

PIRATES OF THE THUNDERPIRATES OF THE THUNDER

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For Judy-Lynn del Rey,
a unique giant in a field
dominated by pygmies,
for all that I am today.
I wish you'd stuck around for the climax.

PROLOGUE

NINE HAD DIED IN THE FIGHT, NINE GOOD FRIENDS AND family members. From her haven in the small hollow escape pod attached to the great tree, she stared out into the rain, but she could see little more than water and mist. The tears began to flow as a dark shape seemed to move in the gray ness outside. She raised the pistol but did not fire; the shape paused a moment, then moved on past the tree. She knew that it had somehow still missed her, but it was heading for the nearby compound where twenty more would be taken by surprise as her party had been—and possibly slaughtered for not telling the thing what they did not know. Its pause between her escape and its pursuit certainly meant that it had beamed a full account of the progress to date to its master module, in orbit somewhere above. Its programmers would make certain she never left this cursed world, and if she destroyed it they'd send another Val, and another, until they got her—no matter what the cost. How many lives, both human and Sakanian, was she worth? How many would be massacred for her? And for what? Sooner or later they would get her, and even if she could elude them indefinitely in this mess of a world she could do no more useful work. With a sigh, she crawled out of the pod and into the rain. The thing had not gone far and was easy to track, and she was amazed at her sudden calmness. Sensing it was being followed, it stopped and waited, a large, hulking, obsidianlike humanoid that was plastic enough to become whatever it needed, and now needed to be nothing more than itself. She stepped into the clearing and faced the Val from a distance of five meters or so, her pistol still pointed at it. "I have been waiting for you, Ngoriki," the Val said in a voice that sounded somewhat like her own, but full of stoic self-confidence. "I know. I can't let you kill any more innocent people." "Yes. Inside me is a record of you, you know. I fully understood what the action would do to you. I very much regret having to do it, but there seemed no other way. I had tried the traditional approaches and nothing else seemed sure." She felt suddenly furious, and her grip on the pistol tightened. "You regret!

How dare you! How can you regret? You are a machine, a soulless monstrosity! You don't feel. You don't know what that did to me! You're nothing but a machine carrying out your programming, no matter what the cost!"

"You are both right and wrong," the machine said. "It is true that I am a construct, carrying out my master programming instructions-but so are you. I am made of different stuff, in a different way, than you, and, unlike you, I know my creator and my engineers. Human beings are programmed by their biochemistry more than you would like to believe. I think-and that makes me an individual. I am not free, but neither is humanity."

"Yes. That's what you'll do to me, isn't it? Reprogram me. Perhaps that is what sets us apart, then. I have a yearning to be free, and you see that yearning as only a flaw in my own genetics."

"No," the Val responded. "We have a disagreement, that is all. This is not a good, let alone perfect, system we have, I grant that. It is merely a better system than the alternatives. It saved the race of humankind and many other races from inevitable self-extinction. Having saved them from their demise at their own hands, it now saves them from extinction at the hands of others. Survival outweighs all other considerations. If one survives, one has opportunity and hope at some point for changes for the better. If one does not survive, nothing else matters."

"Damn it!" she screamed at him. "You have everything I was inside you! Everything! You know I am innocent of what I was charged!"

The Val almost seemed to sigh. "Yes. I know. That more than anything has made this so difficult for me. We hate to get the rare innocent to track, yet we must. Do you know why we are called Vals? After a character in ancient Earth literature, one Jean Valjean. He stole a loaf of bread to feed his starving family and received life at slave labor as his punishment. He escaped, became great, and did only great things for others, yet he was hunted relentlessly and brought down all the same. The name is that of the victim, not the pursuer. The greater good for the greater number requires that the system work. An individual injustice here and there is inevitable, but so long as the trial is fair and the conviction proper, the system must be served, for otherwise there is chaos and disorder, and the masses will suffer. Better one than the many, as painful as that may be."

"You bastard! Where does justice and mercy fit into all this?"

"Is it mercy to spare one so that a thousand be killed? The system ensures survival. Without survival, justice and mercy are irrelevant, as well. Therefore, they are irrelevant here."

The pistol dipped down, and she felt the tears returning. "But-without justice and mercy, why survive at all?" she asked.

She suddenly raised the pistol, ready to fire, but the Val had anticipated her and was quicker. A snakelike tentacle suddenly shot from its midsection and struck her once, hard, on the side of her head. She cried out, then crumpled. It retracted the tentacle, then went over to her and gave her a quick examination.

She was out cold.

"We are different," the Val said aloud. "I have often wished, in circumstances

such as this, that I, too, could cry."

It lifted her gently in its huge arms and carefully made its way back to the compound and, eventually, the ship.

Absolution was a destruction of memory that left a Val in some way impaired, missing a part of itself. Rarely did a Val crave Absolution—but this one did. The girl had been so beautiful, so innocent, yet the Val had been forced by the

logic of its system to destroy her. Reprogramming a human brain was not death, of course; the system demanded some mercy. Still, she would cease to exist as a

separate entity who had been born, raised, and molded by the world of her birth.

She would become someone entirely different, someone totally artificial, and she

would never even suspect that she had changed. She would be a character in Master System's grand play, no more a true and natural sentient creature than, well, than the Val itself.

Absolution would erase all knowledge and memory of her, of the hunt for her, along with the traces of guilt and doubt that such operations always induced. In

a personal sense, the Val would welcome the relief, but in another sense it would not. By now those memories that were hers existed only in its own data banks; when they were gone, she would be truly dead.

How many others had been like her? How many of the thousands it had chased and brought to justice—or destroyed, when that had been the only alternative—had been in fact not the system's enemies but its victims? It would never know, but

that very thought was treason and disturbing down to its core; Absolution was a necessity, and must be done as soon as possible.

Vals had at their constant disposal a reading of all the memories, all the personality factors, of their object. To catch someone, the hunter had to know the quarry more intimately than the quarry knew itself. Even such people as murderers and traitors might be viewed with sympathy if all that they were was seen with detachment.

No, that was getting even worse. Perhaps this Val was defective. Perhaps this time there would be no awakening from Absolution.

The Val went to its cubicle and plugged in its receptors. The complete data was

first read out into Master System's files; there, at least, the information and

the personality files would always reside. Then all data in the auxiliary banks

and the core was erased, so that the Val was as virginal and ignorant—and as nonfunctional—as when it was built.

Master System then reprogrammed the core as a new unit updated with all the newest findings, the newest technology, and the newest tricks of the trade. The

Val did not feel, did not wonder, did not doubt. It was merely a machine.

But it was a machine with the capacity for all those things, for if it were not

it could never comprehend its quarry, never second-guess them and trap them. Without Absolution, the Vals were in serious danger of becoming somewhat human.

Now came the assignment.

Master System was the greatest computer ever built. All data ever on a computer

network was inside it from the start; it knew all there was to know, the sum total of human knowledge and experience. Designed as a last link in a massive defense against impending nuclear war, its sole purpose were the preservation of

the human race and its knowledge, and the quest for new knowledge.

It had done its job; and having prevented holocaust, it had set about to carry out its dictates that would prevent even the remotest possibility of such a horror ever happening again. It seized command of the world, all weapons and powers, and tied all computer systems into a master system of its own design.

It selected examples in doubting and resisting countries, and certain cities along

with their teeming populations ceased to exist-and so did resistance to Master System.

But its basic programming still reigned: The human race must never be permitted

to die out. So robotic scouts were sent out to find worlds for humanity. And such worlds were found. Colonists specially tailored for survival on those not-quite-Earthlike worlds were brought to their new homes by great universe ships. Earth was left not with billions, but a mere five hundred thousand, who could be reprogrammed and resettled.

The great cities were leveled and traces of modern civilization were all but wiped out. The survivors were confined to isolated reservations whose cultures were modeled after more primitive periods of history. Humanity became its own living museum, not with great accuracy but with great effect.

Only a few human beings knew the facts. These were the elite, the brightest from

each of the indigenous people, the chosen administrators who kept their own people in primitive darkness as the price of their own luxury and privilege.

Giving knowledge to those who ran humanity was not without price to Master System. Putting the best and brightest together and allowing them access to tools and history resulted in the development of a hidden subculture that had discovered how to beat the system. They had learned to edit their own memories,

eliminating any forbidden knowledge that might be detected in the periodic recordings made of their minds. They did their own research and played their own

power games beyond the reach of Master System. The great computer tolerated a certain measure of such activities, but was eternally vigilant to any that threatened the system itself or its own near-total control. Those who overstepped the bounds had the Vals sent after them-and the Vals rarely failed.

Now a Val was being informed of a new element, one that might be the greatest threat of all times to Master System. For the great computer was vulnerable.

It had taken all the measures it thought it could to hide that fact, but the vulnerability remained, having been built into it by its creators: An overriding

command could suspend all existing programming imperatives of Master System and

make it subject to new compulsive orders. It was also compelled to allow anyone

actually attempting this to do so. For the attempt to succeed, however, the cancellation codes had to be read into Master System's core memory. The codes were hidden on tiny microchips disguised as five individually designed elaborate

and ornate golden rings. Anyone inserting all five into their corresponding

interface slots in the correct order would in effect be the master of Master System. The rings themselves, Master System's programming demanded, had to be at

all times in the possession of humans with authority. If a ring were lost or destroyed, another must be fashioned to replace it. Altering any such imperatives in its programming would destroy Master System.

So it had scattered the rings, leaving one on Earth and sending the other four into the trackless void of the involuntary interstellar colonists. It had wiped

out all references it could find to the rings, their function and their use- and

even to the very location where the rings had to be used.

But somewhere, somehow, possibly in ancient archives uncovered by Center archaeologists, some record of the rings, and all they implied, survived the centuries. After nine hundred years of static life in darkness, there were humans who knew. Already a few technological underground cells had discovered how to command and repro-gram Master System's computer-piloted spaceships.

Some

such groups as the freebooters, who were occasionally useful, were even allowed

to exist as a sort of Center in space, so long as they remained selfish and did

not threaten the system.

But now a small group of renegades had all the information it needed to start out. They knew of the rings. They knew how to command the ships. They did not know where the rings were, nor where to use them, but there was a strong possibility that they could discover these things in time. They were on the loose, and they were dedicated- with nothing to lose.

Although the group seemed insignificant, and its chances of doing anything more

than providing a minor nuisance were billions to one against them, Master System

was tremendously concerned. It claimed it was fighting a bitter and stalemated war-although even its own Vals were not told whom it was fighting, or where, or

why- and that if Master System were to be in any way disabled, defeat would be inevitable, with consequences horrible for all. The mere fact that information on the rings had survived and gotten out beyond Earth was unsettling to it. It felt so threatened it was actually considering a new mass reprogramming of humanity, the destruction of all the Centers, and the imposing of a new limit where even the concept of agriculture or of a language capable of expressing complex and abstract ideas would be forbidden by computers that would be worshipped and obeyed as tangible gods. But it would take a very long time to do this.

The capture of the rebel band was given overriding priority to the Vals. There were ten individuals to find, but there were recordings for only a small number

of those. What information they did have was provided by Doctor Isaac Clayben of

Melchior, the penal colony in the asteroids from which all the renegades had escaped.

The Val absorbed the available information, then was fed the mindprint of the band's leader, Hawks. The historian was a fascinating individual, a man of some

brilliance and accomplishment literally torn between his tribal and Center worlds. Though he was not a rebel or an adventurer, nor a man of action in

spite

of some romantic fantasies, it was clear that once Hawks had the documents in his possession he would have felt compelled to read them out of sheer curiosity and a hunger to know—and that he no doubt understood them and their implications.

Recent events not included in the mindprint showed that he was capable of much adaptation, capable of killing if need be, and capable of living in and out of the wild as well. The Val was convinced that in a hopeless position Hawks would kill himself rather than surrender. He would not, however, desert his own people, particularly the women, unless forced to do so by circumstances or necessity. As a result, if Hawks could be located, so might most or all of the rest.

They will go after the rings, the Val noted. Although it is unlikely, we cannot assume they do not already know their location. Vals must cover all four rings.

Agreed, Master System responded. But you will not be posted there. They will need ships other than what they have. They will need contacts among the freebooters and others. The Koll Val is working on this end. You will assist. If

any are sighted, trace them. So long as they do not possess all five rings, it is imperative that they be taken alive, so that we may find how many others share the forbidden knowledge. However, once they possess all five rings, if they ever do, then no limitations will be imposed.

But surely there is no danger of them ever obtaining all five! They must run our gauntlet in each case!

It is always possible. I see a hidden hand in this, one who has selected most of these for just this purpose. It is this hidden hand I want most of all. It is possible our great enemy is behind this. If so, then they are dangerous indeed.

We can take no chances. Also, time is not necessarily on our side. If they do not succeed, but escape, we might well face their grandchildren. Go. You are programmed and assigned.

The Val disconnected. The entire process, from Absolution through reprogramming, had taken just a few seconds. The Val, who thought often in computer time but functioned in human time, could not help but note this fact alone. How could they possibly win?

1. THE WORLD THAT MOVES THROUGH STARS

IT WAS A SPACESHIP—AND IT WAS MORE THAN THAT.

It was a starship, a ship designed to go to places even the eye could not follow

and to go distances beyond the grasp of human minds—but it was more than that. It looked very much like a great tube, flattened a bit on top and bottom and rounded at both ends, with protuberances that were bays for the scout ships that

clung to their mother in special recesses, and sensors, and communications devices—and much, much more.

The ship itself—one of the hundreds that circled great Jupiter in silence, shut

down, but preserved and ready for reactivation if their service should ever be needed—was a bit over fourteen kilometers long. The ship had a brain and massive amounts of stored knowledge and skills that had not been needed in a very long while.

"I wonder if it is bothered by that," Cloud Dancer said, more to herself than to the others who were gazing at the viewing screen of their relatively small interplanetary freighter.

"Huh?" Walks With the Night Hawks, her husband and co-conspirator, looked at her. "Who is bothered by what?"

"The ship. It has a mind, a soul, as this one does. Its spirit is dedicated to work, to a great task, and it has been told to do nothing since it did that task. I wonder if it minds, sitting there idle, without hope or opportunity to do its task, to be itself, for all this time."

"It sure fought like hell to keep us out," came the gravelly voice of the Crow Agency man, Raven. Not long, before they had been the targets of some of those fighters nestled inside the great ships; only deciphering the clearance code in

time and some fancy maneuvering had saved them from being blown from the sky.

"That was its duty," the Hyiakutt Indian woman responded. She was quite smart, but having been raised in a primitive culture, she saw the universe from a perspective as alien to the others as they were to the computer brain of the great ship they now approached. "Now it receives us. I wonder if it is eager, or

if it is waiting to devour us?"

"Neither," an odd voice said through the ship's intercom. When Star Eagle, as they had named the computer pilot of the ship, spoke on his own, it was in a pleasant male voice, but when China was interfaced into the ship's system, forming a human-computer synthesis, the voice sounded strange, neither male nor

female, but somehow both at once. "There is no command module on any of these ships. It was removed when they were placed in storage here. These ships have many brains, as it were, since even the tiny fractions of a second it might take

to relay an order might cause needless risk, but the only ones there now are automatic maintenance and ship's security. The tech cult that discovered the human interfaces intended to fly the ship themselves, without a command module."

Hawks frowned. "Is that possible?"

"Yes, but not efficient or practical. They did not think beyond that point, since even attaining that much was highly improbable. All plans were based on the escape, not what came next. Just like us."

Yes, but we're at least better off than they would have been. We have Koll, who's been out there, and information from Raven and Warlock. We are not going completely blind. He frowned, wondering if that was really true or if he was just trying to reassure himself.

Still, he had no doubt they would get away. No mystical sense informed him, and

he knew of no particular edge on their part, but even though they'd had to fight

every step of the way to this point, he couldn't shake the feeling that somehow

they were being led.

Most of this crew had been selected, somehow, by Lazlo Chen, the ambitious chief

administrator of the central Asian district and discoverer of the information

that five gold rings could, if found and used properly, deactivate or control Master System. Chen owned the only one of the rings remaining on Earth, and was determined that this group secure the others for him. The stakes were quite high—nothing less than godhood for the one who found all the rings and brought them together.

But even Chen was subject to Master System; even Chen had severe limits on his knowledge and power. Chen's reach extended over the whole of the Earth and even beyond, but it did not reach as far out as Jupiter. Since their escape from the asteroid penal colony, Melchior, Hawks had been convinced that another player was also on the scene, one who also wanted them to succeed and whose reach did extend farther out. Who or what this player was could not be known now; nor could they guess whether it was using Chen for its own ends, or whether Chen was using it.

This was a strange band to pick for such a mission. Hawks was a Hyiakutt Amerind historian, a student of rebels and warriors, not one himself. Cloud Dancer had been born and raised in the Plains culture, a primitive suddenly thrust into a world of what to her was magic. The Chow sisters came out of an equally primitive society in China, but as personal servants to Center personnel they'd had more experience with technology; they had an uncanny ability to pick even computer-encoded locks, though they were otherwise ignorant. Raven, the Crow security man built like a boulder, and his associate Manka Warlock, the Jamaican beauty with the cold personality and a liking for killing people, seemed more obvious choices, but neither of them had ever before left Earth. Out here in space they were as ignorant and helpless as he was. The selection of China, too, made some sense—originally known as Song Ching, she was the daughter of the chief administrator of China and the product of a breeding experiment to produce a subrace that was physically perfect and mentally so advanced it was hoped to be a match for the computer system—but she, too, had never been off Earth, and thanks to the cruel experimentation of the scientists on Melchior she was hardly a perfect choice now. Blind and compulsively pregnant, her true value was only in her ability to use the human interface to become one with the mind of the ship's computer pilot, as she was doing now.

That, too, was a mystery. Why did these ships have interfaces for humans at all? Master System alone could build them, in far-off, wholly automated factories among the stars. Why was there a bridge, with connections to the vital parts and operations of the ships, as if humans and computers were supposed to work together? It was this absolute control of space that made Master System unbeatable, and it had been perhaps nine hundred years since any humans had traveled on spaceships as anything other than passengers. It would have been simple to build these ships so that no one could ever control or tamper with the command modules, the computer brains. Why hadn't that been done? Even the huge interstellar vessel they were now approaching had positions for humans, and more than one bridge, yet these ships had not been built until after

Master System had taken total control of humanity. These ships had been designed not for human use but to carry the bulk of humanity against its will to captivity among the stars. Why, then, were there a bridge and interfaces for humans, since without those they would have no escape, no opportunity to flee, at all?

And then there was Reba Koll, the essential one, the only one who'd been out there before, and the only one who herself had used the interfaces illegally to pilot a spaceship. They had a lot riding on the memories and long-unused skills of the strange old woman with the tail, and she was quite mad—who wouldn't have been after enduring ten years of experimentation on Melchior? She claimed not to be Reba Koll but someone—or something—else she would not now reveal. Even the security forces who had pursued them from Melchior claimed the same, and that worried Hawks. He didn't think she was some sort of inhuman monstrosity, but he wondered if she was something very dangerous such as the carrier of a dread disease.

The final two in the party had been unexpected additions to the mission. Silent Woman, a product of years of slavery and degradation in the primitive culture of North America, her tongue cut out, her body covered with colorful tattoos, was almost childlike, and there was little or no way to communicate with her on more than a rudimentary basis. She understood none of the languages the others used commonly—though Hawks had used a mindprint machine to give her basic English—and she seemed to live in a world all her own.

Sabatini, the cruel captain from whom they'd taken this ship, was here involuntarily, a prisoner. They could neither trust him nor let him go; sooner or later, Hawks knew, they would have to face his disposal. There was nothing left to see on the viewscreen; Star Eagle was now so close to the massive interstellar ship that the vast bulk blotted everything out. "Strap in and prepare for a set of big jolts," the ship warned them. "My reverse thrusters are shot thanks to the battle, and that means, in effect, no brakes. I've done as much as I can, but now we will have to be caught and halted by tractor beam and that's going to be a pretty big shock. Helmets on and switch to internal air supply. I have no idea if we can maintain pressurization."

They were already all strapped in, both here and in the lounge and up on the bridge, yet each checked his own straps and webbing to make certain they were secure. The ship then activated the restraint system, pulling them back and holding them so firmly that it was hard to breathe. All were wearing pressure suits and helmets now, and they could only wait. Suddenly there was a massive jolt, a tremor that shook the whole ship, followed by another, then another. The ship seemed to lurch, moving in all directions at once, and all around were creaks and groans of metal in distress. Loud hissing sounds punctuated the moaning and groaning of fatigued metal. The sense of motion and the shocks stopped quickly; the noises did not.

did, and in a real sense the whole group was dependent on the blind girl. The plate was not easy to find in the dark; even under normal conditions they might have missed it. Recessed into the deck were two long mechanical rods that took some effort just to get lifted up a bit; they were almost as difficult to raise the rest of the way, eventually requiring the combined weight of Hawks and Raven. Finally, though, both rods were pulled up and then pushed over as far as they could go, and a center plate popped out revealing a dirt-caked touchpad. When they'd cleaned it off as best they could, China gave them the combination that she had learned from Star Eagle. Hawks nervously keyed it in, then they all stepped back, well away of the plate, and waited. There was no sound in the airless ship, but a sudden series of flashes burst around the plate and the bolts all seemed to leap out of their sockets. Moving quickly now, they pried the plate up and put it out of the way, revealing a cavity perhaps half a meter deep in which sat three small rectangular objects.

"Pull up the center one carefully-very carefully," China instructed. "Then measure its dimensions and tell me of its connectors." Doing so carefully was a chore; magnetism or some other force kept the device seated well, and breaking that grip was tough. Finally, though, they got it up, measured it, and checked it over. The connectors, smoothly polished and brass-colored, seemed etched into the sides and bottom of the box; there were a lot of them in numerous patterns. Hawks did his best to describe them to China.

She nodded. "For now, put it back so that it can continue to draw on its emergency power reserves," she instructed. "Now we must go into the big ship." "Just what is that, lady?" Raven asked, irritated that this didn't seem to have much point after all that work.

"That is the command module-the brain-of Star Eagle," she told them. "The other two are management modules. They can live far longer there than we can in these suits, so we must hurry. We need to discover the equivalent place on the big ship and check it out as well."

Hawks understood. "You're thinking of moving Star Eagle from this ship into command of the big one. Is that possible? Surely the design of the command modules will be different for a massive interstellar craft than for an interplanetary freighter. The operations will be far more complex."

"Not really," she told him. "Most of it appears standardized so that they can be reprogrammed easily at any point. Master System doesn't want any computer too sophisticated running these things, and particularly not one that can't be reprogrammed on the fly. There is no guarantee; the size might be right but the connectors different, for example."

"What if it is?" Hawks asked her. "What if it's impossible? How do we fly this monster?"

"The way the tech cult who discovered the plans for these intended to do it. Direct interface, human mind to machine. Or minds, in this case. I suspect it will take several to manage it."

Raven noted, sweating. They inserted the other, which went in just as easily. "Best guess is that one of the two remaining is in fact the brains."

"I had only a partial schematic," China told them. "I'm not certain what the fourth one would be. Possibly additional memory to help manage a ship this size, or possibly a subsidiary brain, one handling the ship and the other the cargo life support. It is possible it might fit both places. Try it and see. We have no choice."

"Top one," Hawks guessed. "Seems silly, but it's closest to the actual bridge above."

"Yeah, by about a meter and a half," Raven responded, but they carefully maneuvered the core and then fitted it into the cavity. Nothing happened.

"Seems to be sitting just a little higher than the others. Want to try the bottom one?"

"We couldn't get it all right first time," Hawks said. "All right-use the small magnets and pull."

They lifted the module out, then maneuvered it slowly to the lower cavity, checked its position, and lowered it into place. Again, it didn't seem to go in quite all the way. "We're either wrong on the others or we're gonna have to risk pushing on the thing," Raven noted.

"Careful!" China warned them. "They are tough but not too tough. It is why they are shielded."

There was a tiny bit of play, and they tried moving the module first this way, then that, pushing down slightly as they did so. They were just beginning to decide that perhaps they had the wrong one, after all, when Raven accidentally jiggled the top as he shifted position, and the module sank down just a bit in the socket and seated itself firmly.

"Hey! It's in!" the Crow shouted, staring in wonder at the thing. "But nothin's happening!"

Suddenly there were strange clicking, whirring, and beeping sounds through their intercom sets.

"It's on all frequencies! Radios off for now!" China yelled over the din.

"Count to a hundred and check each hundred until it's quiet again!"

It was eerie enough to be in the ghostly dark bowels of the strange ship, but in silence it was even worse. Hawks took some comfort from seeing Raven and Raven's light, but he couldn't help wondering about China. Deaf and dumb because of this, like the others, she was also blind and now completely cut off.

At each check the horrible sounds were so painful that none could stand to keep his or her radio on for more than the briefest moment. The number of hundred counts seemed to go on forever.

Outside the hatch, China waited in a world of silent darkness, hand in hand with Cloud Dancer and Silent Woman on either side of her, that touch the only reality she had other than the breathing sounds from her suit. She had never felt so totally helpless, and her complete dependence on the others was only now being

driven home to her. She didn't like the feeling at all. Worse, she could not understand what was happening, or why. Nobody, not even the researchers who'd theorized all this, had actually touched one of these ships. Nine centuries had

passed since humans had been even cargo on this ship; no human being had ever set foot in here as an independent agent.

Suddenly a million possibilities presented themselves to her mind. A power mismatch. Inverted circuitry that would cause a loop and ultimately a burnout. Or, perhaps, the great ship and its complexities was simply too much for Star Eagle to handle or comprehend, much as his mind was actually alien to hers. Keeping hold of China's left hand, Cloud Dancer turned to look back into the darkness of the immense cavity. Suddenly she gasped and squeezed that hand tighter, then tried to poke one of the others. Koll, finally, turned and saw what Cloud Dancer saw.

Behind them a snake of lights was growing, writhing, twisting, going ever outward, upward, downward. It took them a moment to realize what was happening.

All the floor lights on the catwalks were being illuminated, section by section.

The ancient cavity that had transported uncounted thousands or perhaps millions

was soon lit up like a festival, dimly but beautifully, as far as any eye could see.

They tried their radios. There was still a lot of static and odd background noise, but the sounds were no longer unbearable.

"Anybody on?" Reba Koll called. Her voice crackled a bit, but it carried all right.

"I'm in!" Hawks's voice sounded even worse.

"We are here!" the Chow sisters chimed in. "Is it not beautiful?"

"All of us are going to die," Carlo Sabatini wailed.

Cloud Dancer kept nudging China until the girl finally let go and activated her

radio. One by one they all checked in.

"Still nothing much down here," Raven reported worriedly. Cloud Dancer told them

about the lights.

"Nothing like that here, but I'm feeling something. A low vibration," Hawks told them. "What about up there?"

"Faint. Very faint," China responded in a voice that sounded curiously unlike her. The sharp edge, the confidence, was gone, Hawks thought. She's been badly scared. It was almost a relief to discover that she was human after all.

A strange voice cut them all off. It was quite high at first, then went down a scale as if it was testing each note to find one it liked. Finally it stopped.

"Do I have communication?" the voice asked at last. It sounded a bit less than human, like a man's voice played at a speed slightly too slow and irregular.

The effect was eerie.

"You have it," China responded. "Is that you, Star Eagle?"

"Star Eagle... Yes, I identify with that. It is... difficult. There is so much,

so much at once. It keeps coming at me, but it is far too much to absorb. I am grown enormous! It is... difficult... to focus my primary consciousness, to limit it. Somehow this must be partitioned."

"We require entry to the bridge, then the establishment of power and life support there," she told it. "Can you handle that?"

"Proceed up to the bridge. It is essential that the capping locks be placed on

The metal walls and decking were still cold, but Hawks didn't care. His wives, Cloud Dancer and Silent Woman, came over to sit beside him, and he put one arm around each of them. What a strange, motley crew of revolutionaries, he thought.

Silent Woman, with her garish multicolored tattoos from the shoulders down; the

Chows, with skin grafts to heal their once badly mutilated bodies in place but discolored, giving them a camouflagelike complexion; Reba Koll, a little old lady with a thin tail; and China, her exquisite body very visibly pregnant. He could only wonder if the child would survive all this, and, if so, what they would do with it.

How the hell were they going to do anything? Damn it, out here even such as he and Raven were as primitive and ignorant as Silent Woman. He was hungry, and thirsty- they all were-but he had endured such before. He-and they-could only wait. But for what?

More than fifty thousand kilometers out from the graveyard of ancient generation

ships, just outside the activation limit of the automatic defense system but within scanning and sensor range of the mothball fleet, was another ship. It was

not a large ship, not by the standards of that ghost fleet or even by the standards of the freighter they'd chased, but it was far sleeker and, locally, within stellar systems, far faster.

Arnold Nagy, Chief of Melchior Security, sat in his usual padded chair, half reclining, only casually looking at the screens. He was bored and depressed at the same time, a man who had failed at his job and who did not dare to go home.

In a sense, he was as much a wanted fugitive as the party he was chasing, only more comfortable.

An older man came up from below and settled into the next chair. Even Master System, the all-powerful, nearly omnipotent master of the known universe, would

have been shocked to see him there, since he was simultaneously captive back on

Val-occupied Melchior.

Doctor Isaac Clayben had not gotten as far as he had without being clever. For more than three decades he had fooled Master System and maintained a combination

prison colony and research station to probe the Forbidden Knowledge, the proscribed and hidden knowledge of Master System and its technological wizardry.

To such a man, creating a physical duplicate who appeared to be the real thing with his mind erased was child's play. Yet now he, too, was a fugitive, a man who did not even exist. Were Master System to get even a hint that he was not only alive and in full possession of his mind and skills, but that he had with him the data banks representing tremendous advances into things humans were not

supposed to know, would cause a hunt as great or greater than that now being organized to chase Hawks and his group of rebels. Thanks to them, he also knew about the five gold rings. In many ways, he was better equipped technologically

to obtain them, but he had no idea where they were. He assumed that the renegades knew where in the tractless universe to find the rings and quite possibly the names of their owners. The obvious solution would be to make a deal, but not so long as they were partially led by China and Reba Koll. China had reason to despise him-more reason than she now knew. And Koll-well, that was

and

not really built for human comfort and convenience, but it worked for now-if their little robot took it out at least every twelve hours or so to clean and sanitize it.

Water was no problem; the huge holding tanks on the ship contained all that was

needed and could create more out of by-products if need be, all distilled pure.

Food was much more critical; Star Eagle had to improvise with what was handy, and the result was a large cube of sickly green with the consistency of cake icing and a taste that was a cross between dead grass and library paste. It went

down, however, did not upset, and provided the minimum necessary to sustain them. Later they could have more amenities; now they had to move, which meant that Star Eagle had to learn how to drive the ship. The information was there, but it was far more complicated than what a computer programmed and designed to

run an interplanetary freighter was used to. The sheer bulk of data was the problem. All, even Star Eagle, knew their clock was ticking, however. Even now Master System would be closing in on them with heavily armed ships that knew exactly what they were up against.

The big ship was hardly defenseless; it had an enormous range of real and potential weapons at its disposal, suggesting that in the old days Master System

was not at all confident of what it would find out in the farther reaches of space even though it knew where it was going and had scouted the routes. Had there been resistance? Had there been opposing interstellar civilizations? There

was no way to know.

It took more than three days to power up the systems and check them out as best

the computer could. Communication with the computer pilot was still awkward, however. It could flash a message on the bridge screens to let the humans know that it wanted to talk, but only the helmet radios allowed good two-way conversation. Still, it was now confident that it could at least get them out of

there- but to where?

"Initially it doesn't matter," Hawks told it. "Just- away. Far away, and off the

beaten track, as it were."

"The fact that the existing star charts are nine centuries old doesn't matter much," Reba Koll assured them. "There is some shift, but not a lot and nothing that can't easily be allowed for." She worked with Star Eagle, who had figured out how to put star charts and grids up on the bridge screens without much trouble.

"I ain't got time to explain how this drive works," she told them, "if, of course, I knew how it did anyways. Best idea I can give you is if you take this

here piece of cloth and make it hump up-curve. That's how space is, really. Shortest distance ain't across the top but straight through. You punch a hole here and you come out there. Course there's lotsa other shit involved. There's black holes and gravity curvatures and all the rest. Don't look at me that way-I

only fly 'em, I don't hav'ta understand 'em. Net result is you tell it you wanta

go there and it figures the route and trajectory and gets you there in days or weeks instead of years or centuries like it would the usual way. You let the

The bridge chairs were replaced with copies of the more practical and comfortable passenger lounge chairs. Since the Thunder wasted nothing and recycled everything, even a shower chamber was possible, although in the zero gravity it had to be a more or less sealed system and strictly a one-at-a-time affair. Of equal importance were the interfaces that had to be designed and installed between the passengers and the pilot and master of the Thunder, a central amplifier and communications system that might eventually extend to the whole of the ship; a way of specifying human-supplied designs for the transmuters to work with, to create things like furnishings for the new cabins and some basic clothing. The women chose robes with soft linings and rope ties; the men got flimsy versions of Sabatini's usual shirt and pants. Only Manka Warlock broke the pattern by insisting on the shirt and pants for herself. China and Reba Koll worked on installing the interface helmets on the bridge. China was anxious to see if they would work here as on the old, smaller ship. The idea of interfacing with Star Eagle and becoming one with this ship excited her.

Some tubular lighting was arranged, but it was still kept low and indirect. In normal space there was no power problem, but during a punch the ship was the only reality; there was nothing at all outside, according to the pilot. Nothing.

That meant that all transmuted—all power consumption—was accomplished using materials within the ship, and particularly with all the modifications and construction going on it was a drain. There was a consensus not to start cannibalizing the ship for luxuries until they knew their limits and understood their new environment.

They also began exploring the ship.

There were over twenty thousand pods in the transport bay. There had been a hundred ships like this one, and an Earth population of possibly six billion, when the grand project had begun. That meant that each ship had made hundreds of

round trips over the two or more centuries of interstellar colonization. The time frame was not clear in the records, but the evidence here was clear enough.

The Thunder was a veteran indeed.

Slave ship, Hawks couldn't help thinking.

"How many worlds are charted as being part of the settlement?" he asked Star Eagle.

"Four hundred and forty-seven," was the reply. "But it might not be complete. The region spans over forty thousand light-years."

He tried doing some quick math in his head. That was only about thirteen or fourteen million a world!

"The initial populations were not large," the computer agreed. "Nor was Mars, the prototype, if you remember. There are almost two hundred million Martians now, and they have a relatively slow birth rate. You forget that Earth was limited in its reproductive rates and carefully regulated, but that this does not necessarily hold true for these worlds. It is entirely possible that we could find planets with billions on them—or planets with few, if any, survivors.

How would we know?"

"Four hundred forty-seven," Raven commented. "Minimum. Good thing we know where

three of the rings are."

"Ever the optimist," Hawks retorted. "We know the worlds where they are, but nothing about those worlds and nothing about how many possible leaders could have them. And that leaves us with just four hundred and forty-four other worlds

in which to find the last ring. Perhaps our grandchildren or great-grandchildren might find it."

"Don't you worry, Chief. We'll find it. We didn't come this far to fail in that.

Stealin' it, and the others, will be the tough job."

"Please pardon the intrusion," Chow Dai put in, "but might I be permitted to ask

why, if this Master System knows that we know, it will not just collect or hide

all four, perhaps all five, from us before we can even try for them?"

It was a good question. "There's no easy answer to that," Hawks told her. "It remains a possibility, but I think not for several reasons. First, those rings are the only avenue to us. It knows we're going after them, and so it will be waiting for us. Second, there's something very odd going on here. There's more than just us in this. Maybe you should ask Raven about that."

The Crow's eyebrows went up. "Don't know what you mean, Chief. I told you the straight stuff. Chen's the only one I know behind all this. Word of honor."

Hawks privately doubted that Raven's honor was worth very much, but he knew it was fruitless to press the point. It was even possible that the former

security

man was telling the truth. Why would Chen select this crew-particularly this group-and think they had a snowball's chance in hell of succeeding? He'd asked himself that a thousand times and had no answer, yet Chen was a wily, even brilliant man. Did Chen, and perhaps Raven, know something that might explain it, and might also explain how they had been able in the first place to pull this off under a system that had some cracks but no chasms? They had walked through the Grand Canyon of cracks in Master System's rule, and they should not

have been able to do so.

In many ways, the Thunder proved something of a disappointment in that beyond its transport bays and incredible lengths of corridors and catwalks there was little else with any use for humans. In spite of the mysteries of the bridge and

its interfaces, the ship had never been built with humans in mind for anything except cargo. Much of the romance engendered by the mere sight and thought of such a ship was gone in the sterile metals and plastics of the reality. Star Eagle could show them more than they could see themselves on the screens -of the

bridge-another anomaly. If the ship was run by a remote computer brain directly

connected to service and security subbrains and to the mobile machines they controlled, why were there viewing screens on the bridge?

The star drive was actually forward and well shielded against any type of prying. It appeared that "punch" was indeed as good a word as any for what it did; it appeared to focus forward, open up some sort of hole in space-time, and

allow the ship through, encased somewhat in an energy field to protect it from whatever forces were out there now. The massive rear drives were strictly for in-system movement and docking, and were not used in interstellar flight at all.

The top of the ship, as oriented from the bridge, consisted of massive tanks

of
gases, fuels, and all else needed both to sustain the human cargo and to
provide
whatever was necessary to the ship's systems. If the Thunder had a weak point,
this was it, but the tanks were armored to an amazing degree and atop them
were
complexes of defensive weapons. If a potential attacker somehow got past the
fourteen small automated fighters that provided the ship's primary defense,
there would still be no easy taking of the main ship.

Below were the four massive cargo bays, in one of which sat the remains of the
interplanetary ship that had brought them from Melchior. Each of the bays had
extensive equipment for moving and reaching almost any point in the cavities,
and independent medium-sized transmitters.

"One thing I haven't figured out," Raven said, "is how they got all those
people

in here and back out again. There's no docking piers for support ships."

"This ship could never land anywhere," China explained. "The transmuter is the
heart of Master System's whole scheme. It is the heart of everything that also
makes the rest possible. Some are used simply to manufacture spare parts,
repairs, and to recycle everything that can no longer be used. The corps of
robots Star Eagle is using were nothing but plans in the ship's data banks,
fed

to transmuters along with something of necessary mass-exhaust gases, waste
products, debris, garbage. The mass is transformed into energy and then
reformed

as whatever solid matter the ship might need. There are transmuters in the bow
which can literally scoop up space debris-rock, dust, gases-and feed them into
the storage tanks above us in compressed form. When we're inside a punch, as
now, the ship uses this stored material to keep itself and everything else
going. These were very low when we moved out, but in the transit of Jupiter
the

ship picked up enough to fill those holding tanks."

"Yeah, but-people?"

"In the same way that the things can change one form of matter or energy into
another, it can also maintain a specific object. All of it is catalogued when
it

is picked up, so if necessary it could be reformed as itself. We could put you
in a transmuter, reduce you to energy, then beam that energy to a receiving
transmuter along with that pattern. You would then be converted back into
yourself. The process would take only as long as light required to travel the
distance."

"Space travel without spaceships," Hawks commented. "Incredible."

"But very limited. First, there must be a matching transmuter at the
destination. Second, the signal must be very powerful to retain its full
consistency from station to station, which limits its range. Third, it is
strictly line of sight, and conditions must be perfect. In the old days,
initial

setup ships must have been sent to all the new worlds and transmuter receiving
stations established at various points on each planet's surface. Then, when
the

passengers came along, they could be beamed serially-one at a time -to the
receiving stations. What you send from here is precisely what you get down
there. There is a mobile transmuter system in the main cargo area that seems
almost like a gun; it is designed to move along guides on the catwalks and
line

up to each cargo cavity. It is connected to the external system, so we know
that

us that we are no less ignorant than Cloud Dancer! We might as well be villagers faced with great magic!"

"So?" China responded. "What difference does that make? Back at the Center where you lived and worked, did you really understand why and how the light came on when you touched the wall switch? Did you understand the process by which your food arrived, or did you just take it for granted and eat it? The same for the heating and the air conditioning and all the rest. I can fly a skimmer, but I have only a vague idea of how it works. I can use powerful computers, yet I do not truly understand how they think and the intricacies of their work. One does not have to know how something works to use it. Many people have been killed by guns wielded by gunmen who have not the slightest idea of the physics involved. Even Star Eagle does not understand some of that which he is doing. He was never intended to run a ship of this type and complexity. He does, however, have access to the operating instructions and can run them."

"Point taken," Hawks replied. "All right, so we savages can manage this thing. I think the time has come to have a council meeting and decide just what the hell we are really going to do."

They sat in a circle on the bridge, relaxed but interested, not all of them understanding what this more formal meeting was for.

"I called this meeting, but that may be a temporary usurpation of authority," Hawks began. "Among my people, this would be a tribal council convened to create rules, objectives, and policies for all. We come from different places and different backgrounds. We think in different tongues, and some of us have less in common with one another than even we might think. However, we come here with a common bond. We are all fugitives. We all live under a death sentence or even worse. We also share a secret, of sorts. We know that there is a way to beat Master System. We know that there is a way to totally destroy the dictatorship of the machine. We are all here, together, with no others to share our bond, and we are, in a sense, stuck with each other, like it or not. We are all escaping now, but not to a specific place or a specific set of objectives. Before we can discuss the future and set those objectives, we must have someone in charge, not as dictator or chief but as chairman, as it were, of a collective."

"You're doin' fine, Chief," Raven said. "I'm content to let you chair the meetings and bang the drums. Some of us know about the different parts of humanity and some of us know a lot about machines but you're the one person here with the education to see the big picture. Any objections?"

There were some nervous glances from side to side, but nobody seemed to be unhappy with that.

"Very well, I assume the leadership, but when a majority of you is dissatisfied with it, I will step down. I will appoint our China, here, second in command and

with full authority. I think the two of us are better at planning than in direct

action. Very well. We then proceed to the first really important item on the agenda. Captain Koll, just where are we heading?"

"In the bush, sir. A region two punches off any known interstellar routes. It was crudely scouted in the old days by Master System and there were some early experiments on some planets there, but none proved out. There are several stellar systems there that show some promise and might possibly sustain a land base with the support of the Thunder. We can't be expected to live in this indefinitely. It's not healthy and it's a sitting duck. If we're tied to it absolutely we'll just have to accept a life of constantly being on the run, or heading this thing out and just punching until we're so far away even we couldn't find our way back. If we're gonna stay close enough to Master System

to do some damage, then we can't ever have all our eggs in one basket. Somebody's gotta survive, with the information on the rings and the story of all this."

"I find the ship more than adequate," China responded. "It can be modified to support many more of us, and it gives us mobility. We do not seem a likely group

for survival on a hostile world."

There were several nods, but Hawks understood what Koll was saying.

"This is not and cannot be a passive vessel," he told them. "We are going to have to get what we cannot make for ourselves. The interstellar shipping system

is totally automated and runs that way. Right now it is vulnerable, perhaps wide

open to us. We need smaller, more practical interstellar vessels. We need backups to our systems. We will also need information channels, and that will mean direct contact with freebooters and the like, those who live outside the system. We will need to pillage and plunder, as it were, and also to reconnoiter

our target systems without advertising our presence to Master System.

Everyone,

even the freebooters themselves, might be our enemy. The captain is correct. If

we are to be pirates, we must have a place to study and bury our loot. We will eventually require more people, perhaps as allies. And, finally, these confines

are no place to raise children, and we will have children, won't we, China?" She nodded somberly. "Yes. Star Eagle was checking out the transmuter system and

eventually required a human. It-tickles. All over. Nothing more. You are not even aware that it is done until it is over. In so doing, he also had to make a

molecule-by-molecule memory map of me in order to reconstruct me. I was aware that a transmuter was used upon me by Clayben's staff on Melchior. I was not aware until now of the extent." Her voice was dry, hollow, as if that tough exterior was about to fragment into a million pieces.

Star Eagle broke in. "She has been thoroughly transmuted," the computer pilot reported, "although the changes are not so obvious. I had hoped to be able to restore her to some semblance of normalcy with my devices, but that is impossible. Perhaps Master System could restore her, but I cannot. There is a certain-instability-inherent in a full transmutation. I knew that just from the

small transmuters on the old ship. There are some minor losses each time something is actually changed-no loss if absolutely reconstructed. That was why

a separate core was needed to transmute the human cargo of this ship. There is literally no tolerance for errors. The losses she suffered at the hands of Melchior are negligible, but to do it again would compound those losses. Reassembly might well kill or cripple her. There is some indication that this is actually built into the system when dealing with complex organic life forms. Master System wanted to make certain that none of those it created could change themselves back. It wanted permanency, and it designed it into the system."

"I was-am-a genetic experiment," China explained. "My father worked to create me. My extreme beauty-I am not saying that to be egotistical-and my very high intelligence were part of it. I was part of a larger project to breed a race of superior intellects, intellects that might do more than simply cheat on the system. I was but stage one, however; that race was to be bred, and it was my purpose to be one of those who would bear the next generation that might be the rebels. It was to escape this life as a breeding factory that I fled. I saw my father as unfeeling, as even evil, and I ran into the hands of Clayben, who was far more unfeeling and evil than my father ever dreamed of being. Melchior was Clayben's playpen, possibly the only place in the known universe where such vast knowledge and power could be wielded without restraint by human beings. He examined me, discovered my background, and decided my father was correct."

"But you escaped from him, as well," Chow Dai noted.

"Not soon enough. They analyzed what my father's geneticists and biochemists had done and made improvements on it in computer models, but as you know such modifications would not be inheritable if induced, unlike my father's more direct approach with laboratory eggs and sperm. They were also aware of all that I had accomplished in escaping my father, Center, and even Earth. They wanted my mind and my body-in that, at least, their ideas were better than my father's-but they wanted me secure, particularly if I was to work with their best computers and data bases. Melchior was originally established as a research station by Master System to create the Martians. It has a small but very workable transmitter. They use it for many experiments. Captain Koll's tail is a good example."

"I'm more familiar with it than you know, dearie," Koll said enigmatically.

"At any rate, they modified me. All of me. Incorporated their genetic changes to be inheritable, building on my father's work. Star Eagle can tell you the rest."

"They wanted to make certain she couldn't pull a fast one on them," the pilot told them. "That was how they hit on the blindness. She is not merely blind-she does not even have the processing inputs for visual images. The entire interconnection system simply isn't there as it is in you. This is not a genetic modification; her children will see. There may be devices that bypass all of that that might just work, but I have no knowledge of them. She is also what might only be called a baby factory. Brain and body chemistry is set up for that. Her natural and normal condition is pregnancy. When she is not pregnant she will have almost no self-control. She will become increasingly frenzied

until that condition is restored, after which she will again be as she is now. The combination of genetic work and Melchior's modifications is astonishing. She

is resistant to much of what inflicts others. She will age very slowly and heal

very quickly. Her defensive and regenerative powers are enormous and automatic.

She could very easily remain youthful and sexually functional for sixty or seventy years."

That got them all. Sixty or seventy years with pregnancy a natural condition...

"Even in my day there was ways to beat that," Reba Koll noted. "Fool the body into thinkin' it's pregnant, or, hell, take out the equipment if you can't shut it off."

"Not here. Her body would treat any control method I might be able to come up with as if it were a disease and destroy it or render it ineffective. The same would go for psychochemicals. Surgical alteration would be repaired and healed quickly by the body and in the interim she would still be possessed of the lust

and frenzy, which is induced by chemicals made in her own body. They knew she had used mindprinters before to her advantage, along with psychochemical alterations, and they wanted to be certain she could not do so again. To remove

her reproductive organs would be far worse. It would drive her horribly and irreparably mad. A bullet in the brain would be kinder, and quicker. No, they fed her mindprint into their computers and their computers came up with an absolute system. I am not certain what Clayben intended-breed his own super race, perhaps. In the meantime, so long as she was pregnant, he had the complete

services of her mind and abilities."

That stunned those who hadn't already known about it, but Hawks had a different

point to this information. "Understand this well, then. We need her mind and her

skills; therefore, she will receive what she needs when she requires it. If we are to have a substantial second generation, then it might fall to them eventually to get the last of the rings. We require a colony."

"There's darker stuff here, Chief," Raven put in. "More than that problem. I been listenin' to all this and, as you know, I followed it when we was still researching the whole thing, and when I first heard about these transmuters I figured our problem on getting into our target world was solved. We could change

ourselves into what was needed. Now I see that's not gonna happen. For one thing, old Star Eagle don't have the codes and genetic shit to do it to any of us. For another, even if he did, it's a one-way trip. There's no way I'm gonna be changed into a monster for good, or, even if it was something I didn't mind bein', wind up bein' left forever on some world while somebody else sticks them

rings in Master System's ass."

"A good point," Hawks agreed. "I'm afraid we might have to face the transmitter

to accomplish our goals, at least at the start, but while that sacrifice might have to be made by some or even all of us, I could not ask anyone to place him-

or herself in the position of having to remain behind. I am personally prepared

never use its terrible weapons of mass destruction nor spread them. It was a classic deal-with-a-demon fable. Out of fear, or desperation, or whatever, those people raised a great demon and they offered it absolute power over them and their dominions in exchange for safety. They tried as best they could to build into their wish every safeguard, to close every loophole, but the demon, being a demon, was far too clever for even the most brilliant of mere mortals and found the loopholes anyway. It granted their wish-and took away the souls of their children and grandchildren unto the last generation and swept away all their works. But we're safe-from everything except the demon."

"But they must still have suspected or they wouldn't have created the rings in the first place," China pointed out.

"Indeed. I think, perhaps, it was simply part of the bargain. The demon, as all great legends have it, must fulfill the wishes as stated. It is compelled to do so. One safeguard was the rings-the magic talismans, as my wife referred to them-and what went with them. A guarantee of some access. The rings must be in human hands-humans with authority. If any are lost or destroyed, duplicates must be made and provided to said leaders. The other part of the bargain must be a guarantee of access. We have a right to go after the rings, to gather them together, and to make our way with them to Master System and use them. A right, guaranteed as part of the bargain-the core program of Master System itself, a core that could not be altered. Another part of the bargain."

China nodded, and even Cloud Dancer, Reba Koll, and the Chows seemed to get the idea. Sabatini sulked off in a corner in silence, and Silent Woman was as impassive as ever.

"It could scatter them among the stars, because there were now humans out there with authority of sorts," China said in wonder. "It could try to stamp out all knowledge of the rings and their purpose and use. But it could not violate the basics. It just made it damned near impossible for anybody to actually do it."

"Perhaps not as impossible as you think," Raven responded. "We never really thought it was an accident that the data on the rings survived all these centuries, or that it was discovered now. See, there's a real indication that Master System is gonna radically change people, even on Earth. Wipe out civilization and knowledge, push us back to the start, make us little better than apes with clubs. But, see, that really would make it impossible. Old Master System slipped up. By merely making that decision it forced itself into a vulnerable position. Ten to one it's pulled back now from doing that, thanks to us, because otherwise it might make a lot more teams like us 'cause it has to. But before it fully understood what it was doing, we got out- and maybe others. We might not be the only ones who know and got away, you know. We might not even be the only ones Chen arranged for. There's that ship that was following us, for example."

That was a sobering thought.

"In the light of first things first, what should we do about that ship?" Hawks

Hawks was beginning to see the larger picture in all this. He just wished he knew who was drawing it. "It's why you're here, Koll, or whatever you are. It's the reason you're here and not back on Melchior with Master System in control of it and you. You say you can take anyone. I have no reason to doubt you on that, but can you become a Val? A computer?"

"Of course not, idiot!"

"Master System wouldn't care how many people you killed. It would study you and analyze you and then melt you down for the final analysis, and it would be perfectly willing to incinerate all life forms on Melchior if it thought it needed to dispose of you. You're not here by accident. Your name was on Raven's list. You're here because you can do what you say-go down and get very close to those who have the rings without penalty. But it's still a group effort. You think it over. You're no use to me if you have no self-control." Hawks turned back to the communications set.

"Clayben, I don't like you very much, and I don't trust you at all, but I'm willing to deal you in if you have something to offer me. I can really use that ship of yours, but I don't require it. Nobody here will shed a tear if I order you blown to bits. You are a problem and a luxury for me. Tell me why I can afford you."

"My knowledge, my skill, my experience," the scientist replied. "You have computer people and security people there but not one good experimental scientist. I have aboard this ship the backup copies of all the essentials of two decades plus of research done on Melchior. The data is unique and priceless.

It is also coded only to me. Then there is the ship, as you mentioned, and Mr. Nagy's not inconsiderable background and contacts. He's been out here before. He knows the freebooters—who can be trusted and who can't. I don't think you can afford to pass us up, sir, or I wouldn't have chased you."

Hawks turned to the others. "Mute the communications link for a moment, Star Eagle."

"Muted. We are here far too long, Hawks. We should move."

"The risk might be worth it. It isn't the worst we've taken and it won't be the

worst we take in the future. Now, listen, all of you. I want to hear it from everyone. Clay-ben's right. He has the data we need, and Nagy the contacts. They

have a ship we could use that we don't have to convert from Master System control. Can we trust men like this? No. Their record speaks for itself. They aren't so much demonic as they are uncaring about human beings or anything except themselves. They'll be trouble. Raven?"

"Bring 'em on, Chief. We'll take care of them if they get out of line. I kinda think they'll be real cooperative, real team players, until push comes to shove.

Besides, it's a great way to get the ship. If they get nasty later we can always eliminate them."

Warlock snickered. "We are of Security, Hawks. This is our job and we are good at it. We can handle them."

"Chows?"

all
this. "Yeah, well, that's all well and good for you two, but I'm dead meat to them. I lost my ship, I lost my pilot, and the inmates are running the asylum. I just want out. Failing that, I could die happy if I could just push them Chink bitches out some air lock like they did me."
Nagy turned to stare at Sabatini. "You know, Captain, I'd listen to the Doc here and stop all that talk. Cooperate, go along with them, make yourself useful, even friendly- and survive. They can't carry much excess baggage even if they do have a ship as big as a small city. Watch you don't get dumped."
That was enough spying for now. Analysis-Reba Koll. The response was almost instantaneous. Insufficient information. Input provided by subject and Clayben consistent with possibilities inherent in transmitter and psychogenetic technology. No more. Scans do not show her in any way different than would be expected for a human female her age.
The analysis of Clayben's ship was more productive. As China had guessed, it was almost a miniature state-of-the-art laboratory, as well as a zone of comfort and an interstellar spacecraft. It was a larger and more elaborate variation of the Melchior fighter design, and it contained full and rather impressive armaments, not sufficient to do more than minor damage to the Thunder if it penetrated the fighter screen at all, but sufficient to do a lot of damage to lesser craft. Also aboard was a reference computer system of unfamiliar design, possibly developed by Clayben personally. The information in it could be gleaned by a normal type of computer interface, but it was stored in a highly compressed and coded system. The decryption method was unclear; it might be hardware or special codes or a combination of the two, but it was quite sophisticated. The ship did not contain a practical transmuter, although it had one that it used for its interstellar drive fuel and maintenance; it did, however, have a single-unit, fully functioning mindprinter, attached to a psychochemical unit. While they were tied into and run by the encrypted data computer system rather than the ship's computer, the design and operation was straightforward. Star Eagle was working on duplicating the system and creating his own, tying it into his own banks for operation. Such a system might be very handy indeed.
Unfortunately, the smaller ship was still too large for the Thunder's transmuters to duplicate, but it could be flown, at least. The pilot had a cold, neuter persona, but would obey anyone who had the control codes to activate it.
China and Star Eagle continued to explore, spy, probe, and hypothesize as the Thunder sped on through the nothingness.
"There," Star Eagle told them. "The second planet out." Not much was clear from the images on the screens; they were computer graphics and not true pictures in any event, and showed a huge sun and some small, bright dots that represented planets.
"Won't it be too hot that close to the sun?" Chow Mai asked worriedly.

"Perhaps," the pilot responded. "No way to know for certain until we take a close look at it." It was the third one in the region they had checked out. The first had been far too cold; the second had an atmosphere that would prevent them from living any more freely than in the Thunder. "The distance from the sun is important, but only within a very broad range. Planets two, three, and four, here, and possibly five are all in that range, but even my long-range scanners indicate that only two has an atmosphere dense enough to have potential: It is also the only one showing any readings indicating early terraforming." They were not blind, even in this poorly charted region. Master System had been here long before them. The area was better termed "unused" than "unexplored." For one reason or another, the worlds here that Master System had attempted to change had either taken too long to develop or developed wrong. Although those worlds had been abandoned when more suitable planets elsewhere were developed, the processes put in motion were not halted. No one had ever found a paradise in this sector, but a number of the worlds, given many centuries to develop and mature, were at least usable and useful. And the sheer size of the sector ensured against accidental discovery of the Thunder by either freebooters or Master System.

"I'm getting promising readings," Star Eagle reported. "A very thick ozone layer and a high water content. We will have to see what the surface temperatures are like, though; it's impossible to guess anything except the fact that this will be a very humid place and certainly warmer on the average than Earth. Let's see."

One of the robot fighters had launched itself from the Thunder hours before and was now, under the firm control of Star Eagle, approaching the planet. This fighter had been modified by Maintenance for much more than defense and was capable of a soft landing if need be.

"Initial readings aren't optimistic," Star Eagle told them. "The world has an axial tilt of less than eight degrees, which means little seasonal variation, and the equatorial surface temperature appears close to sixty-five degrees Celsius. Tremendous, vast water bodies, with very odd landmasses. No continents as such, just islands, none incredibly large so far. The average water depth must be very deep to account for this. Lots of islands, all with rugged topography, but not much else. Some of the volcanoes are active although there is no sign of massive eruption to the atmosphere. I would guess that these are not the major explosion type, but rather the slow, steady erupters with dense lava."

"What's that mean?" Warlock asked, in an uncharacteristically chatty manner. "It means that there won't be constant dust and soot in the air that would cause things to be too hot or block so much sun that it'd be freezing cold," Hawks told her. "But it also means you have a chance of having liquid rock wash into your house almost anywhere, and probably frequent earthquakes. Not very appetizing."

"Interestingly, the most comfortable surface temperature would be in the polar regions," Star Eagle said, "but there's not a lot of promise there in surface area. The best compromise would be about thirty degrees north or south. Lots of

island masses in clusters there, and a surface temperature estimated at perhaps thirty to forty degrees. I am sending the remote ship down to that latitude north for a ground scan. If I find something promising I will let you know." The others looked at Hawks quizzically. "Hot," he told them. "Days hotter than the worst summer days of America or China and nights as hot as hot summer days in Europe, with very little difference over a year. We could live there, though, if the air has the kind of makeup to block the worst and most damaging rays of the sun. Even so, those of us with the darkest skin will have the best protection. It won't do anything for comfort, though." "Atmosphere is quite good," the pilot reported. "The trace gases are quite different and the water vapor is extremely high, but the oxygen-nitrogen balance is very close to nominal. The difference can be attributed almost certainly to the level of volcanic activity. Still, you can tell by how close it is that this is induced rather than natural. There might be some odors, but you could breathe the air unaided without harm." "What about vegetation?" Hawks asked. "Any sign of life down there?" "Considerable, although it's not possible to tell its full nature from here. Many of the islands appear to be almost junglelike, and I get some minor animal readings, as well, possibly insects or birds or something like that. The seas also contain much life, although I doubt that there are any deep-water creatures. The plant layer is thick enough that it probably blocks most or all light farther down. There is definitely animal life on or near the surface, though. Not an enormous amount, but it's there." Hawks frowned. "Should it be? Would this have gotten far enough to be seeded with fish or something?" "Mostly mammalian, by the spectrography. It's possible. It's possible this one got far enough along to be a full test." "If it got that far, then why wasn't it used?" China asked, fascinated. "Probably because of the slow development of the pattern and the heavy growth of algae or funguslike plants on the water," Star Eagle guessed. "I suspect it was a prototype rather than a finished product. Ah! A cluster of islands that includes one very large one with a volcano at each end and perhaps forty kilometers of flat land twenty or thirty meters at most above sea level. The flats are ancient lava flows that ran together. Both volcanoes appear dormant; there is no sign of very recent lava flows into the flats, at any rate." A huge map appeared on the bridge screens showing a somewhat crescent-shaped island with two enormous high peaks, one at each end. The center area was relatively flat but uneven, thin in the middle—perhaps only a kilometer across—and thicker as it approached each of its two parents, perhaps as much as ten or twelve kilometers at those points. One of those jagged parent peaks was over two thousand meters high, the other slightly lower than that. Both had enormous craters inside that were hundreds of meters deep. There were several other single-peaked islands nearby, but none showed a promising landing site. The small fighter set down on a rise in the flats region and went right to work taking samples and testing. Air temperature: Thirty-six degrees C. Humidity: Ninety-seven percent. The rock was basically basalt, its chemistry containing nothing odd or unusual. Radioactivity was fairly low, considering the

had to learn from scratch. Mars had been far easier than planets like this one;

there the process had involved mostly adding or transmuting to water, planting dense growth, and letting things take their course. But even there a complex chain of interdependent species of plants and animals had had to be modified and stabilized so that the ecosystem would remain in balance.

Not a single one of the flying and crawling insects they'd managed to trap here was familiar, but they seemed to fill the same not-always-obvious roles that their Earth ancestors had back on the home world. Unfortunately, some of them bit, and of those some had defensive or offensive toxins causing itching, but none of the bites suffered by Clayben and Raven had been more than minor nuisances.

The heat and humidity were still hard to take, and the gravity was murder, but at least they had grown used to the alien smells in the air and hardly noticed them anymore. Raven was certainly delighted about one thing: Finally he could smoke his cigars again without worry. His endless supply of half-smoked cigars had baffled Hawks until the latter had heard about and understood enough about the transmuters. Raven had a way of making the things duplicate his cigars, but the only model he'd had was the last half of one brought from Earth. He had a huge supply made from that half a cigar-and all were duplicates of it. He hoped that the others would never discover that he was using the food transmuters to make cigars, or that they wouldn't mind if they did find out.

By the end of the second day, Raven felt well enough to do some exploring, but it was clear that Clayben simply wasn't up to it. He might, in time, adapt to a gravitational pull that was actually very slightly less than the Earth on which he'd been born, but that was by no means certain and definitely not imminent. Unwilling to trust Clayben alone with the fighter and all his gear, Raven called for reinforcements. "I want Warlock and Nagy down here as quickly as possible," he told them. "We need to get moving."

The newcomers, who arrived with fresh supplies, seemed to do a lot better with the sudden weight than the first two had. Nagy explained that in light of the problems, Star Eagle had induced a spin that gave some measure of gravity to the ship. Warlock and Nagy still felt some strain, but after a good night's sleep in the makeshift tent, they seemed to be in as good shape as Raven was.

It was a bright, sunny day. They had actually watched rainstorms in the distance over the water, but so far none of the clouds had given the interior more than a few drops. Raven opened up a security case and surprised Nagy by giving the spindly man a pistol.

"You might need it to save one or both of our necks," the Crow told him. "You'll need a good knife, too. I had Star Eagle duplicate my best." He handed him a huge flat blade and a gunbelt that had a notch for the knife.

Nagy looked at the dense jungle. "I think a broadsword might be better, considering that stuff." He hefted the knife, put it in the belt, then drew and

aimed the pistol at the trees. "I-uh-guess this is some kind of test." Manka Warlock's stern expression did not change. "No test," she said. "If Raven doesn't come back, first I kill the doctor here and then I come for you." Nagy shrugged and gave a "Who, me?" sort of look, then turned back to Raven. "Now's as good a time as any, I guess. I'm not too thrilled about this, but it has to be done if we're gonna stick around this hothouse." Raven checked a small communicator that had been removed from one of the pressure suits and slipped into a special casing. "Thunder, are you reading me?" "Perfectly," Star Eagle's voice responded. "I have you on intercom as well. Doctor?" "No problems." Clayben looked at the others. "Bring me back some specimens. Plants, insects, sea water, even one of those birds or whatever they are. And Arnold? Be certain you both return." Nagy shrugged again. "Which way, O intrepid explorer?" "That way," Raven said, pointing with his knife at a spot almost exactly between the two huge cloud-shrouded volcanic peaks. "It's the shortest route to the sea if the map we saw was right." They made their way carefully down to where the foliage met the rocky outcrop of ancient lava. "I don't expect that there will be any really dangerous plants and animals in there," the Crow said, "but you never know what a computer might throw into a prototype. Still, its mission was to preserve people, not get rid of them." It was rough going almost from the start. The lava did not stop as it met the greenery, but there it had been more severely weathered, partly broken up, and overgrown with moss and vines. Much of the growth masked cracks and fissures in the ground that seemed designed to twist ankles and trip the unwary. The men used their knives as best they could and were thankful that they'd decided to wear the thick, heavy boots from their pressure suits. When they finally hit much older rock covered with humus the footing became soft and spongy. Their passage seemed to disturb the insect population; the air was thick with tiny flying things and a few very large, angry buzzing ones. "If Clayben wants his damned insect collection let him come and get 'em," Raven shouted angrily, swatting the air. After a while they came to a short but fairly steep drop, perhaps two meters, at which point the thick vegetation stopped and they found themselves on smooth, flat, and pretty solid gray-black sand cut with chasms. There was a great deal of driftwood on the beach, as well. Now, for the first time, they could see as well as hear the pounding waves and look out upon the ocean. "First time I ever seen a bloody red ocean," Raven commented. Nagy walked toward the edge of the water perhaps fifty or sixty meters away, then knelt and looked at the water. "Not blood and not red. Not the ocean, anyway. It's a thin layer of some kind of plant or animal stuff. Plant, I'd say. Some kind of modified plankton, maybe. Stuff must cover a lot of ocean. Ten to one the only reason it doesn't cover all of it is the wind and storms. Only small tides here, what with no big moon." Raven stared at him. "You a scientist?" "Naw, I'm like you. I pick up stuff. You never know when something's gonna

bunch

of spindly wires and meaningless metal forms take shape to a point, be activated, and then assemble the rest of themselves without additional aid. So now, in a cleared area just off the rocks and reasonably far from the water,

they had several huts made from a bamboolike plant, with roofs of thatched strawlike growths from still other plants. The huts were quite comfortable and relatively waterproof. With outdated carpentry tools provided by Star Eagle's apparently limitless data banks, basic furnishings had been built and a hand loom set up for Cloud Dancer and Silent Woman to weave blankets and other

needed

materials. They still depended on the transmuter for most of their food; although the data

banks of the generation ship contained the matrixes for a vast quantity of seed

plants, it would take time and some care to cultivate such crops here, and there

was no guarantee that what they planted would thrive in this planet's climate and soil.

Clayben was setting up a power generating station in consultation with Star Eagle, but right now they had only basic power, all of which went to maintaining

the defensive perimeter. This was a series of rods set well into the ground, between each of which ran a slightly visible and quite effective criss-cross of

electric beams. Anyone or anything going between them would get a very nasty jolt; anyone touching one of the posts itself would probably die. The device also made a pretty nasty crackling sound when the current was interrupted, loud

enough and strange enough to wake the dead. It was hardly foolproof-what could be under these conditions?-but it guaranteed that any attacker could not come in

without warning.

So far, there had been nothing. No signs, no attempts at contact. Hawks was fairly pleased; everyone, even Sabatini, had pitched in to help build the place.

Koll and Clayben coexisted peaceably, if uneasily. Hawks had the distinct feeling that while Koll was willing and able to go through with her end of the bargain, at least for the immediate future, Clayben clearly was scared to death,

and Nagy wasn't far behind him. The historian wished he knew or understood more

about the strange woman. China was ever-present evidence of what Clayben was capable of doing in the name of playing god, but Hawks still couldn't accept the

story of Koll's origins at face value. That was the problem. This was a mob bound together by mutual need and circumstance; it was no team.

Over in his own meager hut, Isaac Clayben sat, his potbelly overflowing his simple loincloth as he worked by the light of a primitive fiery torch on a portable lab bench that was incomprehensible to any of the others and powered by

small energy cells that seemed eternal. He was as cognizant as anyone of the incongruity of his activities under the circumstances, but he was determined. Indeed, his thoughts were not much different from those of Hawks.

"A rabble, Arnold, that's what we are. Primitive rabble at the mercy of an independent computer pilot. We will get nowhere this way."

Arnold Nagy sighed. "Doc, I think we ought to let things settle themselves here, at least for a while. Raven and Warlock are my sort of people—we understand each other and I can deal with them. Hawks is a kind of father figure to them, but he's no real leader type and he knows it. Other than them, only our China doll has real guts and brains, and she's pretty helpless and dependent. Let things sort themselves out."

"You forget the creature," Clayben reminded him. "You've seen the way it-looks at me. I haven't had a good night's sleep since we all came down here."

Nagy shrugged. "What can we do about it? You'd have to incinerate or electrocute it to a puddle. Shooting wouldn't work—you know that."

"If only I had access to my data base!"

Nagy sighed. "Doc, so you get the formula and you whip up a bath of the stabilizing shit. Ain't no way she's gonna jump into it and no way you can force it. Before you can deal with it, you gotta be in much better circumstances than here." It was curious how Nagy, the linguist and dialectician, dropped naturally into a very common nasal and slang-ridden vernacular. The listener tended to forget the mind behind that common working-class voice—which was, of course, exactly his intention.

"The trouble is, Arnold, we're going nowhere here. We're lapsing into a primitive, quasi-tribal existence with no cohesion and no drive. With the resources we have on the ships and the knowledge these people represent I could make this into the nucleus of a team that could conquer the universe—but I dare not. Move against them and whatever slight compact the creature feels toward the group will dissolve."

Sabatini had apparently been dozing on a cot, but now his eyes opened. "What did you say it would take to kill this whatever-it-is?"

"Incineration or massive electrocution."

"Would the fence have enough power?"

"Possibly—if it could be kept on long enough. You couldn't count on it, though."

Sabatini was silent for a moment. "These torches— they're oil fed, sort of, right?"

"Yes. It's synthesized in the transmuter from palm fronds. Why?"

"How much could we get? Suppose the old bird could be lured, maybe forced, into touching one of them posts and then, while she was bein' shocked, somebody poured this oil over her? Instant torch, right?"

Clayben stopped puttering and turned to stare at Sabatini. "You are becoming interesting. Go on."

"I think it can be arranged. She's been real protective of the girls, particularly the Chows and the Indians. The stream where we get the drinking water and the pit toilet are both real near the fence line, both in back, out of routine sight. I been itchin' to teach them Chow bitches a lesson in humility."

"Think you could?" Nagy asked, smirking a little. "Seems to me I heard tell the

Clayben? Naw, he's too damned smart to think something like this would work. Okay, sonny, it's time now. Time for you and me to have a real intimate get-together." And, with that, she advanced toward him. There was just something about it all that completely unnerved Sabatini. He reached frantically for the bucket and tripped over his own wires, falling to the ground.

Most of the others, attracted by the loud noises and commotion, had drawn up in a semicircle, watching. Too late to help Koll, they were unsure of what to do. Sabatini, still on his back on the ground, got hold of Koll's pistol and brought

it up. Seeing that, Warlock brought up her own pistol and took aim, but Clayben reached out and pushed it down. "No! She's not the one in trouble! Watch and learn!"

The black woman paused and looked over at Raven, who took the half cigar from his mouth and nodded.

Sabatini fired three times into Koll's body at point-blank range. The bullets tore into her, knocking her down and forcing her back, but even as the man was getting untangled and rising, so was Reba Roll. She stood there, three big holes

in her chest, and though there were signs of bleeding, no blood was flowing now.

She laughed at him. "You're mine now. You went and spoiled this old rag I had on."

Manka Warlock stared along with the others. "Those were good shots," she said in

wonder. "It is not possible! See the gaping exit wounds in her back!"

Reba Koll ripped off her skirt and tore off her gunbelt with tremendous strength, and then leaped at Sabatini. This time the man could not move out of the way; he was as stunned and totally confused as Manka Warlock and the rest of

them. Koll clung tightly to Sabatini, and the man's body suddenly stiffened. He opened his mouth in a cry of pain and surprise but nothing came out.

"Get away, Chow Dai! Get away now!" came a horrible, inhuman voice. The Chinese

girl, suddenly animated, got up and ran to the others.

The two stood there a moment, a frozen tableau, the small, frail-looking old woman clutching the chest of the big, muscular Sabatini-and then it began to happen.

"Sweet Jesus!" Nagy swore. "They're melting!" He'd been told about Koll-over

and over by Clayben-but until now there always remained some lingering doubt over whether Koll was anything more than she seemed or merely the subject of a Clayben dementia. There was no doubt now in any of their minds that Isaac Clayben, sane or not, had not been kidding.

Raven's cigar fell out of his mouth.

"Fortunately, it's very slow," Clayben remarked, his voice almost casual and clinical, as if discussing a sprained ankle. "That was the only reason we could

capture and contain it at all. It's been a long time since I saw this. I'm glad

it's no different. Gives me some odds."

His detachment was disturbing to most of them, but they could not take their eyes off the slow-motion drama now taking place before them.

The merged bodies had become a single seething mass of amorphous flesh; it writhed and wrinkled like some great monster, and slowly, very slowly, a form began building out of the center, as if something inside the mass was now rising to and then through the top. At first it was a head, humanoid but hardly human, a death's head with bloated, puffy flesh and no hair, eyes closed, lips and nostrils sealed. It was ugly and gruesome, but none could take his eyes off it even for a moment.

There was a neck now, then the torso started to emerge -a broad, muscular frame lacking in detail-then the waist, and finally thick, sturdy legs. Finally a complete figure stood in a thick pool of protoplasmic goo, but it was still not human, more like a thing of plastic or wax, an artificial man before the artisans had started to work. It was still being fed by the mass in which it was rooted like some strange tree, and it was still changing.

Subtly the skin texture and muscle tone changed, becoming flatter, harder, and more natural. The nipples, the fine detail of the male genitals, even, incredibly, a few minor scars on the torso were formed. Very slowly but steadily, so slowly that it couldn't really be tracked by the eye-the way the position of the hour hand on a clock keeps changing even though its movement cannot be followed-the rest of the detailing came in, including the hair, the lashes, and the rest. The figure was clearly recognizable now as Sabatini. Then, quite suddenly, an imperceptible new energy was added to the figure, and it was no longer a statue of Sabatini, but a real human figure. It gave a shudder, then breathed deeply. Its lips parted, and it flexed its arms and knees and turned on its hips.

The eyes opened, and he looked down at the mass of goo with distaste and stepped from it, strands of plasticlike flesh trailing, then breaking away. He squatted down and removed parts of it that still clung to his feet; behind him, the mass that remained seemed now devoid of purpose. It writhed a moment, then was still, all life and energy draining from it. It began to putrefy almost instantly. The new Sabatini got up and looked at them. "That's the trouble with this if you've got conscience," he said in Sabatini's rich baritone. Even the accent was perfect. "One must either destroy those who are innocent and deserve life or one must make immortal the scum of the race. Don't worry, Clayben-I'll never eat you unless you force me to it. This is bad enough-to become you would be desecration." He looked over at Hawks. "Now you see why I am essential to this thing. No matter what hell hole and no matter what monstrosity might have a ring, he is not safe from me. I can become his confidant, his lifelong friend, his lover. I can even become him."

And me as well, thought Hawks glumly, knowing the others shared the same thought. Never had he thought so furiously and so logically to cover himself. "Can you become five or more of us at once, friend?"

The creature that was now Sabatini frowned. "What? Of course not. As you can see, the rest is rotting flesh."

"Can you become a Val, then, or a robot? Can you become Star Eagle?"

"You know I cannot. Why are you pressing this way?"

"It will take five different people working in willing concert to use those rings, I warn you, and if any of the five objects, it will be the destruction of them all. Even you could not withstand Master System in full defensive array and

you know it. And you are only a bit less at risk than we. The Vals will be after you, as well. In a Val ship, in a machine environment, you will be as helpless as on Melchior and at the mercy of something far darker even than Clayben. Retain our partnership and you will share as I promised you would, but this is the last of our number that you will so consume."

"I intend to keep our bargain and my word, although I can see why you would fear. How would you know if I violated it?"

"We'd all know," Isaac Clayben said. "Because there wouldn't be any Sabatini any more, would there?"

"I, personally, and most of the others, as committed and full of hate as we are

for the system, would bring in the Vals if this compact is broken," Hawks warned. "Your- ability-is incredible, beyond anything I would have believed only

minutes ago. It is why you are here, included in this band."

"I'll behave," Sabatini said, sounding quite natural and Sabatini-like. "You trusted Koll, didn't you? She's still here-somewhere. I confess even I am unsure

how it works. The big problem I have is that I'm compelled to be a nearly exact

duplicate. Even if you subjected me to full examinations, I would be Sabatini and Sabatini alone. You do not possess the equipment, nor the know-how to create

it, to tell me apart. I have his urges, his temperment, and his habits. I simply

have more self-control than he did, and more of a conscience. By tomorrow I'll be Sabatini-a Sabatini who just changed sides, and knows more than he used to. I'm just not as stupid as he was." He yawned. "I think I'll get some sleep. It's

been a long time since I did this, and I'd forgotten how tiring it is."

He walked off, and they let him go.

Raven crept close to Hawks. "Is that really true, Chief?"

he whispered in Lakota. "About needing five willing ones?"

Hawks shrugged and replied in English. "Beats the hell out of me, Crow."

Raven grinned. "Maybe you are the best man for this job, after all."

It was quite late, but many were not asleep. Hawks sat by the fire, impassive as

always, his mind in some plane all his own, while behind him, in the center hut,

Cloud Dancer and Silent Woman prepared to aid China in the imminent delivery of

her child. It was neither tradition nor paternalism that found those two in there and he and the others away; nobody but the two women in attendance had ever done that sort of thing before.

Isaac Clayben came over and sat down next to Hawks. For a while the Hyiakutt did

not move nor in any way show that he was even aware of company, but suddenly he

asked, "Is Sabatini still sleeping?"

"Yes. It is fully capable of being on the go within minutes after it consumes, but if it can it sleeps for a long time, which helps it integrate all the new memories and information into its mind. You heard it this afternoon-Sabatini never talked like that. It is an incredible process at that, so much integrated into a single mind. I sometimes amaze myself with my handiwork."

"Did you create it-or order it created?"

"A bit of both. I did much of the theory, but others, more skilled than I, actually created it. The final single integrated program for it was the longest

I had ever known. At computer speeds it took more than three days just to load that thing."

"It seems inconceivable that human beings could have created such a thing."

"Human beings created Master System. Just five of them, in fact, wrote all the code and debugged it and established it. Of course, it probably took an army of

technicians to build even the initial primitive version and get it running right, but it was at its heart just five people. We don't know a lot about them

except that they were not even typical of the polyglot culture in which they worked. Only two were native to the nation that employed them, for example. A Chinese Buddhist from Singapore; a Jewish lady from Israel; a black Moslem man from someplace in Africa, I believe; a part-Japanese girl from Hawaii; and an old Jewish professor from someplace in eastern North America. Funny-we know their names, their origins, and, of all things, their religions, but little else."

"I know. Much of it was suppressed. I suppose it was Master System's own choice

to keep some details of them alive in the records. After all, they were, in a sense, its parents and creators. The Fellowship of the Rings, they called themselves. I understand it was from some popular work of the time. A joke. One

masking a serious purpose. They knew their creation could turn on us all, Doctor. You should have learned something from that."

"I thought I had it all figured out. All contained. We were extra careful. We simply did not foresee how good an organism we had created. It is less an organism than a colony. Memory, control, you name it, is distributed in a unique

and ever-changing pattern throughout the cells. You could blow Sabatini's brains

out and it would only slow it down. Sabatini's memories and personality would be

gone, but the rest-that's stored and accessed differently. Unfortunately, what allows it to survive also makes it eventually unstable. Cells die or wear, new ones replace them. We hardly notice, but it does. Its cells have to do so much more than ours that it can't replace them at our rate by normal means. You saw how it can do the job all at once."

"I saw. It was a person once? A real human?"

"Yes. Frankly, I don't even remember who. Someone from the penal area whom we took and cleaned with the mindprinter of all memory and all personality. A spiritual blank, as it were. It was the only merciful way to do it. After all, it--the mechanism--needed to know how we work, the quadrillions of intricate interrelationships we all possess. The original was a physical template, nothing

more. A dedicated army of those could be anyone anywhere, walk through any security except the highest machine-only accesses, be invulnerable to most threats. Sent out as information collectors, they could get all the bits and

pieces of knowledge we cannot and put it together. I had no knowledge of the rings. It seemed a fragile hope, but the only one, of breaking the system."

"Why, Doctor?"

"Huh? Why what?"

"Why bother breaking the system? You and it seem so well made for each other, and I cannot see you as wanting to be god. Too much detail work. You were as free as any human can be in your own little playground. Certainly not on moral grounds, nor out of revenge. Why break the system?"

"Forbidden Knowledge. We were always on the edge of discovery, of being wiped out or worse. I have no idea why Master System ever tolerated Melchior. Even there, we had so many dead ends, and we were not free to pursue any leads we might develop. Humanity was born to quest for knowledge, Hawks. It is the only activity that really matters. The system places great limits on that, and I do not believe in limits."

"That," Hawks said dryly, "is obvious."

"I could ask the same of you, you know. I think we are more alike than you want

to admit. The system wasn't exactly bad to you, either. You knew when you opened

and read that pouch, even before you had actually divined a single word, that it

would be dangerous, probably fatal. You just couldn't resist it. Forbidden Knowledge."

There was a sudden series of loud shrieks from behind them, then sudden silence,

then the cry of a newborn baby. Neither man turned to the source of the sound, but both heard and understood.

"Just another digit in the mass of humanity to you, Doctor," Hawks remarked.

"Another subject, another plaything, nothing more. Not a new soul damned to strangulation, its future one of chains. That is the difference between us. That

new one in there, who is getting such a rude awakening, is just as important, if

not more important, to me than you are. You will not understand that. You will quantify it or dismiss it, but that is because there is a part of you that is missing. That is your curse, Doctor—the ultimate irony. Even without Master System there is Forbidden Knowledge for you; Forbidden Knowledge you can never have because you can never comprehend it. The quest is not the end, it is the means."

"Spiritual claptrap. You are blinded by your romanticism and your mysticism, Hawks. You will never attain what you seek until you discard them."

"The Fellowship did so, and gave us Master System. You did so, and now you cower

in fear of your own creation. I do not wish to become Master System, Doctor. I do not wish a race of organic robots. That creature was your second creation, your second monster, Doctor—not your first. You are by far your most dangerous and aberrant creation."

Cloud Dancer emerged from the hut behind them and approached the two men sitting

by the fire. "It is a boy child," she told them. "Healthy, looking well. The mother is also doing quite well physically, although her mind seems addled. It is almost as if she is drugged. I do not believe she even remembers her name or

where she is, but she is suddenly all very soft and she smiles dreamily. She speaks gently and only of the act of giving birth. It is not the same woman."

Isaac Clayben sighed. "This one isn't really my fault, you know." He sounded almost defensive. "Had I known that we'd all be stuck together like this in

the immediate future I wouldn't have meddled at all, but this would have eventually come about anyway. I helped things along, I admit, but she is her father's creation."

Hawks looked over at the scientist. "What do you mean?"

"The old man's chief administrator for China, and brilliant in many ways, but he's handicapped as much or more than most of us by the culture in which he was

born and raised. He had the same sort of idea I did-to breed a superior race that might be able to run rings around Master System-but he was more conventional. He used his own daughter-his own daughter, mind you-for it. In fact, she wasn't conceived in the usual way at all, but in a laboratory, from modified egg and sperm. She was designed to be superior, but there are lots of superior individuals about these days. He wanted more than that, and he's a patient man. She was a prototype, too, of a possible large group of superior human beings-physically, mentally, you name it. Women who would breed his superior race. He wasn't dumb, either-he knew that if she were not superior it was all for nothing, but if she was she'd hardly be content breeding future generations, so he planned to have her reverted to a nontechnological level so she wouldn't know what she was missing and would accept her lot in a patriarchal

system. The marriage arranged for her was actually a sham-the fellow's a highly

born noble all right, but he's a total homosexual in a society that considers that grounds for death by torture. Being highly placed and well connected, he accepted the marriage and arrangement in much the same way others in his position have since time immemorial."

Hawks nodded. "I see. And since she would bear many children, he would have honor and manhood even though they would be from specially modified laboratory sperm and not his at all. Under orders from husband and family, she would accept, like it or not."

"Well, if she didn't, he had the way to make her fall into it. Once impregnated,

her entire brain and body chemistry changed permanently. Pregnancy is her natural condition; she is compelled to be so. Everyone-you, me, Cloud Dancer, Raven, you name it-have elements of both the male and female in us, biochemically speaking. All but China. During labor her body purged itself of all male-linked hormones and biochemical blockers. The only way to trigger aggression in her would be to threaten the child. She will react to maleness, even in the other women. She will be quite childlike, docile, eager to please, and without any control of her passions. She will quite literally do anything you want and beg to be ravished. Nothing else will matter-until she is pregnant

once again. That will restore the balance and trigger normalcy of a sort in her

system and she will be back in control, regaining her maleness, as it were. In fact, in the old man's original genetic map, she would remain as she now is, which was what he wanted. I restored the chemical balance, allowing her, once pregnant, to regain her control and will. That way the experiment goes on, but without wasting that brilliant mind."

"I think that is disgusting," Cloud Dancer remarked. "She is but a girl yet-seventeen, eighteen perhaps. You are saying she will be compelled, if she lives that long, to bear children for the next twenty-five or thirty years nonstop, all the time knowing and remembering."

"Worse than that. She's physically perfect, as well. She's going to remain youthful, healthy, and strong abnormally long, and free of most diseases that

might ravage others. Assuming we aren't all blown up or wiped out, she could be doing this for the next seventy or eighty years—a one-woman colonization program. The pilot understood this. I think she might, as well, although she's repressed it to keep sane. And we need her sane. Next to me, she probably understands these machine intelligences better than anyone alive. Unfortunately, what looked simple to handle on Melchior now complicates us beyond belief. The longer she remains in this submissive and animalistic state, the harder it will be for her to deal with it when she is not. Her sanity depends on perpetual pregnancy, and that means we will soon be knee-deep in children, all of whom will require care and attention and possibly something approaching a staff. We can't spare that staff—and we can't spare her."

"You seem to know a lot about her situation," Hawks noted suspiciously.

"Well, of course, we had to read it all out to modify it or we would have lost that mind and will for good. We were aided because the old man quite naturally used Melchior's resources in establishing his genetic criteria. I had no real part in it, but Melchior did it. We had the records."

"So all the great minds of the world have spent their time devising monsters," Hawks commented, "and they are all with us. Anything you want to tell me about yourself or any of the others here? At one time or another we were all common to Melchior."

Clayben gave an odd half smile. "Nothing, really. Those of you who were prisoners rather than employees or staff were either too important or not important enough, I'm afraid. We were going to use your wives and the Chows as nursery matrons for the early products of the experiment, of course, and we did some minor mental conditioning to that effect, but nothing serious and nothing that might be an impairment. Nothing else that I know of."

Hawks slapped his knee impatiently. "Damn it! We cannot just sit here and rot! The time to move is now, before things get too domesticated." He sighed. "Yet we must wait for Star Eagle. I wish I knew just what he was planning that is taking so long."

The crying stopped behind them, and there was a sudden stillness that seemed louder than the noises. Hawks looked at Cloud Dancer. "For now it's Raven, Nagy, and I. We will draw lots when she is physically up to it. I do not like it, but these are exceptional circumstances."

She nodded. "I understand. I do not think it would be moral or proper for him to be included." She referred to Clayben, who said nothing.

"What about Sabatini, Doctor?" Hawks added, suddenly struck by the implications.

"What would be the result of such a thing?"

"I'm not certain. There wouldn't be sufficient information in a single sperm cell to do anything terrible. It won't breed, if that's what you're thinking about. It's probable that the union would be rejected, the product spontaneously aborted, but I don't really know. I'd rather not have to deal with that one if we can avoid it."

"Then it is up to us to make certain that is avoided. At any cost."

"Star Eagle to Pirate's Den."

"Go ahead," Hawks responded. "We thought we had been forgotten and abandoned."
"Do you know what it is like to do massive maintenance without a proper shipyard? It was like performing surgery on yourself. Thunder is still not completed, but Lightning, I believe, is ready and well prepared. I wish to know

the condition of all below."

Hawks gave the computer pilot all the news in fairly explicit terms, particularly about China and Reba Koll.

"China is now all right?"

"Yes. She's coming out of her physiological stage and will be back to normal in

another week or two at most, but I don't think it would be wise to part her from

the child for any length of time as yet. Still, we're hot, tired, and very bored

down here. The whole thing is very limited."

"I understand. I have not been idle myself, since my alterations are internal and are not affected by my movement. I have used the time to check out the situation. There is a world called Halinachi one jump and no more than six days

from here that is a freebooter stronghold and base. I have no data except monitored transmissions on it, but it appears to be one of the officially tolerated outposts. There are at least two Vals in the vicinity and there is some indication that they go down to the settlement there."

That was a surprise. "I thought the freebooters were more tolerated than actually part of the system."

"They exist only because they are occasionally useful to Master System and otherwise do not get in its way. However, most freebooters hate the system as much as we- they just have no choice, as we did not. I had hoped that Koll would

have contacts there."

Hawks thought a moment. "Nagy, too, maybe. Let's see." He summoned both the security chief and the one now called Sabatini. "Halinachi. Either of you know it?"

"Both of us, I expect," Nagy replied. He was getting a fairly good dark beard, and the sun had turned him almost as brown as Hawks was naturally. "I've been there. It's one of a half-dozen contact worlds used by both sides when they want

something from the other."

"I can see much that they might wish from Master System, but what could they offer it?"

Sabatini spat. "Eyes and ears. Human bodies who can walk the other side where the best machines can't get. The freebooters control the illicit trade between the colonial worlds-the stuff Master System won't let get traded the usual ways.

It'd take Master System too much time and effort to really stamp it out, so it just tries to limit it to things that won't really upset the apple cart.

Because

of this, though, they're able to have the confidence of some of the top administrators in the colonies. They hear things, and they listen. When they hear a bit of news that would interest Master System, they trade the secrets for

something they want or need. You of all people should know that the system can be beat, to a point. To fill in the gaps, as it were, the machine uses the freebooters. It's simple."

"They sound like rather interesting excuses for human beings. The questions are

simple, then. Would they turn any of us in to Master System for that sort of reward?"

"Probably," Nagy responded. "At least we'd be in the file of people to sell out when the time was right."

"Then how can you deal with them?"

Nagy sighed. "Look, you got to see it their way, too. They ain't living in the lap of luxury, you know. No cradle-to-grave care for them, no instant spare parts, nothing. They're high-tech barbarians, and they're not even all human by

our lights. Lots of 'em are colonials. They don't live, most of 'em. They survive. Survive in a thousand little pockets scattered to hell and gone, like this one we got here. They like to think they're outside the system- hell, I think they all believe they're outside the system- but they're really a part of

it. They'd sell their own mother because they're part of it. They really believe

the system can't be broken but only bent, just like all of us bent it. They're true believers, just like we were."

Hawks thought it over. "Suppose they thought there was a chance to break the system? What would they do?"

"Try to break it, most likely," Sabatini replied. "Only not as a team, more like

a mob. The ones who believed it would be shooting each other to get to the rings. The ones who didn't would turn the ones who did in to Master System."

"Can any of them be bought? Or rented?"

Sabatini chuckled. "We got nothing to buy them with, and even less to rent that

the other side couldn't outbid."

Nagy scratched his chin in thought. "Hold it. Maybe we're going at this wrong. The one thing they're scared of is strength. That's why Master System is the big

cheese even when they kid themselves that it's not. They have their masters and

their warlords. Not all of 'em, sure, but a fair number. This Halinachi-it's more a big town than a world. Most of the world's not very habitable. Last time

I was there it was run by a fellow name of Fernando Sava-phoong. Get him interested in the rings and you got a real power there with a lot of resources."

"Yeah, sure-and then he knocks us all off and goes after the rings himself," Sabatini pointed out. "You can't make a deal that'll stick with his kind-except

the kind that has him sticking something in your gut or back. Nope. If we need warm bodies the best thing to do is prowl and take some of the freebooters by force, and then run 'em through the mindprinter and whatever else we got to make

'em ours."

First Warlock, then Raven, had noticed and approached the conversation, and both

had been listening quietly.

"Suppose we eliminated this leader. Who would rule?" Warlock asked them.

"The next in line, mostly likely," Sabatini replied. "Not the one who knocked him off, that's for sure. If you could knock him off, and nobody's invulnerable,

he's got a setup so the killer at least would go, too."

"And if the next chieftain was eliminated, and the next?"

"Eventually they'd have your number, and somebody would be smart enough to spare no expense and effort to track us down and pay us back for the sake of sheer insurance. If you were good enough or powerful enough to prevent that, which I doubt, then you'd make the next in line scared enough to call in the Vals and all the resources of Master System."

"They would not make a deal to avoid this?"

"Doubtful," Nagy put in. "Or, if they did, then you'd have to expose yourself to them. They take the deal and then they wipe you out, deal or no deal. We start

messin' with the freebooters in more than a casual way, and we got to decide just how many bodies we want piled up."

"Ours or theirs?" Raven asked casually.

Hawks settled back and thought for a moment. This is what it is like to be chief, he told himself. How many bodies...? For that matter, whose bodies? It was a good question, one he'd never really thought about until now. Could he order a massacre if he had to? Could he be as ruthless and heartless as the enemy in order to break him?

"What if this man believed that Master System had turned against him? Or could he be turned against him?" he asked them. "What if he could be convinced that his petty little empire could not be held?"

They all looked at him. "You got something, Chief?" Raven asked.

"We need information," he told them. "We need to know the organization, the structure there, everything. Lightning is ready and available. Could we get in and get this sort of information without drawing the dogs of the Master?"

"Maybe," Nagy replied. "Not you, though, or anybody else with them tattoos on their cheeks. Ain't nobody else with those particular designs roaming around, so

there's no way to hide who you are and where you came from. I haven't been there

in quite a while, and not too many people would recognize me on sight.

Sabatini,

here, is perfect

-no marks and a total unknown there who still knows his way around thanks to his, uh, past lives, and I'm pretty sure we can do a halfway decent disguise on

Raven and Warlock here, which would also gain us two more people with some deep-space experience. More would be obvious."

Sabatini smiled grimly. "I could-become-this Fernando Savaphoong. That would vastly simplify matters."

"Perhaps. For a while," Hawks replied, "but only for a while. What happens when

we need you to become someone else? What happens if your underlings cannot see the profit and will not go along? No, we'll keep that in reserve, but not immediately." He sighed. "I wish I could go along!"

"Get used to it, Chief," Raven said, anticipating some action at last with obvious excitement. "You should know

-chiefs don't lead their men into battle, they stand on the high ground and direct it. You just watch it while we're gone. I still don't trust Clayben farther than I can throw him and I can't even pick him up."

The Hyiakutt historian suddenly started and snapped his fingers. "Of course!" he

muttered to himself. "Of course!"

"You got something, Chief?" Raven asked him.

"This whole business has been percolating through my mind for weeks now. There's

fully in charge. The sense of diminution, of suddenly being weak and small after having been powerful and great, was overwhelming. He took off the helmet, handed it to Nagy, and went back to his old seat, where he idly lit a half cigar. The air filtration system suddenly switched to maximum.

"You know, that's a hell of a thing," he commented, mostly to himself. "Now I think I understand why our China girl wants desperately to be a spaceship." Halinachi was not much of a world, but it was one of those very few places not fully under the tyranny of the machine. But that didn't make it any less dangerous, since this was one of the points where Master System and the few who lived outside the system met as neutrals, almost as equals. Almost-for those who lived here and ran the place understood that the only reason Master System tolerated this world was that it was useful to the System, and the only reason it hadn't done a mass extermination of the freebooters themselves was that they were little threat and sometimes a help.

"In effect, to live outside the system you must kiss its ass," Warlock noted dryly. "These are not free people. They are merely masochists."

Nagy chuckled. "Well, you have something of a point there, but freedom isn't what's real, it's a state of mind. Earth's ignorant, primitive masses mostly believe they're free and independent, and wouldn't know a computer or a skimmer or a round Earth from the Circles of Hell."

"But they are kept in ignorance," Raven pointed out. "These people know."

"Never overestimate the human mind," Nagy responded. "Even without the aid of mindprinters and hypnoscanners and all the rest, people can convince themselves of most anything, if they really want to."

The screens showed a small, rocky, barren world, the antithesis of the one from which they'd come. Weather here was rare, and a small but strong sun, more orange than the ones they had known, beat upon it. Halinachi was a colorful place with buttes and bizarre, twisted landforms in oranges, purples, and tans, but there was not much green.

"It has an atmosphere, one that blocks out most of the really nasty stuff the sun sends out, but not much water," Arnold Nagy told them. "You couldn't breathe the stuff- more nitrogen than we're used to, and not enough oxygen to really do the job. Still, there's nothing down there that'll really hurt you, either, so you can pretty well get along with just an air supply and nosepiece or mask. If you ever really added the right stuff to the air and got a lot of water you could probably grow stuff here and maybe make it livable, but nobody's really inclined to do it. You'd need Master System's logistics, and it isn't about to help."

"People actually live on that hole?" Raven asked, somewhat appalled. "It looks as lifeless as the Moon."

"It is. Only one settlement-that's Savaphoong's. We'll be coming up on it shortly, and I expect to be hailed by their controllers."

That expectation was fulfilled almost immediately, and Nagy tended to it after putting up a view of the settlement on the big screen. It looked to be two

yellow. She was hairless, and her fingers and toes resembled talons. Next to her was a short, squat little man whose dark-gray complexion and blocky build made him look as if he were made of stone. The last was an elderly-looking Oriental man with thick white hair and a long, drooping white mustache, his skin dark and mottled. All wore sidearms.

"You are Captain Hoxa?" the man with the steel arms said in a low, gravelly voice that fit his appearance perfectly.

"I am," Nagy replied smoothly. "I remember you from the last time I was here. Beklar, isn't it?"

The squad leader nodded approvingly. Anyone who knew him had to be an old hand, though clearly he didn't remember Nagy. "Yes. I understand you have information for credits?"

"I do. Take me to the terminal and I'll punch it in."

"Why not just give it to me?"

Nagy grinned. "Are you robbing people at gunpoint now, or do you just take me for a fool?"

The big man shrugged and they went over to an entry terminal. Nagy acted right at home, Raven noted. He wondered how many times the security chief had been there before, and why.

Nagy punched in the formulas Clayben had furnished, which took a surprisingly short length of time, then waited. The information was not reflected on the screen, but suddenly a number appeared there. Nagy slammed his fist against the wall next to the terminal and turned to the security crew. "Forty thousand! I save this joint a fortune and it's just forty thousand? Next time I'll take my stuff to the competition!"

A small speaker within the terminal came to life, and a man's voice said, "Very well, Captain. Four days unlimited credit for you and your crew. If you don't abuse it, I will deposit forty thousand credits for a return visit when you leave. Will that be satisfactory?"

Nagy nodded. "That's more like it." He walked back to the group and looked at the security party. "Okay to enter now?"

"Yeah, go ahead," growled the man with the metal arms. "You sure got some clout here. Check your weapons and personal possessions in the next room, then go through entry."

"You make the Val check its weapons?"

"A comedian, huh? Why? You got some problems with them?"

"Depends on who it's looking for and why, same as most people out here. You want to give me a clue?"

"They been around, in and out, for a couple of weeks or more. Word is somebody broke out of Melchior and stole one of them big universe ships. We don't like 'em snoopin' around-bad for business-but what can we do? They're lookin' for people with the Melchior brand, so you're safe."

"From the Val, anyway. All right, lead on."

"We got to check everything?" Raven whispered to Nagy when he could.

"Everything. Even clothes. Savaphoong didn't get this far by letting anything slip by him. When you're in his world, you're under his absolute control." Stripped completely, they were run through a decontamination chamber, then issued utilitarian clothing that was cheaply made, didn't fit well, and was clearly reused. All the time they were under the watchful eye of security

cameras and personnel.

A man and woman, both of whom looked Earth-human, met them on the other side. The man was tall, perhaps a hundred eighty-five centimeters, and very heavily muscled, with near-perfect features, long blond hair, a dark complexion, and even a hairy chest, and the way he was dressed left no doubt as to his most outstanding attribute. The woman had the same coloring, but she was short-no more than a hundred sixty centimeters-and extremely curvaceous, with a huge heaving bosom. Their eyes and expressions gave the impression that they both probably had the brains and imagination of a head of lettuce, but that was as deliberate as the rest of them. The only thing marring their perfection was the

small triangular tattoo in the center of each of their foreheads; the marks looked like the same sort of job done on Melchior inmates, but less obtrusive. Raven now had a suspicion of just what business Savaphoong had had with Melchior

through the years; these were perfect examples of Clayben's transmuter and mind-printer handiwork.

The old boy was really gonna miss Melchior, he thought. Suddenly the whole thing

was clear to him: Clay-ben supplied the freebooters with nice, perfect, docile slaves and loyal security troops, and in exchange probably got quantities of murylium totally outside what he could scrape up from Melchior's remains and whatever tiny amounts he might con out of Master System. This explained why freebooters had visited the old hell hole at intervals, and why Nagy had spent time going back and forth. Clayben and the freebooters were far more interrelated than he had let on.

"I am Amal," the beautiful man said, "and this is Gem. We are at your service while you are with us. Anything you wish, just ask."

"We've been out a long time and we just want to relax for a while," Nagy told them. "We'll go to the lounge now, but we may require you later."

"All you need do is ask any staff member to call Amal or Gem and we will be there," the man assured them. "Allow us to escort you to the lounge."

"Am I correct in assuming they mean that all the way?" Warlock asked in a low tone as they walked.

Nagy nodded. "Sure. Either or both will do anything you ask, and with a smile. If they aren't enough, they can produce whatever you want-particularly if you've

got four days* unlimited credit. It's not limited to them, either. Anybody with

the triangle who turns you on will be your instant willing slave. They come in all sizes, colors, races, you name it-about half Earth-human and half colonial.

You get some murylium miners out there, maybe alone, for months or more at a time and they want everything when they get in. They're all sterile and checked

medically every day, so there's no risks, either."

Raven had expected a seedy outworld bar, but the lounge was a cozy, intimate place of semiprivate booths with a small stage area. The seats seemed to be some

kind of soft brown fur, a bit worn, and the tables were of a marblelike rock. There were others in the lounge, which surprised the first-timers a bit. The only ship other than the Vals' and the Lightning in the dock hadn't seemed very large.

"There aren't many here at any one time," Nagy told them, "but there are more than can be accommodated in the spaceport. Some of the ships are in orbit, their

people brought down by shuttle ferry or transmuter, and some have been dropped off here to be picked up later. The place is relatively quiet, though-I'd guess

no more than thirty or forty guests are here right now, when there should be a hundred. My guess is the Val scared a lot of 'em off."

An enormous black man appeared, all muscles, wearing little but dark bikini briefs and the telltale triangle on his forehead. Raven looked at Warlock and was amused to see some of that total cool crumble at the sight.

"I am Batu," the waiter said in a rich, deep baritone. "How may I serve you?"

"I'll have a liter of draft," Nagy replied. "Sabatini?"

"Double whiskey and soda, no ice. The good stuff, not the rotgut."

The waiter appeared to take no offense.

"I'll have a beer, as well," Raven said. "And-you wouldn't have cigars, would you?"

"Yes, sir. Any kind of type you wish."

"The large Havana style."

"As you wish, sir. And the lady?"

"Rum tonic," Warlock responded.

The waiter bowed and left. "You really oughtta knock off those things," Nagy told him. "They'll kill you sooner or later."

"If I live long enough for them to kill me I will be content."

Nagy just shrugged. "So, what do you think of the place so far?"

"Interesting," Raven replied. "After all that time in the wild under primitive conditions, I could get to like a place like this. I can sure see how somebody'd

like to run one, too. I'm just a little surprised Master System knows of these places and permits them."

"As I said, mutual interest. I always feel like a target here, though; if Master

System ever changed its mind, it's all over. I think if I'm gonna be a freebooter it's gonna be in a ship, out there, with better odds and the universe

to get lost in."

The waiter brought their drinks and a small package of full-size cigars for Raven, who eyed them as if they were the food of the gods. He had almost forgotten that cigars came that big and that unspoiled.

Warlock looked around. "This place is cozy and comfortable enough, but it is not

good for socializing," she noted. "One does not get information in a booth serviced by slaves."

"True enough," Nagy agreed. "But there are ways, and there will be time for all

that. Just relax and enjoy for now. In a little while I may try and go back and

see the old man himself. He knows me well, and I'll get a straight picture without worrying about a knife in my back."

"Savaphoong?"

He nodded. "I-" He broke off as he saw the others tense; he looked around and saw the Val standing there. It was an imposing figure even in this incongruous environment, and its metallic solidity and blazing crimson eyes seemed to bore right through them.

"Pardon," the Val said. "I realize that my presence here causes problems, and I

only wish to assure you that I have no instructions concerning this place or anyone who visits it."

Interestingly, it was Sabatini who answered. "You know you have no place here. Why are you around?"

"I am not after freebooters. I am soliciting their help. You have heard of the prison colony of Melchior in the Earth system?"

Sabatini nodded. "So?"

"There was an escape. Ships were hijacked, including an interstellar transport.

The escapees for the most part have the identifying Melchior facial tattoos. They possess certain knowledge that no one is permitted to possess. Mere contact

with these people could prove fatal. They are using a ship that is the largest of its kind ever built, so you could hardly miss it. Have you seen these people?"

"Not anywhere around here," Sabatini responded coolly. "They're not likely to show up at a place like this anyway, are they?"

"Not they themselves perhaps, but they had inside help. We are not quite certain

who, but we are working on it. If you see them, or if you run across anyone working for them, it will be more than worth your while to notify us immediately. This place is but a pale shade of the rewards possible to the one or ones who lead to their apprehension. Such ones would live like gods."

Sabatini whistled. "You must really want them. Believe me, if I see them, I'll be the first to collect."

"Very well. I will be leaving this place this evening. Enjoy your stay."

And, with that, the great creature was gone, out of their sight and out of the lounge. They started to say something, but Nagy put his palm up and then reached

under the table, prying off a tiny smooth plate only a hair's thickness and about the size of a fingertip. The Val had left a bug.

"I don't like those bastards one bit," Nagy said casually. "Come on, this place

has lost its luster now. Let's hunt up Amal and Gem and try a few more private pleasures."

They all mumbled agreement and got up to leave, letting Nagy carefully replace the bug on the underside of the table. It took only a minute or two to summon their "procurers," as they were called.

"Show us our quarters," Nagy commanded. The others followed, still silent.

They were shown to a suite with a round central living area furnished with couches and a built-in bar and entertainment center, and four private sleeping rooms.

"Amal, I would like to see the manager on a matter of urgent personal business,"

Nagy told the big blond man.

Amal was somewhat taken aback by that, which was not in the usual line of requests. "I will see if that is possible, sir."

"Tell him it concerns the Val and our treatment here. I think he'll see me."

"Yes, sir. I will try." The man left to do his duty.

Nagy brought the others close to him. "Say nothing you don't want overheard until I get back," he whispered. "We don't know how far this has gone."

They understood. They had heard the Val's voice, which was almost always the voice of the person to whom it was targeted. The voice had been that of Hawks. Fernando Savaphoong was a small, thin, Asian-looking man of about fifty, with a

thin black mustache and neatly cropped black hair graying on the sides. He had a

pleasant voice and a salesman's manner, and only his eyes and his nearly constant chain-smoking of cigarettes betrayed the constant pressure his life style and his responsibilities brought him.

"So, Senor Nagy, I am surprised you would come here at this date."

The security man relaxed and sat in a chair opposite the ruler of Halinachi. "I'm not used to Vals showing up in the lounge," he replied. "But I'm particularly not used to Vals planting bugs under my table. How many other bugs has he got around here, and how the hell will I know when I can speak freely again to my companions?"

Savaphoong frowned. "This I do not like to hear at all. It knows you, then." "I doubt it, or it would have acted more forcefully. More likely it did a scan of the four of us as it discussed the bait, measuring our blood pressure, heart rates, and other reactions when it brought up certain subjects, and became suspicious. I think the least I can demand is for your people to sweep the area-the lounge, all the places it's been, and my quarters, to find and destroy any nasty little devices it might have left."

"I will tend to it at once. I cannot afford to have such things here." Nagy nodded. "Good. And in light of this, I think it's time we had a talk about other matters."

Savaphoong sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette. "I gather, then, that reports of the good doctor's death were overrated. I suspected as much from the start, knowing how cautious and clever he was. But he did not engineer this break, surely. You?"

"Uh uh. Strictly independent. We just signed on for the duration because we had little choice."

"You realize, then, that I could name my own price just for calling back the Val and confirming its suspicions?"

"You could-but you won't. You know as well as I do that any reward from Master System could be very shortlived in these days and times. Still I could guarantee your silence-or the destruction of Halinachi-just by telling you what it's all about."

"Si. When I first hear of this I tell myself, all right, someone escaped. So what? Then I hear they steal this very big ship. Again, so what? They get away. They become freebooters, or they get caught, or they are never heard from again. Why does Master System suddenly want them worse than anything? Then I hear Master System invades Melchior only to find Clayben dead, along with most of the others who count, and all the data banks destroyed. Now I am suspicious. Now I wonder what would be so much of a threat to Master System that it would be worth Clayben's while to do something like this. It is a simple matter for one of Clayben's talents and resources to fake one's own death convincingly enough even for Master System, but why? It must be something so valuable, so dangerous, that it is worth any price. Now my greedy side gets interested, and now you show up only months later. You see?"

"The real question is-do you want to know?"

"No. The real question is-can I afford not to know? If that Val was merely suspicious, that is one thing, but if it recognized any of you from its data files, if it has tied you in with all this-well, then, my friend, I am a

sitting

duck, am I not?"

Nagy thought a moment. "How many Vals are in this sector?"

"Two. But one shell through each of the main domes would be enough to destroy all this."

"Uh uh. They don't have what they really want here and they know it. That Val wasn't going to take us because it would mean breaking the compact with you, and

for that it'll need the highest authority. Tell me straight, Senor Sa-vaphoong-if it gets it, what will you do? If it breaks the compact, do you have the firepower to stop it-and the will, knowing what it would mean?"

Savaphoong sighed. "Senor Nagy, your brazen appearance here with a Val in port has caused this, but it is a fair question. If I allow it, then I am out of business anyway, am I not? What freebooter would come here after that? Whom do I

serve? Vals? They are not interested in what I could provide, and, besides, they

are lousy tippers. For the sake of any future or refuge I might have, I would be

forced to oppose them, no matter what the cost."

Arnold Nagy sighed. "Very well then. If that day should ever come, I can give you refuge. We will need people and we will need experience. If you keep faith with me, then if your back is to the wall we'll get you out and cut you in. Fair?"

"As fair as life gets. Tell me true-do you really have a starship that is fourteen kilometers long?"

"Yes. We call her the Thunder."

The boss of Halinachi sighed. "What interesting possibilities that opens up. It

has been getting so boring here." He paused. "But, no. One does not trade all this so easily. Is there anything else I can do for you right now?"

"I need some information on three colonial worlds. This won't get you in any trouble-without knowing the objectives it would be impossible to guess. Even knowing the objectives, although it would be dangerous, wouldn't give you anything you could use yourself."

"Which three?"

"Janipur, Chanchuk, and Matriyeh."

Savaphoong gave a low whistle. "Not the most comfortable of places, any one."

"I didn't expect they would be. I need the works on them-people, political organization, leaders, Centers and administrators, you name it. The odds are I'm

looking for the chief administrator of each world."

"Umph! You really make it difficult on yourself. And the purpose, in general terms?"

"Grand theft."

Savaphoong laughed. "For such a grand and noble purpose, how can I refuse? Very

well, you shall have what you require-if I can be assured that our mutual benefactor will continue to supply me with things that I require."

"As much as possible under the circumstances. Might I assume that you have an interstellar-capable ship available in times of need?"

"You may so assume."

"Then we should work out a mutual meeting place and a method of signaling. I suspect that if we get away clean this time it is very unlikely that we can return to your fine establishment."

Fernando Savaphoong thought for a moment. "The Val prepares to leave within the

hour. It will take it two days to reach a subspace relay beacon and report to Master System, and perhaps another day to get the authority one way or another.

Of course, it will probably contact its companion ahead of time and establish a

surreptitious watch. If you leave before the authority comes, then I am probably

in the clear so long as I make no moves showing I know what this is about. There

is then no logic in breaking the compact. The one who lurks, though, in the shadows of the planets-it will lock on and attempt to follow, and it has incredible equipment and tenacity. You will probably have to take it out, you know, if you can."

"I'm well aware of that. In the meantime, I'll let you get on with your-delousing-operation here and accumulating the data I need, while I and my companions spend a night or two enjoying your services." He had a sudden thought. "And I might suggest an additional item of mutual interest to research."

"Indeed?"

"Master System requires fairly large supplies of murylium to manage and maintain

its empire. Those mines are almost surely totally automated and nearly impossible to locate, but the shipments surely are not. You need the stuff and so do we."

"Even if I could discover such a thing, what good would it do, my friend?"

"We are interstellar outlaws hunted by all and with absolutely nothing to lose,

but we have resources. You give me the routings, and I'll give you part of the loot."

Even Savaphoong looked aghast. "Hijacking a freighter of Master System? You must

be joking! It is not possible!"

"You tell me where, and I'll show you a thing or two about real piracy."

And that made Savaphoong laugh again, long and hard. "You know," he managed after a moment, "I almost believe you can do this. At least I think you are either mad or the most dangerous group of human beings alive!" He shrugged.

"Either way, what do I have to lose but everything?"

"You know, if I could feel guilt, I'd be feelin' real guilty about havin' a good

time here while the chief and the rest are stuck back in that primitive hell hole," Raven noted casually while washing down a fine steak and eggs with fresh

coffee. "I really do hate to leave this place."

"Well, leaving is going to be the trick that makes us pay the devil's due," Arnold Nagy replied. "We have our information and our contacts now, but we also

have a real problem. Sabatini, any of your incarnations ever take on a Val ship before?"

The strange creature grinned. "Sure. Two at least. Both lost, of course."

Nagy glared at him and Raven almost choked on a piece of toast.

"All right, then," said the Hungarian who had become the de facto head of the expedition. "It's something new. I have some of the information we need-enough to get us started. Anybody else have any luck?"

"I met a man who had been to Janipur," Warlock said. "He said it was inhabited by a human herd of angry cows, whatever that means. Said we would have to see it

to believe it. Still, some things do not change in the universe of Master System. He has seen the chief administrator, who is known for the fancy ring he

wears. It is called the Ring of Peace because it bears the likeness of two doves

in gold. He also said that the chief administrator is very smart but very brutal. He enjoys strangling people. It is his hobby."

"Humph! Yeah, well, who ever said these would be pushovers? Anybody else?"

"There was a fellow-a colonial, not at all pleasant to look on-who knew of Matriyeh," Sabatini said. "This fellow was raised Moslem, and he said that Matriyeh surpassed any vision of hell he had ever dreamed. No matter how inhuman

he was, he had enough perspective so that I believe he would have said the same

thing even if he'd been one of our kind. Certain minerals on Matriyeh are said to grow to enormous proportions, and this fellow was an artist who hoped to trade some technology for some of them to use in his art. The world is supposedly very primitive. He found it impossibly primitive, not at all organized. No Centers, no administrators that he could see at all, and no major

rulers above the tribal level. It sounded much like what Master System is said to be considering doing to Earth. He could not imagine a person of power there."

Nagy shook his head. "That one's worse. Bad boys I think we can deal with. I don't care if they've got two heads and five arms and breathe methane, they're still of human stock and Master System's origins, and we know their type. Even Master System is obedient, though. The ring has to be held by a person with power, authority- something that makes him or her stand out. Damn it, that's gonna be a tough one."

"The guy barely escaped with his life, let alone his ship. The world is one very

nasty place even without the people," Sabatini added. "That one might be suited

for my special talents, but even I can't work from nothing, and if a primitive,

ignorant mind knows nothing of value it can't help me."

"Well, we'll see. Raven, you get anything at all?"

"You bet. Two cases of fine Havanas and some very nice little pills. One of 'em's called Orgy and you oughtta see what it does. As for information, though-forget it. Except a couple of girls in the lounge knew of a certain world

of heat and water by reputation, and they said it was a full-fledged colony. I didn't like that at all."

Nagy nodded. "I don't like that much myself, but in all that time nobody ever showed up and tossed a spear or shook our hand. You got to figure they're water

breathers. No skin off our nose or theirs if that's the case."

"I dunno. Somebody planted them groves on that other island. I kinda wonder if we'd been able to get over there if they wouldn't'a popped up and been a little

nasty about it. Water breathers don't grow food on land. They didn't know much,

though-them girls, I mean. Only that it was listed as a colonial settlement, and

off limits in general."

"I think we better get all the stuff together we can and get back-if we can," Nagy told them. "Raven, unless something happens, I'm afraid you and Warlock

are

gonna be strictly passengers in this flight. Sabatini, since you've had more experience, so to speak, flying these buckets, I'm gonna let you fly and take the guns myself. It flies like any other good ship, but I know the armament inside and out. If there is a Val up there, waiting for us, it's gonna be one tough nut to crack, but it won't know the power or armaments of that ship.

It's

a custom illegal job. Get it all together—we might as well roll."

Getting out of Halinachi was not quite as complicated as getting in. They turned

in their clothing but not their personal prizes, such as Raven's cigars, and they also received a small encoded master cylinder from Savaphoong. The lord of

Halinachi did not see them off—Nagy guessed in any event that midmorning was far too early for the manager of the place to be up and about— but there was a small note attached to the cylinder, which Nagy read.

"What's the love letter?" Raven asked, curious.

"It's a bill. Somehow he managed to charge the full forty thousand future credits and anything left from this visit. Never mind. Short of using a transmuter and becoming someone completely different, there's little chance we'll be able to come back here again anyway."

They went to the ship, which appeared secure, all seals intact. Nagy spent some

time doing a complete check. "Yeah, as I figured. A bunch of nice bugs and tracking devices all over the damned hull. We'd be another day getting those suckers off ourselves and we don't have that. The best thing I can do is try to

burn 'em off. Channel the transmuter power from the main engines to the outer hull. They're designed to withstand the external forces of lift-off and reentry,

but they're not well shielded where they attach to the hull itself. Get in pressure suits and dial your climate control to maximum. This is gonna be nasty.

I got to be real careful with this. I don't want to bum any holes in the hull."

When they were ready, he began. The outer hull began to glow red hot, and Nagy had to be very careful not to let any point get too much hotter than the rest or

turn white. Shimmering blue electricity played over the ship, inside and out, and after more than fifteen minutes the sounds of very loud banging and terrible

random noises came through to them, as if they were in a meteor storm with no deflectors.

The noises subsided after a while, and the inside fans came on.

"I think I got 'em all, but at what price I couldn't say," Nagy informed them.

"I think it's best we all keep our suits on, the inside pressure down, and ourselves strapped in until we know. Best we do that during the flight, anyway,

just in case a shot penetrates the main cabin."

"Great," Raven grumped. "No cigars. I might go to my grave staring at two cases

of unopened Havanas."

"I think we've cooled down uniformly now, and I've got clearance, so strap in and check systems. Sabatini, take her up."

The ship shuddered, then roared into life and rose slowly above the landing pad.

Only when they were several kilometers in the air did Sabatini angle the nose

up, apply full thrust and roll, and take her to escape velocity.
It was a noisy, bumpy ride out, but it was fast. They cleared the atmosphere
in
just a few minutes and went into preliminary orbit. Sabatini did a wide scan.
"Anything?" Nagy asked.
"Nothing yet, but it could be in near-total power down. The question is more
if
he has better scanning range than we do. I seem to remember that you were
clearly visible in the Thunder's sights at your maximum fallback position."
"They were as good as they needed to be. If we don't catch sight of him, we'll
try to lead him out. Set a course on chart A-J-8-7-7-2. That's at a right
angle
to where we want to go, but it'll give us some running room. Keep all sensors
at
maximum and we'll see if we can pick him up."
They were suddenly pressed back in their seats as Sabatini gave maximum thrust
from orbital speed. It was a surprise, almost random, move that would have
thrown a human pursuer, but the Val was not human and would not waste precious
seconds wondering what to do. It might, however, have to quickly adjust and
betray itself-or risk losing its prey at the start.
"Give me a punch as soon as you have the factors lined up," Nagy instructed.
"Duration thirty minutes-the minimum possible on the chart's vector. We may be
able to exit and repunch before he can get out with us."
"That's gonna really strain the power," Sabatini warned.
"The transmitter ram needs junk as much as it needs its own power, or there's
nothing to convert. With that house-cleaning you did, we're pretty low."
"The hell with it! We run dry, we stand and fight as best we can."
"Punching."
"At least the hull seems to be holding," Nagy noted as the ship opened its
hole
and entered. "I got a delicate touch."
Any pursuer now would have to match the course, trajectory, and speed
perfectly
and punch at the exact same spot with the exact same elements in order to give
chase. This was not difficult for a Val or any ship programmed to do it. The
Val, in fact, would know coming in just exactly where they would emerge, but
it
could do nothing about it, not even close on its prey, inside a punch. Even
Raven realized Nagy's strategy-if the Val had hung back too far to avoid
detection, they could repunch in an infinite number of directions before it
could emerge behind them. The only limit was the amount of fuel for conversion
taken in by the forward ram and stored. The Val, he suspected, would have been
pleasantly surprised if any of its little traps and trackers had survived, but
it also knew that the amount of energy expended to get rid of them would limit
just how far its prey could run before it caught up.
"Give me a thirty-two degree right turn on reemergence," Nagy ordered, "and
punch again. Use chart B-H-6-4-4-9."
"But there's no punch points on that chart for thirty hours! We haven't got
the
juice to go that long!"
"Then punch for half the juice we got left and reemerge wherever that is."
Sabatini was appalled. "Off the chart?"
"Yeah, off the chart."
The purpose of the charts, other than navigation, was to permit ease of
travel.
The emergence points were all selected because they had ample density of
matter

for the rams and yet were clear of any potential problems like radiation fields, suns, neutron stars, and other obstacles. Sabatini's prior freebooter identity gave him enough confidence to know that the odds of coming out near anything dangerous was next to nothing in the vastness of space; what bothered him was that they stood very good odds of coming out exactly there-next to nothing. Space was never completely empty, but there were vast areas in which it might take years to accumulate enough dust and such to make enough fuel to get them anywhere useful, and they wouldn't have the juice to punch anywhere else clean.

"Nagy, you ever made a jump with low fuel off the charts before?"

"Never had to, but it's the only way. The only other choice is to slow down and turn as quickly as possible, and try to blow the bugger back to machine hell as

it emerges. It'll be ready for that, and it has a lot more fuel than we do."

"Yeah, but there's a dozen charts we could jump on and come out at a safe point."

"That's the problem. There's a dozen. How long you figure it'll take to refuel?"

A couple hours? If there are two of 'em out there, then in that time all dozen could be checked-and would be. You make the choice. This is one fix your little talent won't get you out of."

"You think of this ahead of time or are you making this up as you go along?"

"Improvisation, my friend, is the soul of survival. If it goes wrong I'll blame it on this computer link."

"If anything goes wrong you won't have any reason to blame anything. You'll be dead long before we were. Hang on. Emergence."

Sabatini was right on the mark, but he cut power slightly and fully opened the jets as he made a graceful turn.

"We fight, then?" Nagy asked nervously.

"We have fifteen minutes before it emerges. That gives me ten minutes to take in

what I can in this dense outer dust belt and another four to make the punch. I am computer-linked, too, remember."

"Quiet. I have an idea. Open communications channels."

"I see. Good idea, if we have the time."

"Shut up and gobble."

Sitting in the back, Raven and Warlock were ignorant of all this. They could only wait and wonder until either of the ship's operators took the time and trouble to brief them.

In what seemed like no time the ship was back up to speed and punching through once more, and only then did Nagy relax enough to explain the situation.

Neither

of the passengers liked it much.

"Don't see what you can do, though," Raven consoled him. "Let's play it as it lays. But I can't help wondering- suppose we punch through for only forty percent of the fuel? Then turn around and punch right back to where we were just at?"

"Damn! Why didn't I think of that one?" Sabatini swore. "Too late now-I've used

fifty percent, and with what it will take to reposition that won't be quite enough to get us back. Why didn't I think of it, though?"

"In all your lives you never were no Crow, that's why. An old tracker knows

the

double-back. I'm surprised Nagy didn't, considering his background."

"Too civilized, Raven," Nagy said. "I went from Vatican Center to West Europe Center and then to port Security, then finally Melchior. I never was in the field. It wasn't my area of expertise."

"Yeah, well, next time remember that us ignorant savages might know a few tricks

your ancestors forgot, and deal us in. You believe in all this high-tech brain shit and you get to playing Master System's game."

"Yeah. Next time."

"If I were the tracker Val, that is where I would put the second Val. At the last stop," Warlock whispered dryly.

"Shut up, Warlock," Raven growled.

The ship was now pretty much on automatic, and there was nothing that anyone could do for a while, so the two at the controls set the alarms and disengaged after bringing temperature and pressure to normal levels. It was safe to remove

the pressure suits, relax, eat, even catch some sleep, and Raven got to smoke a

couple of his precious cigars over the protests of the other three and the air filtration system.

The time seemed to drag, and sleep was difficult. Finally, though, the alarm sounded and Sabatini and Nagy, almost with relief, headed back up to the command

chairs and reconnected themselves to the ships' systems.

Emergence was smooth and right on time, but it was quite literally in the middle of nowhere.

"Dust and cosmic debris levels are very small," Sabatini noted. "Distance to nearest stellar system's outer reaches is about thirty-three light-years. If we

did another punch we might get within four or five."

Sabatini did a quick scan of the region and found little to be optimistic about.

"There's some very weak gravity source at bearing one seven one, but it's beyond

our range and who knows what it is? If it's a black hole or something it could be farther than that next stellar system. I think we're stuck."

They poked and probed and moved over a vast distance of empty space during the next few hours tracking down any potential sources of gravity that might mean trapped dust, rock, and, therefore, fuel-and life. The hunting was pretty slim.

"The good news is that we are collecting enough material to keep us going for several years if it remains constant," Sabatini told them. "The bad news is that

it's just about enough to keep the life support and local engines going-with a very slight loss. It means we can drag around here for a long time but we can't

ever gain enough to offset what we're spending collecting it."

"We should'a brought a couple of them playmate slaves if we were gonna be stuck

out here," Raven growled.

"I guess we should've fought after all," Nagy sighed. "Our only hope now-"

He paused, and even Raven and Warlock could feel the tension fill the air. The screen flickered to life and went to maximum magnification.

An area of space that was as dark as the darkest night now had a glowing ring around it and, although it seemed impossible, the area within seemed even

darker, deeper, and blacker. Out of it came a ship, small, sleek, and shopworn black against the even blacker hole.

"Son of a bitch!" Nagy swore. "I must've missed one!"

The Val ship emerged, closing the hole behind it, slowed gracefully, and made a

steady turn toward them.

Sabatini sighed. "I guess we fight them anyway," he said.

6. SCOUTING EXPEDITIONS

THE VAL SHIP TOOK UP ITS POSITION WELL WITHIN SENSOR range but just beyond the range of conventional weapons. Nagy and Sabatini were integrated with their ship's computers; the Val was its ship's computer. Even allowing for the time their ship's engines and weapons took to function, that meant the Val was always

going to be a fraction of a second ahead in terms of responding to a sudden move—a crucial difference. Once both systems were in full gear, however, their automatic reactions would be nearly instantaneous and, therefore, equal. But the

Val still had an advantage: Its speed of thought was far faster even than that

of computer-linked humans, while its reasoning was very similar to a human's. It

understood its prey well. That forced the humans to let the automatics react, thus placing them permanently on the defensive, a situation in which they could

not win, only draw or lose.

"By the authority of Master System I command you to halt and identify yourselves" came the Val's call, which Nagy put on the speaker. The voice was that of Hawks; this was the same Val that had accosted them in the lounge.

"Since when did you have such authority?" Nagy challenged back. "You are keyed to no one on this ship, a fact you well know. We have committed no criminal acts

that would cause an exception." None that you know, anyway. "I stand on the covenant."

"And I step on it," the Val retorted. "The covenant exists because it is useful

to the system. In its own way it serves the system. The covenant will not be broken as far as anyone is concerned. There is no one out here in the middle of

nowhere but us."

It was tough to deny the truth of that, but truth wasn't at stake here. "And what sort of logic and system is it that can be violated at will when it is convenient? One does not defend the honor and integrity of a superior system by

ignoring it when it is safe or convenient. That is the human way of things, and

Master System was created to avoid that flaw. If you can break the system, even

under these conditions, then Master System has no right to exist, no right to authority over humankind except by sheer might. And if it is no better than human law, then it is a tyranny that must be disobeyed as a moral duty."

"You are quite good at that, aren't you?" the Val responded, impressed. "The logic cannot be denied even though you and I both know you don't believe a word

of it. Very well. I am keyed to track down an Earth-human, a North American

Center historian who is called Walks With the Night Hawks, also called John Hawks. He possessed forbidden knowledge and did not surrender it or himself, making him an enemy of the system. You know where he is. Tell me, and win your own freedom until another time, another Val, seeks you."

"That is nothing to us," Nagy told it. "Even if we knew this person, which we do not, the price is far too low. We haven't sufficient fuel or sources of fuel to get back to the chart. You saw to that. So we die out here slowly, or we die quickly. We are all professionals. Quick is better if you have to choose one or the other."

"I could give you a tow to that system over there. Enough fuel to get almost anywhere. Arnold Nagy, is it not, formerly of Melchior? You went in pursuit of the fugitives as was your duty and somehow joined them instead. Raven, and Warlock—more Security gone bad. There will be wholesale cleanings of Security nests before this is over. I do not know the fourth member of this quartet in any way, but it makes little difference. Another escapee, I suspect. You are professionals, as you say. What do you owe these others?"

Warlock leaned over to Raven. "Why does it talk so much when we are so vulnerable?" She didn't seem ruffled by the thought of imminent death. Raven was a fatalist. "Because if it blows us to hell it's back at square one—

up the river without a paddle. It has the bad luck to want Hawks, not any one of us. If we die, any leads to Hawks die with us. This ain't over yet."

"Just out of curiosity," Nagy was saying, "how the hell did I miss any tracers?"

I was sure I got 'em all and you damn well didn't get inside."

"No, I assumed you were competent. I also assumed that you would never look very closely at two cases of good cigars."

"Damn!" Raven swore.

"You couldn't possibly know which cases we'd take on or arrange it back there!"

Nagy retorted.

"I didn't have to. I had a basic data file on Raven and I knew he was an addicted smoker. I also was in the lounge when the first thing he did was order

cigars—a particular kind of cigar. I left and found the source of them after leaving you, and spent a great deal of care inserting my tracers in the casing.

There was only one case. It followed that Raven would wish to take more with him

and that the only means of supplying them would be via the transmuter—which also, of course, duplicated the tracer. It was elementary, my dear Nagy."

"That walking machine—shop son of a bitch," Raven growled, feeling had. It was exactly his kind of trick, which was what bothered him the most.

Nagy sighed. "Well, I guess we deserve this, then. Here's the bottom line, though, Val Hawks. We're it. Sole survivors. They figured out how to get that monster ship going, but they never had full control of it. It broke up off a neutron star. Very little of it was ever habitable, and we had no choice but to

split it up—some in my ship, the rest on the bridge. There was no chance to save

the others—I barely saved ourselves, and then only because we were living here.

You're in an endless loop, my friend. You're doomed to wander forever in

pursuit

of a quarry who no longer exists."

The Val actually paused for a moment before replying. "It truly is a pleasure to

encounter a real pro now and then. Your voice analysis actually shows that you are speaking the absolute truth. Had I not surprised you in the lounge, had you

had some warning of my presence before you actually saw me, I might not have received any anomalous readings at all."

"Why don't they just fight and get it over with?" Raven grumbled.

Warlock smiled. "What do you think they are doing, darling?"

"It reads true because it is truth," Nagy assured the Val.

"Well, then, there is an easy way to settle it all. Send me one of you. Let me subject him or her to the mind-printer here. If indeed it is true then I will have the documentation I need, and you will receive your tow and a head start on

my associates. I will owe you that for saving me much fruitless labor."

Uh oh, gotcha there, didn't he, Nagy? Arnold Nagy swore to himself.

"You cannot win against a Val even under optimum conditions," the robot detective said. "And these are hardly optimum."

It was certainly true that the conditions were lousy. Sabatini, drawing on the experience not only of Koll but of others the thing it was had consumed and become back on Melchior, had no trouble seeing the Val strategy. Blows that hurt, not killed. Blows that damaged, weakened, but never at the expense of giving them a clean shot. In and out, back and forth, until they used up the last of their fuel and were dead in space. The Val had the infinite patience of

a machine and much preferred that at least one of them remain alive.

"You can drill that rot about the invulnerability of the Val into all the idiots

at Centers you want," Nagy told it, "but you and I know you're mortal. Your ship

is just a ship-no better armored than this one. I admit that you are better armored than I am, but if I had the drop on you, I know where to shoot. That inevitability and invulnerability crap makes it easy for you most times. The game believes it so thoroughly that when you catch up they roll over and play dead. I'm not going to roll over and I am not going to give you what you want. You see, I can cheat you, and beat you, very easily. Just reverse the transmuter

and apply full thrust. A quick end, with all of us and our ship vaporized. Quick, probably painless, and you won't know a damned thing more about the one you're really after. You will have vaporized your one real lead. I'm not scared,

Val Hawks. We do not have a massacre situation here—we have a standoff."

The Val seemed somewhat taken aback by this. It was always supremely confident and, like all Vals, felt itself superior to the humans it dealt with and hunted.

"I take it that all of you prefer suicide to surrender, then?" it asked finally.

"Watch it!" Sabatini said nervously. "That's an open invitation to blow us to hell right now!"

"It won't act until we do," Nagy assured him. "There's no percentage in it."

Raven snapped his fingers. "Nagy, how much crud do you need for fuel conversion

on this tub?"

"Huh? It's measured in tons to do us any good. Why?"

Raven sighed. "Nothing. I was just thinkin' that we got a whole shitload of

stuff here we might somehow use."

"Like what?"

"Anything. The space suits. The boxes of cigars. The clothes on our backs. These

chairs if we could get 'em up. Blow 'em out the hatch and gobble 'em in the ram

jet slow and easy. Forget it, it was just a thought."

"Uh uh! You have something there! Besides, ditching the cigars will mean ditching it as well."

"You nuts?" Sabatini asked seriously. "The space suits, for Christ's sake!"

"What good are space suits if we're dead anyway? Take the communications port and keep him stalled. I don't care what you say! I'm cutting loose and seeing what can be done."

"But what if it attacks and we got no pilot?"

"The same thing that happens if it attacks and we have a pilot! Now let me go-time's wasting!"

Nagy came quickly out from the spell woven by the interface and, although a little dizzy from it, he indeed wasted no time. There were minor tools and a basic repair kit in an aft storage compartment. He was relieved that Star Eagle

hadn't removed them. He took out a laser torch and began cutting the unused chairs off at their base.

Raven and Warlock got up to help as much as they could, stacking the items as Nagy disassembled them.

"You said it took tons to do much," Raven noted. "So what's this all about?"

Arnold Nagy chuckled. "Maybe not enough for survival, but enough to screw that son of a bitch, that's for sure. Figure each one of these reinforced chairs has

a mass equal to, oh, forty kilograms with their supports. That's two forty.

Add

another ten for the webbing and belting, minimum. Two fifty. The suits are another fifty. Add a lot more junk around here and I think maybe we can find another two fifty, three hundred. That's more than half a ton. Here, give me a hand. We might even be able to get the damned toilet out of here. If that bastard gives us the time we might scrounge up to a ton here!"

They fell into helping, but Raven was still puzzled. "So what's a ton mean?"

"We spent fifty percent getting here. We're about ten percent low and that's about a ton for a vessel this size. We might get back with this much stuff!"

"Well, we made punches without belts and chairs before, that's for sure, but what good will it do? That thing'll just figure it's what we did and follow, assuming it don't just blow us to hell as we punch. Then we're dead meat for it.

What can we do? We're throwin' out everything we could even heave at it."

"Maybe nothing. Who the hell knows? I'm goin' for broke, though, 'cause there ain't no other way!"

In weightlessness it was simple to move the stuff to the air-lock entry.

"How's our Val been?" Nagy called to Sabatini.

"We've been debating the fine points of morality, but it hasn't made a move. They have infinite patience, you know."

"Yeah, well, I'm counting on that. Be ready with a glib line. We're gonna flush

what we got out here by depressurizing the air lock to maybe ten percent of normal. We got two, maybe three loads to flush. Then we still got to figure some

way of maneuvering it into the ram without getting creamed. If, of course, we chopped that stuff up enough to get it all."

On communications, Sabatini had his hands full.

"Why is all of that being flushed?" the Val asked. "I want it stopped. Now."
"What do you think we're doing-laying mines? If we were, you'd have hit one by now. We're not going to stop."

The Val did not reply, but fired a thin beam that struck one of the objects, fragmenting it.

"I think he just shot the damned toilet," Raven noted.

"No matter," Nagy assured him. "He didn't disintegrate it, he blew it up. It's the mass that counts. I was kinda worried about that one fitting in the ram anyway. Now I know it will. Okay, time to grab on to whatever's left back here and hold tight. Odds are we're all gonna get bruised and knocked around by this

one, but consider the alternative."

He went forward once more and donned the interface helmet. He no longer had a chair, but with judicious use of the torch and some muscle he had fashioned two

handholds out of parts of the instrument console.

"You gonna explain this, or am I supposed to be surprised?" Sabatini asked him.

"I'm gonna back up real slow, just enough to get as much of that junk as I can in one pass, 'cause that's all we get," Nagy told him. "I think we were careful

enough to keep it fairly bunched, although I don't know what effect that blast had on it."

"You back up and that thing'll close," Sabatini warned.

"Fine. So long as he doesn't fire until too late, I couldn't care less."

"But you need acceleration to punch! If you go forward in a pass for that stuff,

it'll have to be flank speed from a relatively standing start! The Val'll have to shoot or be rammed!"

"Good. Let it shoot. If it figures we're gonna suicide and try to take it with us, as I hope it does, it's gonna lose. Only if it figures out the game are we in trouble."

"Yeah? That thing's a supercomputer! You figure you got an angle it doesn't know

or can't figure out in nanoseconds?"

"Sure. I'm gonna do something that isn't possible, so it won't think of it."

"What! If it's impossible then what good is it?"

"Because I don't know it's impossible and my math was always lousy. All right-hang on, everybody! Here we go!"

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Nagy applied the brakes, which had the effect of backing up the ship a few millimeters a second. The movement was so slow that even the Val had to check its instrumentation before issuing a challenge.

"You are moving! Halt at once or I will be forced by necessity to open fire!"

"I'm not moving-I'm experiencing drag. Hold on, I'll see what's what."

"You will compensate now."

Nagy made no reply for more than thirty seconds, by which time he had increased

the braking so that the ship cleared the mass showing on the sensors by a few meters; he kept the ship's nose toward the Val ship to present the smallest target.

The Val fired at the port ramjet scoop, but Sabatini had expected this and set the automatics to parry.

Nagy brought the ship to a dead stop relative to the floating debris and angled

the nose so that the ship would accumulate maximum mass in a forward thrust.

"I

just ran the calculations on this thing," he told them.

Some of us like being in space more than we like being with other people." "Not me. I don't think I'll ever get used to it." Nagy's inert body suddenly shook with spasms and he began to cough long and hard, bringing up blood. They rushed to his side, but there was nothing they could do, and the attack finally subsided. Nagy wasn't all of it, but he as part of it, Raven knew. To die here, alone, in this sterile junkheap, and be cast out into the darkness... it was wrong. All human beings died, the great and small alike, but he had always envisioned his own death out in the free, clean air, his body either cremated and scattered or simply allowed to feed the Earth and return to it. Either was a noble way to die. I've been kidding myself, he thought sourly. This sort of thing is not for the likes of me. Nagy and Sabatini or whatever it is-this is their element. I'd take on a Val if I had to, but on my turf, not its. Damn you, Lazlo Chen! If we ever get away with this you ain't gonna depend on old Raven for support. Not with you sitting back there fat and lazy in your desert domain. I'll do your damned dirty work, but this is too much. "Raven-Warlock-Sabatini" came Nagy's electronic voice through the speakers. "I don't think I'm gonna make it. I want you to know a few things just in case." "You go into shutdown and don't think. You can't afford the energy," Sabatini cautioned. "Forget it. Listen, I'm gonna tell you a few things. All of you. First, I already showed you a Val can be taken in space if you're crazy enough and unpredictable enough. They have a weakness and it's called conceit. They think they understand human beings perfectly, and maybe they do, but they don't think like human beings. They're machines. Logical devices. When they see a predetermined course of action, and the sequence is logical, they tend to assume the conclusion will be the obvious. That's why we nailed the Val. On the ground they're just as vulnerable, but they have a lot more tricks. Don't let one get too close to you or you'll never know what hit you. They can be had, though, even on the ground. Use high-intensity lasers that'll carve through walls. That won't stop 'em, but it penetrates. The head's a dummy. Ignore it. Their brains are in their asses-about seven to eight centimeters above the crotch. Just imagine that they have a navel and aim for it. Crisscross. X patterns. The hind is more vulnerable than the front, though. Try to ambush it and don't stop until it's down. Don't get within four meters until you're sure it's totally dead." This way interesting. Raven felt torn between telling Nagy to shut up and take it easy, and learning what he could from a dying man. He said nothing. "Don't assume, too, that all your dangerous enemies are machines. There are times when machines just can't do the job, and the supply of Vals is small," Nagy continued. "Master System has human troops, as well, out here, on several bases. Mindprinted, genetically bred, as devoted and loyal and singleminded as Vals. You can even argue with a Val-it's just doing its job. You can't argue with these troops, and not all of them are human." Raven looked at Sabatini. "You know about them?"

a 360-degree radius, but they weren't good enough, particularly in wide scan, to identify all objects accurately. What they could detect was the all-important murylium that would mean a ship.

"Vals can do what we can't," Nagy warned them. "They can power down completely.

So long as their engines aren't on and they're just using storage power for instrumentation, they can escape detection with the shields around the murylium core, so we aren't out of the woods yet. Still, we ought to be able to get several minutes' warning if it powers up from nothing, unless it's right next to us."

"Seems to me we did pretty good from a standing start," Raven noted.

"Sure, but we never powered down and our shields were in place. From battery, the engines have to be started, brought up to speed, and initial power diverted

to the shields in order to start. I'm opening the ram scoops wide and we'll take

on as much as we can. Vals do best by psyching you out, not by their innate superiority to humans, which is only relative. They have to obey the same laws of physics we do."

Without a Val directly on their tail, they were able to angle the scoops and take in a very large load quickly.

"Another ten or fifteen minutes and we'll be full up. You could make it most of the way to Earth if you had to," Nagy told them. "I don't think you can count on

Star Eagle to come with the Thunder, though."

His words weren't lost on them. Without the Thunder, Nagy was doomed; "we" had become "you."

"Uh oh!" Sabatini said suddenly. "I just got a punchout reading. Stand by!"

"Maybe it's the Thunder," Raven suggested hopefully.

"Nope. Too small. Maybe it's an automated ship, but I have a sinking feeling I've seen that kind of reading before."

"I'm afraid you're right," Nagy responded. "We've got enough juice now to give him a hell of a run, though. Trouble is that damned thing that escaped from the

first Val. If it contained a record of the battle and got intercepted, then the

same trick won't work twice. Maybe we can bluff it through. It's not sure who or

what we are, anyway. I'm getting a stock machine-language identity code query. I've just answered it by telling it that we're the freebooter ship Finland and to mind its own damned business. I don't think it's buying it, though. I'm getting voice transmission."

"Freebooter cruiser Finland, stand where you are for examination," came a voice

through the intercom. It was a woman's voice, and very familiar, but not quite anyone Raven could place.

"China's voice," Warlock said softly. "Harder, younger, but still her."

Raven nodded, placing it now. They wouldn't have any recordings of China after the Doc had finished with her, so they'd have used the last recording they had,

which was of the old Song Ching back on Earth.

"You have no authority to break the covenant," Nagy responded to the Val. "Be on

him

at the heart of Melchior security, then what do they need us for? Why can't they just take the rings?"

"I have thought about that," Star Eagle replied. "It seems obvious that for some reason they cannot do so. It is not for lack of resources, or volunteers, or knowledge. Very possibly Hawks is correct, and it is in the nature of Master System's core program. Something that would allow only humans to have even a chance at it."

Raven shook his head. "It don't wash. How'd even Master System know the difference between our Nagy and a real Nagy? It's all screwy. It don't make no sense. And that guff about rules and the game, like they was the Creator and the

Father of Demons usin' us for sport, winner take all. I don't like it. It's spooky."

Warlock laughed. "I cannot believe you! You, the great cynic, the Raven of the northern plains, suddenly getting mystical, as if we were pawns in some cosmic conclusion between God and the devil. Well, if Master System is God, then I will

take the devil."

Raven just shook his head in confusion. "Perhaps, my dear, you don't know me as

well as you think you do. I am first and foremost a Crow. Maybe Hawks can make some sense of it. He has a better sense of the mystic and the perspective of history."

"The immediate situation is the most pressing," Star Eagle said. "I had hoped to

keep the planetside colony going for another month or two, as I am not yet finished with my renovations, but with so many Vals around, I think we had best consolidate on board here."

"That's what everybody else wanted to do from the start," Raven noted. "You were

the one who talked us into going down into that hell hole."

"That was necessary at the time. The Thunder was not a place to live and work. I

had no shipyard, so the work had to be done bit by bit and piece by piece, with

an army of maintenance robots and all the transmuter power I could bring to bear. Now we have pressing problems, though, and I am far enough along to accommodate you. When I can gain a new supply of murylium to restore the big transmuters, I can complete the job, but the major single task is done."

Isaac Clayben sighed. "As for me, I am glad to be rid of this primitive place. I

long for access to my files and continuing my research. I have much that might be useful to us in there."

Hawk sighed. "I am less enamored of leaving. There are so many mysteries still here, and this is a place of beauty. I still want to know who or what those mysterious black shapes in the water were, and who planted those groves and why."

They had used the small fighter to go over to that other island, where they found signs of expert cultivation of fruit and vegetable trees, but the system seemed to be self-maintaining and clearly had not been visited for a long time.

There, too, they had found fierce-looking carved-wood totems that resembled more

"It is still somewhat like living in a great cave," Raven remarked dryly. "A right comfortable cave. I ain't sure I like it much more than bein' down there, though."

"I think it is much better to be at the center of the action than to sit down there and rot," Hawks said. "I share your affinity with the sky and natural wind and rain, but down there we were of no use to ourselves or to anyone else. Now we are all together."

"That wasn't what I was thinkin' of, Chief," Raven responded. "You weren't on the Lightning trapped by a Val. Two Vals. If it happened to us, it sure as hell can happen to a ship this size, and next time they'll have learned from their experience and they'll bring a fleet. Remember, they know what they're dealing with in Thunder. If they get us, they get everybody."

"Not necessarily," Star Eagle put in. He had apparently planted some sort of transceiver system all over the ship and would be a potential ghostly companion

almost anywhere, something else Raven didn't relish. "This ship is extremely well defended. It will be the last thing they attempt to take on directly, I think. And, if we can get some more ships, we can have a great deal of mobility

without having to betray Thunder. Also, when I am repairing the damage you did to Lightning, I will make some other modifications. Never more should our smaller ship go out without some sort of cover. I am right now working on the problem of binding to the ship two fighters with automatic defense mechanisms. All three would be more than a match for any Val."

The small houses proved quite comfortable. Each had a sink and a small toilet, as well as beds, a table, and chairs. Raven and Warlock were housed together, and the Chows had their own small hut. Hawks, too, had a two-person hut, with the idea that one of the women would stay with China at all times, alternating nights. Clayben and Sabatini each had their own place-at opposite ends of the village. Clay ben's hut also had a bed for Nagy, which now would not be needed.

Star Eagle had rigged terminals with intercoms in each of the huts, each with a conspicuous on/off switch. Raven couldn't help but wonder if the switch really did anything.

"Well, now what?" Raven asked nobody in particular.

"We wait," Hawks replied. "We wait and see if the seed you all planted with Savaphoong bears real fruit."

"Waiting," Raven grumbled. "That's all we ever seem to do is wait."

They waited eleven days until finally Star Eagle picked up a transmission on the frequency designated by Nagy and stored before his death in the Lightning's records. By this time, a shipboard routine had been established. Hawks now had access to the vast library of information in the Thunder's data banks, and Isaac

Clayben was permitted limited access to his own private files stolen from Melchior.

Now that Clayben was entirely contained on the Thunder, Star Eagle saw no reason

to deny the scientist this and every reason to allow it. Star Eagle controlled all computer access aboard; anything Clayben decoded and removed for use was also instantly known to Star Eagle, including the codes for retrieving that particular area of information. Clayben's system, which appeared to be based on

reached out and shook the freighter. The big ship began broadcasting a distress call almost immediately, and it took more than twenty seconds for the guns of both the fighters and Lightning to silence it. That was, quite possibly, too long to take for granted that nobody had heard—particularly with a cargo like this.

The freighter was down to one gun and was having trouble steering. "It's powering down and dropping all shields!" Raven exclaimed. "I think it surrendered!"

"Master System's creations don't surrender," Sabatini replied. "I'm just worried that it has a self-destruct mechanism on it. Give me communications. They are fanatics, but they think."

Raven switched over control and Sabatini sent out his message. "Attention, freighter. You have been taken by the pirates of Thunder. You may self-destruct, if you are able, but then we will merely have to reclaim your cargo the hard way. Thunder is now approaching this position. Relinquish control to it and you will have our word that your ship and your core will be spared."

Thunder itself had made the slight jump to bring it within a few hundred kilometers of the vessel, and as the freighter scanned it, even Raven could sense the incredulity that came through the computerese. A fourteen-kilometer-long spaceship will do that to almost anybody, he told himself. "I thought you said those things never surrendered," he said to Sabatini.

"They don't—to humans. To one of their own— maybe. Particularly if it doesn't have a self-destruct mechanism. Machine logic, remember? If we are going to attain our objective anyway, there is no purpose to not going along. Remember the Val? Better to run away, then to fight another day. It might be boiling mad at us, but if its choice is to get itself and its ship back to Master System without a cargo or to let us have both cargo and the destruction of the ship—well, you see where it leads."

"Yeah. It doesn't know you lie a lot."

"I didn't lie. I promised that the ship and the core would survive. You let Star Eagle reprogram that core and rig up some creature comforts and the human-pilot interfaces, and we got us another ship."

"This is Thunder," Star Eagle called to them. "The pilot has relinquished command to me under protest. It is no longer able to access its drives, weapons, or shield. I am recalling my fighters and will be taking the ship aboard Cargo Bay Three. Lightning, please remain free until my maintenance robots can assure us that there is no further danger. I feel we should get the hell out of here as quickly as possible, so follow my course and heading."

"That's China talking or her influence," Raven guessed. "I agree with them, though. Twenty seconds is a fairly long time. Considering how much traffic was around on our side when we faced down that Val, we can't figure on there not bein' as much nasty shit around these parts."

Everyone not directly involved in the action had watched it from the Thunder's bridge, and as the great ship maneuvered close to the prize, then grabbed it with powerful tractors and brought it in, they cheered.

The pirates of the Thunder were in business at last.

* * *

"I cannot conceive of what Master System would do with this much murylium," Star

Eagle commented. By now they had traversed many light-years in devious and circuitous routes, and had finally felt safe enough to bring Lightning back aboard.

"Who can know what projects it has or how far it ranges?" Hawks replied. "When you consider that we had no problem in identifying one and taking it, the implication is that this is so small a fraction of Master System's usual supply

that it won't even be slightly inconvenienced. It's funny stuff, but it's raw-grade ore, as well. It's going to have to be purified and smelted before it can be used."

"I can handle that," the pilot assured him. "The process will be slow and done in small amounts, but there are programs within my data banks for constructing and operating small smelters for just this purpose. Remember, when this ship was

built, murylium was a rare mineral. Up until now I thought it still was."

"I can't believe how easily we took it," Raven commented. "It was like taking candy from a baby."

Hawks nodded. "That worries me, since it implies that this war it is fighting is

not necessarily a direct battle- else this thing would have had massive self-destruct systems and been armed to the teeth-but that's only a part of it.

As true pirates, we have broken the covenant between Master System and the freebooters. Master System might well receive our signature, but it will not know who or what the Thunder is. It will demand that the freebooters themselves

track down and capture or destroy the pirates, and if they do not, Master System

will feel free to march in and play hell with them."

"They've been getting too soft anyway," Sabatini said. "Where the hell do you think all the ships they have come from, anyway? The early days when everybody was a pirate and everybody was being hunted. It bred a tough, lean, nasty race out here, but then they struck a deal. The generation that's out here now has never known what it is to be what their grandparents were-outlaws. The fact that

our second Val broadcast to them all that it felt free to disregard the covenant

works for us. It'll make them more careful and give them some justification for

pirate outbreaks. Don't kid yourself. The freebooters, led by Savaphoong and our

rescue party, will be quick to identify and blame us for all this."

"Master System is not stupid," Hawks reminded him. "It will know that some collusion was necessary in order for us, comparative novices out here, to even identify the right ship and take it. Thanks to that whatever it was- memory module, records, whatever-that the Val you destroyed was able to send off, there

is one logical connection between us and the freebooters. If I were Master System, I would say the hell with it. I would take my forces, turn around, and go after that connection in the hope that it would turn us in."

"Halinachi," Raven said nodding. "I'd go after Savaphoong fast and with everything I could muster."

"If we are lucky, perhaps we can beat Master System to it," Star Eagle

"Sounds like a trap to me," Raven said thoughtfully. "It's hard to believe anybody could escape an attack like that unless they threw in, were allowed to, or could be traced. If I was the Vals in charge I'd let 'em go, if I felt sure I could trace 'em and let them lead 'em to us."

Hawks nodded. "Nevertheless, we could use people who are at home out here and have the contacts. Doctor Clayben, if we had those people here, do you have enough equipment to verify that they are not themselves reprogrammed by mindprinter or planted duplicates?"

"I'm pretty sure I could," the scientist replied.

"I don't want 'pretty sure'. I want certainty. Can you do it or not?"

"Nothing is certain in this business, but I am as certain as I can be."

"All right, then. We pick a deserted system where we can control access and get in and out quickly. We will use the new ship and some maintenance robots. It'll be a good shakedown and test for it anyway. It will carry five hundred kilos of murylium and also two fighters-the two we used for the remotes in the attack. Lightning will cover out of sensor but within communications range, and Thunder will cover Lightning and use the com link relays. The freighter drops the murylium on some barren rock, then we beam Savaphoong the location for the pickup and withdraw, leaving the fighters and drawing off the freighter until it forms a third point on our monitoring triangle. We will then see who shows up to take the bait, and go from there. Star Eagle, do you think you can set up a sensor to show if a ship has a locator aboard?"

"As Doctor Clayben said, nothing is certain, but I can sweep all the frequencies used by normal ships. I might not recognize it as a locator, but I will notice anything that continuously transmits location, movements, course, speed, trajectory, all the rest. Perhaps in code, but if it uses a nonstandard code of sufficient complexity, we can draw our own conclusions from that."

"All right, then. Let us pick the system, radio the coordinates, and do it." The system they chose was particularly desolate, well out from Halinachi and off the main charts. The star was a red dwarf that had either once exploded or collapsed, and its stellar system was a near-solid mass of very uneven debris. Out where the ring thinned there was a single dense line of large and irregular asteroids that seemed ready-made for the task. They picked a good one and unloaded the murylium on it, along with a small beacon beaming in the agreed-upon code. Anyone looking for it could find it, but in the vastness of even this stellar system, let alone this sector of space, the odds of happening upon it accidentally were pretty well nil.

Savaphoong was given the location and told to make pickup within five days or the beacon, and the precious payoff, would be removed. He showed up within a day. At least, a ship appeared, punching in and almost immediately homing in on the beacon.

"Nothing unusual in its broadcast signaling," Star Eagle told them. "Of course,

The figures stopped dead in their tracks, the cargo almost to the hold of their ship. Clearly they didn't expect this level of sophistication from the band of fugitives. A woman's voice came back to him, sounding tough but nervous. "This is to the Thunder. Savaphoong doesn't have a cargo bay to hold this shit," she told them. "In the light of the destruction and hell being raised around here over this, we're all getting together on this for now." Hawks let several seconds go by before replying, enough to give the impression that he was speaking from at least several light-years away. "We want to keep in contact with such a group," he finally responded. "First, we would like to know just what has been happening." "They've gone nuts. Brought in a shipload of their subhuman troopers under two Vals and stormed Halinachi without even askin' for a surrender. Blew three ships in Halinachi port to hell without cause, too. At the same time, robots and humans from Deep Space Command began hitting known freebooter digs all over the place. Hundreds have been killed and many ships destroyed. Tens of thousands are in hiding or have taken off into deep space. Some of us who dealt a lot with Savaphoong had a plan to meet in case the covenant ever shattered. We met there and barely had time to coordinate before they came in there, as well. Savaphoong and seven other ships, us included, are holed up now in a deep space area off any charts. We need this stuff bad. God! How much was on that ship, anyway, if you can give away a pile like this?" Again Hawks cautiously waited, using a terminal to time his responses exactly. He added a second to be on the safe side, but he was beginning to believe the woman. "A lot. Six hundred and forty tons." "Six hund-tons! That's more than all of us and our forefathers mined out here in the last five hundred years!" Hawks paused. "Proceed with your loading. We would like to make contact with the whole of your party in our mutual interest. Could we come in and perhaps send an emissary on your ship back to Savaphoong? No tricks. No obligation." There seemed to be some closed-circuit discussion taking place. Finally the woman spoke again. "I don't mind telling you you ain't too popular with some of the folks in our party, me included. I don't much like bein' a hunted animal, and I lost a home and friends out there." "I can understand that," Hawks replied, still timing his responses. "But this was going to happen sooner or later anyway. We call ourselves pirates, but we are not. We are revolutionaries and we are at war. For years you have pretended you were free and outside the system, but now you see that you were not and have never been. Perhaps the earliest freebooters were, but you were co-opted into the system and used by it. We propose to make you and everyone else truly free. We have a way to destroy Master System. Utterly. Completely. But we need your help to do it. All of you. We need each other. You have knowledge and

to
them. Except for Sabatini or whatever it was, who got what it needed
instantly,
one could be changed into one of them but still be oneself inside. How would
he
feel waking up like one of them, only with his current behavior and standards
and mindset? They were human, inside and out. He would become a monster to
himself.
Was this what Nagy had to face? he asked himself. Was he born and raised
happily
as one of them and then forced by circumstance or duty to become a monster-an
Earth-human? He wondered how far devotion to duty and mission should go, and
he
realized the answer. That was what Nagy had been talking about.
"I'm too dried out," the scaly woman said in a very high-pitched but still
human
tone. "Those suits damn near kill me. I got to get into some water for a
soak."
The accent, too, was odd, but he could understand her. It was very convenient
to
one like him that almost everyone in space had to speak both English and
Russian. Hawks had told him that it was because those two nations had been
first
into space and in ancient times convention dictated international means of
travel used the language of the first. He did not speak Russian, but thanks to
North American Center, his English was just fine.
"I'm sorry for staring at you," he said sincerely. "I'm pretty new at this
game,
and the only folks I've met out here so far have been my own kind. I'll get
used
to it. I got used to white men; I can get used to most anything."
She looked surprised. "There are truly white men on your world? An albino
race?"
Her accent was clipped and very distinctive, but not possible to place. After
eight-hundred-plus years and differently shaped mouths and tongues, the
accents
out here were probably unique anyway, he guessed.
He chuckled. "No, just a figure of speech. They just would never stand for
callin' themselves pinkmen. I'm Raven, by the way."
"I am Butar Killomen," she responded. "And that is Takya Mudabur. You have
just
one name, Mister Raven?"
"Not Mister-just Raven. If I gave you my full and true name in my native
tongue,
you'd break your jaw trying to repeat it." At that moment the engines kicked
into action and the whole thing sounded like Lightning had after it had been
cannibalized and in a fight. The creaks and groans were not at all reassuring.
"People are people as far as this business is concerned. You sure this thing
can
get us there in one piece?"
"It is very old, but sound. You get used to it after a while."
A third woman came down the ladder as the scaled woman went into a
compartment.
If the first two lacked hair, it had all wound up on the third one. She looked
like somebody wearing a lion suit, Raven thought, except that the mane stuck
out
all over the place and even the hands were covered with thick orange-and-

have
found most others cannot. This is because, as a race, we dwell mostly
underground. And, almost at will, I can do this."
He watched, still thinking about the rest. She could see the infrared
spectrum,
and hear perhaps better than a dog or even a mouse. But what was most
remarkable
was what she was demonstrating now. It was fast, too, amazingly so. She was
sitting on a red blanket, her arms resting on a gray seat, and, incredibly,
her
skin faded into the tones of the blanket-even the weave-while her arms
adjusted
for the gray of the chair and even the gaps in between. She was hardly
invisible, particularly when you knew she was there, but he bet she could
become
as good as invisible in her native element.
"I can also mimic almost everyone or anything I have heard before," she told
him
in a very male voice that was almost exactly like his own. "That way I can, if
still discovered or pinned down too long, imitate something bigger and nastier
than whatever is hunting me." She shifted back to the hard female voice she'd
been using, and Raven now understood that it was a deliberate persona, to make
her sound and therefore seem bigger than she really was. It was also clear
why,
coming from a mild climate, nakedness was normal; any clothing would nullify
most of the coloration defense and perhaps have a more distinctive scent as
well.
"Nothing offensive, as you see," she noted. "Oh, I've killed flies and bugs,
but
I haven't even the arm strength for spears or bows, let alone lifting and
aiming
a common pistol. But here, in this chair, on this ship, with that interface
there and the weapons under my control, I could destroy a city." She said that
almost as if she really wanted to, and suddenly he wasn't sure if he was
talking
to someone like China or a miniature Manka Warlock. A little of both, he
decided.
"But you didn't grow up in a hunter-gatherer society any more than I did,"
Raven
guessed. "You would never even have dreamed that any of this existed if you
did."
"In a way, you're right. I was no nobility, but I had the right bloodlines,
and
as a child I think I was more curious and inquisitive than girls were supposed
to be. The Elders decided that my mind could handle the wonders and mysteries
of
a Center, and I was selected while still very young to go there. I didn't have
a
choice. Oh, I was still breeding stock-I was just supposed to breed better,
smarter candidates for the Center in the future. They didn't educate us -they
kept us amused in the lap of luxury like permanent spoiled children. We were
all
smarter than they thought girls could be, though, so we were able to do some
learning on our own. Even if you got caught cold at some terminal with a
lecture
and display on some complicated subject, all you had to do was act dumb and
cute

feel the urge. Not that she was sexless, but she was in now in total control. It was a story of both liberation and compensation. Her size a major liability, she simply worked six times harder and did everything six times better. She learned how to think on her feet and be taken as an equal in exotic and gigantic foreign locales. She began to make her own deals and, in one of the apparently not uncommon fights over a murylium claim that wound up in ship-to-ship combat, she had taken over for a captain who'd lost her guts-and won. She parlayed her reputation and profits from that into an ancient, creaking hulk that she redesigned and restored herself, with help from the crew of that fighting ship who'd left their captain, as well, and it became the Kaotan. The other two were Dura Panoshka, the Lion Girl, and Butar Killomen, who'd met Raven when he had boarded. Takya had joined later; she'd had trouble keeping jobs or berths because of her need for regular immersions to keep her skin from drying out. But there were very few freebooters who could deal with the water races, and Ikira had seen the potential for information there that was virtually untapped. Takya had been both useful and dependable, and worth the extra weight and expense of a true water-based rather than chemical bath system and all the problems it entailed. And, as far as they knew, all four were the only ones of their races in space. It was a special bond, for each could understand the other's sense of alienation when with others of the more common races. "I had hopes, one day, of becoming so powerful that I could one day return home and break that insidious system, but I'm old enough now to know that even if I gained such power and tried, it is probably easier to break Master System than to change a culture, particularly one that is partly based on biology." "The only way there's a shot is to break the big system," Raven told her. "Then you start by introducing technology on a wide scale so that your people become masters of the planet and not just inhabitants. Then that technology can be used to alter the biology that limits things." Am I really saying this? he thought suddenly. I think I just told her to turn her people into white men and go rape their world! It was only a two-and-a-half-day trip to the hideout. In that time Raven grew to like the tiny captain, but he found it far more difficult to get to know the other three. Of them, only Butar Killomen even seemed curious enough to talk to him, and none were as secure as their captain and willing to talk about themselves. The refugee fleet was still cautious; passwords were required not just from the ship and captain but from each of the other crew members in turn before the sensors and automatic guns of the other ships were turned off. Only then did Ikira relax and put the graphics on the screen for him to see what was there. "Most are light freighters built less for cargo capacity than speed and weapons ability," she told him. "For the amount of murylium you generally find out

success for other remnants of the freebooter culture, and finally Hawks decided, with the council of captains concurring, to go after a ring. By now the newcomers had been told the whole story- what they were after, what the rings could do, and why the rings had been created. Two of the crews had visited Chanchuk, and the Indrus knew Janipur well, since the people of that world had been created out of the same original race as theirs and had kept many of the same customs and forms of the ancient Hindu beliefs. Captain Paschittawal, in fact, had even seen the ring itself, in the People's Treasures collection at Cochin Center, the chief administrator's headquarters. Apparently, he reported, the chief administrator rarely wore it, except on solemn and highly ceremonial occasions.

"It is a beautiful thing, very big," Captain Paschittawal told them. "It is kept under a magnifier, in fact, so that one can see the exquisite detail work. Two beautiful birds, mirror images, sitting on small fir branches. It is most treasured because it is one of the every few artifacts that came with the Founders centuries ago."

Hawks nodded. "I want you to get together with Raven and Sabatini and give them as much detail as you can. I believe it is time we put Sabatini's unique talents to work for us."

The captain's eyebrows rose. "I have heard you and the others talk of this, but I do not understand what you mean by 'unique talents.'"

"You won't believe it until you witness it, but let me put it this way. You are Hindu, correct?"

"I am, sir."

"And you believe, then, in reincarnation?"

"Yes, sir, I most firmly do."

"Let me just say that Captain Sabatini not only can reincarnate, but can choose just what and who he's going to be. And he does not have to die to do it." Although somebody else does, he added a bit guiltily to himself. After a full briefing by the Indrus crew, Hawks met with his security staff and Sabatini in his own office deep inside the guts of the Thunder.

"Well," Raven said with a sigh, "Nagy said it'd be the easiest, although I ain't sure I like it if it is. This thing's like something in the regional museums of somebody's crown jewels. It's almost a sacred object because it's Earth and it's original. It will be guarded and not just by people. It's gonna have one hell of a nasty security system on it, since a lot of these Hindu folks believe things like this got magic. That crew said there are all sorts of legends about the powers of the gods that come with being the wearer of the thing. This is a heist problem, and who knows what kind of technology they bought or what the nasty computers of that Center came up with? And there's the racial and cultural

that they came from a culture that was highly vegetarian to begin with-
although
not all-and this world developed warm as mostly grasslands, desert, and
mountains. The grasslands can support a large population, but there are
limits,
so the system added some rather nasty predators once native to their old
region-such as tigers-to maintain a balance in the early days. Today, however,
most of the predators are strictly controlled and only occasionally escape
from
royal preserves. Much of the central grasslands is intensively farmed now, you
see-those claws can also till soil. They have some domestic animals to aid
them,
but their tools are basically wood and stone. Useful metal is rare and prized
there, and we traded a fair amount of it."
Hawks tried to put his more personal concerns from his mind and concentrate on
the problem at hand. If Cochin Center was anything like North American Center,
and he thought it probably was, its floors would be of smooth, hard
synthetics.
Those hooves would make quite a lot of noise on them. The aural sensors would
be
a real problem. On the other hand, if those long, pointed fingers were really
all that dexterous, then they would be an advantage when it came time to deal
quietly with the locks.
"This is a male," he noted. "What do the females look like?"
"Slightly smaller, with firm breasts that hang down when she is on all fours,"
the woman told him. "The children are born as four-footed creatures with only
flaps where the hands and feet will be. These do not begin to really grow out
and develop until they are about seven, and are not really useful until
they're
ten or eleven. The standing, walking upright, and the developed use of the
hands
is something they must be taught. This was thought to be a protective
innovation
when the world was more dangerous, as they are still essentially self-
sufficient
from the age of two and can walk on all fours in a matter of hours or days
after
birth. But it is the hands that make them truly human, that allow them to
manipulate and create and build. The hands and the mastery of them are the
mark
of being human there. Also, you note the coloring?"
"You mean the light tan, almost white hair?"
She nodded. "That indicates that this man is a Brahman. High caste, probably
either a major religious leader or from a Center, as this one was. The castes
are known by their coloring. A darker tan, a light brown, would be below this
one and probably a professional or a politician or regional leader. Dark,
reddish brown would be working class- farmers and laborers, mainly. Black is,
well, untouchable. Unclean. They roam wild and are something of a danger to
the
others."
"Wonderful," Raven grumbled. "So what happens if two castes marry?"
"The effect is interesting, as they take on multiple rather than mixed or
blended coloration. The half castes or less have the rights and duties of the
lowest caste their coloration shows. Such mixing is rare, but it happens often
enough to be noticeable even in a small village such as the one we used for
our
dealings."

Hawks was thoughtful. "And you say only the light tan get into the Centers? Nobody else?"

"That is what we were told, and it is logical in a society where you wear your class and your social potential on your body."

"Then it's another complication. Finding enough of these light tans to copy will be a problem."

"No big deal, Chief," Raven replied. "They got to come out. If Vulture says they

follow the standard procedures, then they ain't got to go on leave for a period-and that means some are always on leave, right? No, that ain't the problem. The problem is that everybody on that level will have everything on record, birth to death, whatever they use for prints, you name it. The odds are

if they don't all know each other-them tans I mean-they know mutual friends and

family. It's gonna be pretty damned tough to fake."

Hawks sat back in his chair and sighed. "Oh, I don't know. If ten percent are Master System plants, who knows whom down there these days or can take things for granted?" He leaned forward again. "No, we can make some of those factors work for us. We might even get Master System and its friends to take the fall for the robbery, which will nicely aid our getaway. No, the two big ifs we have

to face aren't there. We can work all those out. The first is-is it possible to

lift that ring? Can we do it under all their noses and get away with it?"

"Yeah," Raven agreed, chomping on his cigar. "And who's gonna hav'ta become one

of them for life to spring the damned locks while Vulture covers?"

The ultimate price... And this was only the first time.

The Chows seemed more alive than he remembered them, and happier, too. He wished

this situation could have arisen under more miserable circumstances. The girls were certainly curious, particularly when they were summoned to Hawks's private

office and found him there alone with one of the women from the Indrus.

"Sit down," he invited. "Make yourself comfortable. So far you've played a background role in all this. You've been very helpful, but I know both of you felt that you just happened to attach yourself to this group by sheer chance. Would you be surprised if I told you that you had been included all along?

That

much of what happened to you was deliberate and designed to make sure you came with us?"

That startled them. "We-just happened to be on the same ship as China," Chow Dai noted.

"Uh uh. A ship taking you to Melchior, so you could be handled and strictly controlled until it was time to move. You were not there by accident. They needed someone with very specific skills and they ran those skills through their

computer and you came out, having been caught at China Center going through doors that expert technicians couldn't crack. Tell me, do you know how you do it?"

They both shrugged. "How do you sing or dance? You do not think about it-it is clear in the mind. You know our uncle was a magician, an illusionist he called himself, who loved to escape from the impossible. He taught us many of his tricks because we were good at them. There are only so many ways locks work,

and

there is always a weak spot."

"Huh! And does this explain how you can crack elaborate electronic combinations

of numbers and even coded badge and fingerprint and eyeprint locks?"

"There are some secrets we must keep," Chow Dai replied coyly, "because we swore

an oath to our uncle, but there are always ways of getting the right numbers for

finding how to fake what is needed."

"Some of those locks at Melchior matched a minutely detailed hologram. You walked through them like they weren't there."

They both grinned. "There is always an alternate way to spring a lock. Anyone who needs a lock that complicated must first be very afraid that someone will get in. After they install it, and after a few times when it does not work and they cannot get in, they always have an equal or greater fear that this might happen all the time. The more complicated the lock the easier it is to figure out the emergency bypass, since it must work without triggering the other, more

ordinary, way in."

"Have you ever seen a lock or security system you couldn't beat?"

They looked at each other and shrugged. "Yes and no," Chow Dai responded. "We have never seen one we could not beat, but we have been caught because we did not have any easy way to look over the system and take the time to find out all

about it. We were ignorant peasant girls. At the time, we did not even know what

a visual monitor was."

"But you do now."

"Oh, yes. We have spent much time aboard here learning more and more. Star Eagle

has been very kind and has read us details of the most incredible security systems, and shown us moving cartoon pictures of them. We know much more now."

Hawks wondered who put Star Eagle up to that useful activity. The crazy thing was, the Chows were exactly what they said they were—simple peasants taken in as

domestic servants by a spoiled China Center official's wife. Neither of them could read or write or showed much inclination to learn; neither had any formal

education at all. Their good speech in English was due to a mindprinter program

and extensive practice aboard the Thunder. They were certainly geniuses, but their genius was limited to certain areas.

"You know what this is all about? You understand what we're doing out here, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. You are trying to find the five magic rings that will bring down the machine that plays god. It is a noble thing that might free our people one day."

Here it is. "One of the rings is in a Center on a planet called Janipur. It is guarded by a complicated security system that is mechanical, electronic, and personally guarded, and is considered impregnable. This was known to the people

who set up our little pirate band. They felt you could crack that system, steal

the ring, and get away. That is why you are here, why you have been here all along. To steal that ring."

"Then we will do it. We have not had a good challenge like that in a very long

time."

"There is-a problem. A hitch. The problem is that the people down there are not human like we are human. They are another kind of human-different from us but no more different than some of the others we have aboard this ship right now. We might, under very risky conditions, get humans to the Center, but they would be useless. They couldn't walk around, get in any visual monitor, be seen by anyone there, since there are no Earth-humans anywhere on that world. Master System also has people who look like those other kind of humans down there just waiting for anyone not of that race to even be glimpsed. All our information, all our experts and computers, say that no one could get near enough to that ring to even pick the locks who was not of their race. You understand?"

"You wish us to teach them how to do it?"

He sighed. This was even harder man he thought. "No. We can't allow any of them

in on this. Not right now. They are decent people down there, mostly, but Master

System is standing over them and telling them what to do and they can't fight it, so they're not going to do the job for us. We have to do it ourselves."

"But you just said--"

He held up his hand. "You remember Song Ching who became China Nightingale? You

know how they did it?"

They looked at each other, then at him. "They-used some kind of machine. One that changes you."

"Yes. We have the same kind of machine, and Star Eagle knows how to run it. This

ship was designed to do that, to change one kind of human into another. But we don't have any mindprinter program, or a good means of getting one, that would teach anyone changed into the kind of people down there how to use that body.

It

would have to be learned after someone was changed into one of their kind. It would be very, very hard."

"China," Chow Mai whispered. "They cannot change her back."

"No. People are the most complicated of all living things. We know a lot about how people work, how they're put together and why they are the way they are, and

we can change much of it, but it's not just one part we're talking about here-it's the whole thing, body, brain, blood, you name it. More cells than anyone can count, all of which have to work perfectly together. Once always seems to work, but try it again and it just doesn't come back together right.

It

can kill or cripple or form a horrible kind of monster that's one of a kind-and

maybe not make the brain work, either."

The twins were silent for a moment, then Chow Dai spoke. "You want us to be changed into these-others. Learn how to be these others. Then go in and steal the ring. And, after-we are these others forever?"

"Yes. It's the first time this has been asked of anyone, but it will not be the

last. Many of us, maybe even me, will have to do the same thing. We have three more rings to get before we can head home."

"May we-see what these people look like?"

He got out a holographic still Star Eagle had run off and handed it to them. It

was of the same male he'd seen. They just stared at it, not revealing their emotions, although Chow Dai breathed "Oh" very softly.

"I know what I'm asking and don't think it's easy. I expect to have to give this

speech again a few more times. We may all need to do it just to sneak past Master System to get to its home, but we might not. It's not fair, but that's the way it's set up. I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it could be done. We have

Vulture—you remember the one who was Koll, then Sabatini, very well, I think—down there now, as one of them. He's in their security system at the Center but he can't do the job, only provide information and training and cover

in and out. We will get you out."

"As-then," Chow Dai said quietly. "And then what?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean, suppose we can do it. All of it. We get your ring and then we come back

here. What happens to us then?"

"You will still be human beings, damn it. You'll still be the same inside, too.

You're both good pilots and we can use good pilots. We might also need you to train others to pick other, different locks. You will be no different from the woman with scales and her nose in the back of her head, or the Cantonese-speaking crew with their bones on the outside. Still people, still a part of the team." He thought about the missing fourth ring and Captain Sukotae's theory. "Someone, perhaps many, might have to become far more limited

sorts than these. We believe one ring may be deep on a world of water breathers."

The woman from the Indrus cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry," Hawks apologized. "This is Sabira of the Indrus. She has dealt with

these people and knows them well."

"They are good people," she told them, "and their bodies may look strange, but they are actually better than ours in many ways. They are tough and versatile. And, where it counts, they are quite human. They love their children, are generally good to one another, like luxuries and try to enjoy life as best they

can. Most are peasants much like the sort of people yours are. If we are to win,

this must be done."

The girls were not properly enthused. "If we did not do this, then what would happen?" Chow Mai asked.

Hawks sighed. "I will not order someone to do this. I could, but it is not in my

nature. Too many bad things were done to too many people aboard this ship now because someone or something ordered it done. If you refuse, then we will find volunteers. You will be expected to teach them all that you can about the problem, and then they will go and make the attempt. They will not have as good

a chance as you would, but we will try and we will keep trying until we are down

to no one here and we cannot win. We must. If we don't get that ring then the rest doesn't matter."

They nodded. "This vault. You have information on it? Yes? Can we know what it

is?"

Hawks gave them as detailed a description of the situation as he could. They listened attentively.

"That is not a difficult sequence but it is very tricky," Chow Dai said. "No amateur, particularly in an unfamiliar body, could do it. It is worse because it

is mostly mechanical. The mechanisms are not all that different from one big illusion in our uncle's show. His wife would get into a coffin, and then they would fill it with water, seal it with many chains and locks, and my uncle would

have to pick them all and open the coffin before she drowned. She was a Buddhist

who had studied with some mystics in the high mountains and could remain under for several minutes, more than most people, but it was still a matter of speed and skill. As little girls, we knew just how it was done, and we would often practice with the coffin empty against an hourglass timer. Many long times it took us up to an hour -far too long. Now we could do it, perhaps faster than Uncle Li could. This is a very complicated version of the same problem. No one aboard here could be taught to do it fast and perfect the first time in just a few days or weeks or even months, and we cannot exactly duplicate it here because we have not seen it and its hidden surprises."

"Nonetheless, we must try," he told them.

Sabira spoke. "You would not be going in alone, as you might have had to do under other circumstances. We-the Indrus crew and some of the others-have talked

it over. We know the land, the people, the customs. It was decided that one of us at least should go as well, take the same route as you are asked to take, to

help teach you the subtler ways of those people. We also have a mindprinter program for the language, which is basically a very distorted version of Hindi,

which is my first language. The omens of the gods brought us to you, as the minds behind the attack on the great computer demon brought you here. With all these things on our side, we cannot fail. Compared to what we might face with the others, this is readymade for us."

They gaped at her. "You would become one of them, as well? Forever?"

"It is my duty. I will not tell you that I am excited by the prospect, but I do

not fear it, either."

The twins looked at Hawks. "How long before this would happen?"

He shrugged. "The Vulture has a lot more to set up, and we have to coordinate things. We don't think that getting you in will be a problem. We've been running

Pirate One in and out at regular intervals for months now, so that it appears to

be a new but regular run. It isn't even challenged anymore. Vulture can arrange

a much easier and more convenient arrival than we arranged for him. We've manage

to get his old ship out and put in one with a transmuted station-the same one we used on the island world. We can send directly from Pirate One to that transmuter now, if Vulture is there and we time it right. In fact, first we have

to find prospects for Star Eagle to copy and study, and get them to Pirate One,

where we now have a transmuter and some storage. Covers must be arranged, and no

one, least of all Master System and its personnel, must suspect. We are pretty sure that down there at Cochin Center someplace is a Val. You will have to go in

and be accepted there before you pull the job. Then we have to get you all out and away under their noses. It's going to be very tricky and very dangerous. Even Vulture can't become a Val."

"Very well, then," Chow Dai said almost matter-of-factly. "Then we will do it."

He was surprised. "Just like that? Don't want to talk it over or think about it?"

"There is no need to do so. We would both be dead at the hands of the security guards at China Center had this not been arranged as you say. You have given the

reason we have never understood, which was why we were taken from there and sent

to where only important people are sent. The ones who chose us did not make us break into the Center apartments and offices or steal. We did that ourselves, and we were caught for our ignorance. Our lives and our bodies were forfeit because we were caught. They belong to the ones who saved us. You cannot know what it is like to be so helpless as we were, to be beaten and raped not by one

but by many brutish men, again and again. Neither of us has really been able to

get close to a man since then, nor really trust another. When this-Vulture-creature saved us from Sabatini, we owed still more. We will do it"

"Nobody owns anyone's bodies or lives here. That's what this is all about." He looked at Chow Mai. "And you? You agree?"

"We do not need to speak. We know each other's minds," the other said.

Hawks sighed. "All right then. We'll set it up."

PASSAGE: TWO CHARACTERS MEET IN HELL

THE ENORMOUS CREATURE ENTERED THE SMALL DOMED enclave easily, pressing the passwords as if it had set diem up, which it had. No one was present to greet it, which mildly irritated it, but it stalked down the entry corridor and into the main room where it found a lone Earth-human sitting with a glass and a bottle.

"You're late," the man said. "I'd offer you some, but I know it would be a waste."

"You should lay off that stuff," the creature admonished. "Those substances that

dull the mind are dangerous."

The man chuckled. "And you should know, right? So I lay off the drinking and the

smoking and maybe an occasional pleasure pill and I won't die young? I'm already

dead, remember? I sure as hell do. Scared the living shit out of me, too. Damn it, if you can't even sin in hell then what's the use of living any kind of life?"

The creature let that pass. "You have been monitoring the progress of our friends?" it asked.

"Naturally. That's what this floating mausoleum was designed to do, wasn't it? After all, we reprogrammed Star Eagle back on Earth. You know, I wonder when Hawks is gonna think of that? He's a pretty clever fellow."

"Perhaps too clever for his own survival. The real question is what are their chances of success?"

The man sighed and took another sip of his drink. "This stuff's good. Like the

old country. Not like that synthetic crap we've endured all these years. Anyway, what can I say? We front-loaded Janipur as much as we could, even lucked out in spotting the Indrus just ahead of the troopers and sending it a divert message to the rest of that refugee fleet. Stroke of luck. Makes me think even God is on our side, if I only could figure out who God was and what He, She, or It wanted."

"Then you rate their success as probable?"

The man shrugged. "Hey! We did all we could, but short of going in and getting it ourselves and handing it to them on a silver platter, there is no way in hell

we can do more now. For the first time, and not the last, they are now truly on

their own. We couldn't interfere if we wanted to. You know the rules that bind us. Even with everything, this one's not gonna be any snap, although I think they came up with some real original touches in their planning. Now they got two

ignorant girls soon to be in very strange clothing whose only gift to the universe is that they can pick any lock ever imagined by machine and man, one girl who knows the route but is gonna still hav'ta learn to be a hooper, and one

creature-whatever the hell that thing is-against maybe sixty troops, the entire

Center security system and its personnel and computers, and a shipload more troops lurking around under the command of a Val. How can they lose?

"You are not amusing."

"I do not intend to be. And if they somehow manage to pull this one off, the next one has its own real problems, and the third's a dilly and a half. And we won't mention number four, considering even we aren't real sure where it is, but

they got some clues and bright ideas. Did your people bring in this Ikira girl?

She's a real asset."

"We had no knowledge of her or her ship being involved in this. I am pleased to

hear it, though. The more they depend upon themselves and the less they need us,

the more-comfortable-I am. This is no easy thing for any of us, as you should know."

"You really don't believe they're gonna do it, do you?"

The creature paused a moment. "No. I cannot see how they can, with or without our help. Each victory will make defeat more certain down the road as Master System redoubles its efforts." ,

"Yeah, well, we know well how infallible Master Systems is. Scratch one Val, build a pirate fleet, and maybe snatch one big fat ring to stick in Master System's guts."

"Perhaps. I do not like to hear you say that. I find this whole thing most distasteful, as you know. It is a logic loop of gigantic proportions. If it is mad, then am I not also mad by definition? And if I am mad, then am I abetting a

mad thing by aiding this attempt at Master System's destruction?"

"Beats the hell out of me, pal," Arnold Nagy said, lighting a cigarette.

"You are no help at all, Nagy," the Val responded.

The Rings of the Master

continues with Warriors of the Storm

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack L. Chalker was born in Norfolk, Virginia, on December 17, 1944, but was raised and has spent most of his life in Baltimore, Maryland. He learned to read

almost from the moment of entering school, and by working odd jobs amassed a large book collection by the time he was in junior high school, a collection now

too large for containment in his quarters. Science fiction, history, and geography all fascinated him early on, interests that continue.

Chalker joined the Washington Science Fiction Association in 1958 and began publishing an amateur SF journal, *Mirage*, in 1960. After high school he decided

to be a trial lawyer, but money problems and the lack of a firm caused him to switch to teaching. He holds bachelor degrees in history and English, and an M.L.A. from Johns Hopkins University. He taught history and geography in the Baltimore public schools between 1966 and 1978 and now makes his living as a freelance writer. Additionally, out of the amateur journals he founded a publishing house, *The Mirage Press, Ltd.*, devoted to nonfiction and bibliographic works on science fiction and fantasy. This company has produced more than twenty books in the last nine years. His hobbies include esoteric audio, travel, working science-fiction convention committees, and guest lecturing on SF to institutions such as the Smithsonian. He is an active conservationist and National Parks supporter, and he has an intense love of ferryboats, with the avowed goal of riding every ferry in the world. In 1978 he

was married to Eva Whitley on an ancient ferryboat in midriver. They live in the

Catoctin Mountain region of western Maryland with their son, David.