me to bring you supper, Cleo?" he asked gently.

"No, thank you. Marvin...I'm deeply grateful for what you did. If you hadn't remembered, and stopped me... I told you, how I get..."

The beneficiary of her efforts to heal his emotional wounds dropped to his knees by the bed.

"Cleo, don't thank me," he entreated. "I owe you so much that I'm just glad I could do one small thing for you. Sleep on it, girl. Don't brood. The most intractable problems tend to work out. Usually in the morning, they look better. Go back to sleep, and get a long rest. It'll do you worlds of good." Leaning down, he brushed his lips gently, quickly, over the woman's forehead. Rising, he walked swiftly out of the

cabin.

Rising, the Gaean stalked purposefully to the door, and locked it behind him. At 2000, Cleo, still lying with grim, set face and rebellious heart, heard a knock. Glaring in the direction of the door, she rasped, "Who is it?"

"It's Justin, Cleo."

"And who else?"

"Leonard. Just the two of us. Cleo, please open the door. I need to talk to you."

Rising, the occupant of the cabin unlocked the door, and opened it a mere crack.

Making no move to force his way inside, Justin asked, "May I come in for just a minute?"

Opening the door wider, the woman feeling beleaguered stepped back, and waited tensely for the visitor to speak.

"Cleo, do you trust me?" he inquired.

"Yes. I do. But if you're about to intercede for Nigel, Justin, don't."

His heart hammering, the self-appointed mediator took the woman in whom he sensed unutterably corrosive anger firmly by the shoulders. "Cleo, listen to me. I'm your friend. I have been, from the beginning, and I am now. I've come to know you. I'm utterly certain that you'd have bitterly regretted doing what you almost did today. Don't make two equally bad mistakes. I assure you—I promise you—that if you refuse what I'm going to ask, you'll be making a second error that you'll come to regret almost as deeply as you'd have deplored the first. Will you trust me if I ask something of you as a friend?"

Cleo stared at the petitioner with mutinous eyes. "What are you asking?"

"Cleo, please. Just stand where you are, and let Nigel step into my place, and say what very few words he needs to say, and give you what he brought you. Then he'll leave. My word on it, and his. He has never broken his word, Cleo. Never! Nor have I mine." The eyes fixed on his darkened with passion. "Why are you taking his part?"

"I'm not. I'm utterly and absolutely certain that if you do as I ask, you'll be glad you did. Please. Trust me that far."

The sorely tried sufferer glared for a few seconds that stretched like a decade of Earthyears in the perception of the intermediary. Abruptly, her shoulders slumped. Tonelessly, she gave him the answer for which he pleaded. "All right...I'll listen. But that's all. Because *you* ask, Justin. For no other reason."

"Thank you, Cleo. You won't regret this decision." Turning his head, he instructed, "Leonard, tell him to come." Giving a final, comradely squeeze to the shoulders of the woman whose body he saw to remain still as if carven of stone, he turned on his heel, and left.

Standing with stormy eyes fixed on the doorframe, Cleo waited. Nigel's tall figure filled the aperture in which he halted. In his hands he held a sheath of opaque glass-cloth. Making no move to enter, he spoke, his dark eyes riveted to the Gaean's irate, bloodless face.

"Cleo, I came for only one reason: to say what I'm about to say. I have no excuse to offer for the inexcusable. None would serve. If we were in Columbia, I could have brought you flowers, to help persuade you to believe that I mean it when I tell you that I'm sorry—not only for what I said, but also for the bitter jealousy that prompted what I said. I don't ask you to forgive my offense, but I wanted you to hear me say that I'm sorry. Flowers being unavailable in this world-forsaken place, I did the best I could."

Opening the cloth, Nigel held out the fragile glass rose.

Shocked to her depths, scarcely believing that this arrogant swordsman had really said what she just heard, Cleo stood as if welded to the deck, her eyes focused on the delicate glass sculpture. Her hand shook, as she took the rose from his.

"Nigel...you made this...for me?" That barely audible whisper breathed wonder. "This afternoon."

Having stared down at the slender object crafted with such care, Cleo gazed up

at the giver, who stood as if awaiting a coup de grace. Her voice trembled. "Nigel...it's unbelievably lovely...but what you just said..." The bemusement with which she regarded him, he read as disbelief.

Stricken by dismay, Nigel spoke, his sibilant voice taking on a pleading note. "I'm sorry, Cleo. Believe me! Cleo...I love you..."

Shocked to the core, the Gaean gave a faint, amazed cry. Brown eyes magnified by tears stared into those fixed on her. Two drops welled up, and slid down pale cheeks: forerunners of a host of others.

Nigel's face contorted into a mask of anguish. "Cleo, you said I'd never see you cry! And now I've hurt you enough to make you! Cleo...please...don't..." Hoarse, visibly shaken, he stepped forward and grasped her upper arms.

Staring at him through tears she lacked the power to hold back, Cleo gasped, "I'm not crying because you hurt me. You *did* hurt me...but you just said two things I never thought I'd ever hear you say. Nigel! Say them again..."

That command the anguished viewer intuitively recognized for what it was: an astonished appeal for confirmation, rather than a desire to see him grovel. Holding her away, he declared with impassioned force, "Cleo, I'm bitterly sorry for what I said, and what I did. I love you. I ask only one thing of you: to believe that."

Looking down at the glass rose, the woman finally convinced by that forceful appeal saw the sculpture ripple, the light transmitting its image refracted by the tears still filming her eyes.

"Nigel...let me set this down so I don't break it," she urged softly. When he released her, she laid his gift with infinite care on the counter. Turning, she threw her arms around him, and buried her face in his chest.

Time stopped for both participants in the drama. Holding this woman he loved pressed tightly against his body, Nigel stood erect, his face drawn, remote, utterly still. In the all-enveloping silence, Cleo heard his heart race.

At that same instant, Justin and Leonard sat face to face across the worktable in the food-chemistry laboratory, regarding each other dispiritedly over portions of steaming coffee. Pensively, the youth gazing into his cup raised his eyes, and spoke his thought.

"You know, Justin, you'd think, caring as deeply for Cleo as I know both of us do, that we'd be glad if a rival just fell permanently out of her good graces. But I'm not glad. I'm sitting here glumly hoping Nigel's mouth doesn't land him even deeper in the head."

Nodding, Justin admitted bleakly, "Me, too. The way he acted scared me a lot worse than his anger ever has, and that's saying a mouthful. I could see what I feared mirrored in your eyes, too. Let's hope he manages to achieve a reconciliation, for Cleo's sake."

Frowning, the man thus adjured searched for words, his sensitive face creasing as he pondered the situation. With deceptive simplicity, the youthful spacer voiced a conclusion startling in its impact. "We used to be a team, Justin. But Cleo has made us into a family."

His brow knitting, Justin weighed that assertion. "Damned if she hasn't, Leonard," he acknowledged in dawning wonder. "She has drawn us together in exactly that way—altered our perceptions of each other!"

Affection mingled with respect in the mind of the technician experiencing a wrenching surge of pity as he contemplated the manner in which fate had so drastically curtailed the experience of life for this boy Justin loved like a son. Sorrow engulfed a man whose own existence had never been overfull of joy. Silently, two friends shared a moment of revelation: of insight into themselves and their comrades.

Having drained his cup, Leonard rose. "I think I'll go to bed. Heavy day, this turned out to be."

"Damned if it didn't."

Justin sat lost in reverie, feeling his age. He glanced up as Michael strode in, to drop into the chair so recently vacated by Leonard. Anxiety shadowed the eyes boring into those of the medical technician. "Justin, where's Nigel? He never showed up in the cabins."

Glancing at his watch, the man privy to the Lieutenant's private business read 2040. "He went to apologize to Cleo. He took her a rose. He swore that if she listened, he'd say what he came to say, and leave. If he's still there, they must have achieved an understanding. I fervently hope that's the case."

Stupefied with astonishment, Michael exclaimed, "He took her what?"

"A rose, fashioned of glass. He crafted it this afternoon. It's a work of art, if I'm any judge—as delicately lovely as any real bloom I've ever seen. Superb!"

Staring out of eyes framed by deep creases, Michael rasped, "Whose idea was that?"

"Nigel asked our advice. Amazed me, his doing that. Leonard remarked that if we were home, flowers might help. Nigel borrowed my print, and rendered the rose in glass. Magnificent, the result. If that offering didn't melt Cleo's icy anger, nothing will."

Frowning blackly, the Captain eyed a man whose medical judgment he regarded as exceptionally sound. "Suffering shades of the moldering ancients of Earth!" he exclaimed. "Justin...would she really have done it?"

"If I'm any judge, Nigel missed dying by the span of a molecule."

In a hoarse, strained voice, the dismayed leader asked, "Is she...mentally unstable?"

Looking the Captain straight in the eye, Justin let his lip curl. "Michael, think back to the first time you laid eyes on Cleo. Review every single encounter you've had with her since—every action of hers that you've witnessed. After you've done that, tell me if you really believe that she's crazy."

"No, I don't." Michael's positive tone vastly reassured the man racked by burgeoning dread. "What happened to her today, then?"

Seizing on the opportunity to negate a dangerous supposition that could conceivably result in new tragedy, Justin chose his words with exquisite care. The explanation he had given Nigel earlier had clarified his assessment. That circumstance enabled him now to speak with convincing force. "I think that all of us grossly underestimated the toll which the mental strain of living this life—one we forced a bereaved, widowed Gaean to lead—took on her vulnerable psyche. Because she exhibited such courage and self-control all this time, we assumed that she had fully adjusted to her life here. We never considered the fact that she was a traumatized survivor who had lost not only her husband and child, but her whole family to boot.

"In spite of the shock to her emotional balance fighting her conditioning had to have caused, she took other people's problems on herself, and solved them. She has worked fully as hard as any of us. I suspect that Nigel has been pressuring her to make a choice she truly can't make. When I tried to get her to confide in me, she refused. She told me that she feels acutely uncomfortable discussing one of us with any other of us, and assured me that she'd handle her problem.

"Well, today, when his hurtful words finally tipped her over the edge into the sort of blind rage she has evidently learned to control ninety-nine percent of the time, she very nearly did solve it—permanently. If she had killed him, we'd have lost her. She'd have turned that ghastly outfit on herself."

Every reasoned word of that quietly forceful explanation lanced through the listener with punishing force: one of a shower of arrows diabolically inflicting non-fatal piercings of his ever more cruelly tortured anatomy. In an accession of bitter honesty, Michael acknowledged the truth of Justin's summary. Guilt again flayed him.

What you forced on Cleo damned nearly killed her! he castigated himself savagely. And your second officer as well. This whole damned mess is entirely your fault! You're a far worse bastard than Nigel!

A long sigh escaped the man silently accepting full responsibility for the neartragedy. From inside his tunic, he drew a small, flat flask. "Pour me a cup of coffee, Justin, and join me in a drink," he invited, rather than commanded. "I've about had the course, tonight."

Justin sat for a time, sipping the stout spirit, feeling infinitely weary. Having taken a long pull on the drink, Michael volunteered thoughtfully, "Every grain of reason I possess tells me that I should be enjoying smug satisfaction at seeing Nigel lose what he never has deserved. But I'm not. All I felt just now when you told me where he must be was relief. I don't even understand myself, any more."

Musingly, Justin replied, "Leonard said much the same thing, just before he left, but he understood what he felt. He said that we used to be a team, but Cleo has made us into a family."

Shocked by the aptness of that pronouncement, Michael pondered the idea. "Damned if he isn't right!"

Nodding, Justin observed, "I've noticed that quite often, he seems amazingly wise, for a man no older than he is. Michael, whatever physical and mental abuse he took that drove him to desert, the cure you began, Cleo finished."

"Nothing much escapes you, Justin, does it?"

"Hard to miss that. More and more, I've come to think of Leonard as the son I never sired...never will, now."

Staring bleakly at a man for whom he had always harbored affection, Michael responded grimly, "Two murderous bastards—Norman and Yancey—wiped Cleo's family. We haven't made her much of a substitution, Justin." Bitter lines deepened around a mouth thinned to a slash.

Silently, the technician considered the incontrovertible charge, and weighed the conclusion arising from it. He smiled, finally, as he felt some of the gloom lift.

"I wouldn't say that," he countered equably. "Our isolation not only proved hard on her, it stressed all of us. If this brush with disaster ends by forcing Nigel to accept what the rest of us have, that'll lighten her load immensely. She cares, Michael—about all of us—even about Nigel, despite what transpired today. You don't get to pick family members, and you love them despite their faults. I think this low point will turn us. There's nowhere to go from the bottom but up."

Nowise convinced, Michael retorted pessimistically, "I hope so. I've talked them into striving towards a goal that could be pure illusion. When *that* hope dies, who knows what violence might follow? Assuming, of course, that we survive the attempt

to lift."

Justin's smile deepened, even as his eyes grew remote. Half to himself, he observed softly, "I have to confess that I could face living this way indefinitely. I hate the thought of returning to the cold, animal relief courtesans gave me. The six of you satisfy my need for companionship, Michael. Even feeding all of you hasn't got me too down in the mouth. But I'm an old man who's past thinking that Columbia boasts anything new that might fascinate me or challenge me. I'm not a boy standing on the brink of life, or a spacer-captain whose career might have taken him farther than he dreamed. You're a born leader, Michael. No, for your sakes, I hope we make it. And for Cleo's sake. You're a man she could trust to keep her safe."

Stunned by Justin's admission, moved to sympathy through which regret drove a sharp pang, Michael cautioned evenly, "Justin, don't underestimate the depth of Cleo's feeling for you. Of us all, you've been the man she has trusted most completely. It wouldn't surprise me if she chose to keep on doing it. No...that wouldn't surprise me at all."

Even as his heart leaped, Justin smiled, and raised his cup. "A toast, Michael: to a remarkable lady. Even her failings aren't ordinary."

As their cups touched, their eyes met over the rims. Michael responded, "To Cleo." Silently, the two men sipped the dark liquid, moved to intense soul-searching as each reviewed the events of the day.

Roused out of the timeless trance into which the shock of Nigel's double declaration dropped her, the Gaean focused on the words he finally brought himself to utter. "I've said what I came to say, Cleo. I'll leave you, now."

Turning a tear-streaked face up to his, she clung to him all the harder. "Don't go, Nigel," she breathed softly.

"Cleo..."

Closing her eyes, the woman pressed her cheek against the chest of the man she held in a tight grip.

Lifting her bodily, Nigel laid her on the bed, and undressed her. Drawing the

bedcover from under her unresisting form, he tucked it around her. Having stripped off his uniform, he slid in beside her, prompting her to nestle against him. Drawing her head into the hollow of his shoulder, he settled her into his usual nightly embrace, and urged solicitously, "Go to sleep, Cleo."

Her faint, whispered reply barely reached his ear. "Nigel...I love you."

A muscular arm tightened around her. As a hand sifted through tousled, wavy hair, a long sigh escaped the recipient of that astounding admission. Cleo's breathing grew deep and regular, advising the tautly vigilant observer that she slept.

A long time passed before sleep claimed Nigel.

Here ends the first volume of a three-part work that depicts the ongoing, dangerous, valiant attempt by seven spacers isolated on an abandoned space station to build an escape vehicle in which they can lift, and make the transit to Columbia. These three stirring narratives portray the day-by-day struggle mounted by those seven castaways. The second volume, *Master of My Fate: A Ship Takes Shape*, and the third volume, *Master of My Fate: The Phoenix Rises*, will be published by DDP in 2008. This epic, three-volume work forms one of a series of nine novels written by Mary Ann Steele, all featuring the same setting, and all chronicling an ongoing saga of futuristic action, adventure, romance.