

Ramaas, Planet of Adventure

by Tony Chandler

It was the greatest contribution known by the human race, the supreme epitome of human technology. The monument's fame had spread until it had even been added to that most prestigious of honors, ranked as one of the 'Wonders of the Known Galaxy'. It beckoned even as I gazed at the splashy advertisement Beamed up from Ramaas, Planet of Adventure.

Excelsior!

The biggest, meanest, most mind-boggling roller coaster ever constructed, wrapping its twin magneto-rails from the peak of Mount Excelsior down to its broad flanks and distant valley below. And that famous first drop, just shy of two thousand feet and capable of sending you speeding over ... well, let's just say as fast you ever dared while still attached to the ground.

Next came the Dirty Dozen -- twelve twisting loops sure to slam and spin even the hardest alien head. With that intense initiation completed, the rider now had a mere twenty minutes more of sheer exhilaration to experience.

It was almost spiritual.

"You see that coaster, Dtang?"

He grunted absent-mindedly.

"We're going to ride that 'bad-boy'."

"Hmph, is this Earth thing?" Dtang growled.

I smiled, thumping my chest with pride.

"The best of 'Earth' things," I said.

Dtang rolled his red eyes and nodded with aroused appreciation, remembering the other Earth treats I had introduced him to lately, especially peanut butter.

"Aren't you forgetting one little detail before you start this little vacation?"

Why do women have to ruin everything? I was going to have to figure that out one day, and soon. I turned to face my ex-wife, who quite inexplicably was still aboard.

She strolled onto the bridge of the Lightning.

"You remember Kragon, don't you? Andarian Pirate Captain. And that little thing about stealing his gold?"

I flicked off the video.

"He was supposed to be dead! Anyway, it's done now."

She shook her head and I felt more bad news on the way. Just what I needed before I start my vacation.

"You can't brush off Kragon, he's dangerous. Very dangerous."

"And you should know, huh babe. I mean, being a loathsome pirate yourself and all. By the way, what were you doing on that ship in the first place?"

She ignored me.

"I'm trying for some odd reason to save your hide. Not that its worth saving."

"Listen, we're several quadrants away from that little incident now, orbiting the "Family Planet." They don't even allow weapons on the surface. I mean, with all that security in place we couldn't be safer at the moment. Besides, if it wasn't safe, aliens and their children from all the known galaxy wouldn't have made this the vacation capital." I leaned back in my chair. "And there it waits, Ramaas, an entire planet of fun. Waiting for me."

Turning, she stormed off.

Dtang sat beside me, a look of extreme concentration on his features.

I got busy punching in the coordinates for our landing and going through all the hoopla they call standard procedures. About ten minutes went by in relative quiet.

That's when I became afraid.

Now, I don't normally get involved with any alien's "personal business." I figure, well, it's personal.

But Holliths have a digestive system that can be outright dangerous to the unwary. Especially in the tight quarters of a small, but fast, starship.

"Dtang, you're not going to have another bowel movement, are you? You just had one three weeks ago?!?"

That look of intense concentration continued, which is a bad sign as Holliths aren't known for their mental abilities.

Unlike normal aliens, the Hollith digestive system is weird. Extremely efficient in tearing and ripping all the minerals and nutrients from their food intake, this same dynamic system stores the mutilated waste until it's time.

And when it's time, by space, it's time.

"Get up, now!"

I pushed his stiff, muscular frame forward as he stumbled along as if in a daze. I guess these things are so infrequent that it takes them a few minutes to realize what's happening.

I finally got him to the porcelain throne. As I turned I picked up several Etabzines for him to read. For a Hollith, going to the bathroom was both a long and titanic ordeal.

I got busy with the security and clearances, all of which are dragged out to the nth degree, but which make Ramaas the safe haven it is. I had almost forgotten him.

And then the noises began.

Now, I've learned to ignore most of the growling and the strained grunts, and even the death-like moans don't phase me much anymore. But I start to get nervous when the

rapid-fire splashing and strange noises begin.

Strange noises like, well, something like a gigantic foghorn that has been stretched so far out of shape it seems to be in agony as it tries to bellow forth. Sometimes it's more like an extra-large Brakian WereRat -- barking, but with a really bad head cold.

And then the results of Dtang's last bombastic bowel movement crystallized in my mind, and not a pretty picture it was.

"Dtang! This time remember to clean off the walls too. Alright? I don't want Natalie going in there and screaming or throwing up or anything. OK?"

Yeah, that would be lovely, Natalie finding that horrendous mess from last time.

Oh well, Holliths were good for one thing -- fighting. I had to keep reminding myself of that during times like these.

About an hour later we were finally landing and the big ThunderStar engines were winding down when she hit me with it.

"A daughter? What daughter!?!" I didn't realize I was screaming.

For the first time since I had met her, Natalie looked like she regretted something.

"I should have told you."

"I guess so, me being only the father and all!"

And then that old familiar look came back. Anger.

"If I could have found you! Three months of marriage and poof! You're gone, flying off in this tin can to who knows where, looking for space knows what. And the only thing I knew for sure was that you'd come back and probably be gone again, if you made it back in one piece. Well, that wasn't the life for me, so I left."

I had always wondered why she left. I guess we should have talked more.

I shrugged. "Maybe I should have taken you with me. I ... just thought it was too dangerous for ..."

"... a woman! Is that what you thought?! And after that Trgallian beast incident?!? Had you already forgotten it was I who'd saved our lousy necks?" She turned to head out the door.

A shiver went down my spine. I hate Trgallians, and I'll never hunt down another. Unless they pay me better.

We had landed only moments before. Dtang, finally finished with his business, and I were eager to spend some money. And now this: I was a father and had never known it.

But she stopped.

"I guess we never should have gotten married, Chase Broughton." She paused, deep in thought about what was behind, and what might have been. And where to go from here, now that we were there.

"She deserves to know her father. Margaret's done nothing wrong in all this." She turned those burning blue eyes on me. "So come on, you're going to meet your 11-year-old

offspring."

"Has it been that long?" I stammered. "And who's been watching her?" I had finally gathered my wits from the four winds.

Natalie smiled the smile of the ambushing carnivore.

"With Prem; he's her guardian. He's an Exxtrol."

I stopped just short of the bright sunshine and the sudden wave of humidity that washed over my skin. Why did all vacation spots have to be so blasted hot? I already knew that Ramaas, the entire surface covered with rides and amusements, was also a planet of tropical weather, what with the one large and two small suns that it circled. But still, why didn't anybody build these things in more moderate climates?

And now this, getting to know the daughter I never knew I had, and competing with this alien surrogate father, who no doubt would live up to his reputation as being the "perfect parent." That's what their race lived for, to raise their own offspring. Naturally, they got good money as "stand-ins" or nannies or whatever for other sentient races. The short, big-eared, by-the-rules, pompous ...

I hated him already.

Still, we all made our way out into the crowd and into Alien Customs -- another long and tedious ordeal. And the questions. It took us four long hours to get through it.

Warriors filled the darkened meeting room of Kragon's flagship, the Avenger, almost to overflowing. Dark-maned heads and the gray-furred, muscular bodies of Andarians were interspersed by other aliens, each clad in a wild assortment of body armor that partially covered fur, rippling scales and mottled skin.

In the middle of this smoky throng stood Kragon, straight and erect, as he surveyed his best warriors. He smiled at what he saw. The most feared crew of pirates in the known galaxy.

Shouts and yells filled the air. Kragon mused to himself how good it felt when other ships of his growing fleet returned with good news. And more booty.

His steady gaze turned to a group of arriving troops. It was Axthran, Captain of the Kilgrath, freshly returned. Kragon's black eyes narrowed as he motioned his personal cadre of officers closer.

The jackbooted Andarians of the Kilgrath marched steadily up to Kragon where they stopped, their bodies stiff as they bowed their heads to their clenched right fists in solemn salute. They held their pose.

Kragon remained silent, not acknowledging the honorific gesture in the slightest.

The crowd began to grow tensely silent as all eyes turned.

The electric feeling in the air quickly grew unbearable in the crowded room of armed warriors.

"Kragon!" Axthran shouted, still holding his salute. "I am a commander in your fleet; I bring you treasure I have taken by force and power. Your share!"

Kragon's eyes narrowed as a snarl curled his lips. Still, he remained silent.

Finally, not able to bear the rising tension any longer, Axthran slowly raised his own black eyes as his clenched fist lowered to the blaster strapped on his right hip.

"Why do you not accept me, my Captain?!" he spat out.

"I have two laws which I require from commanders in my fleet, Axthran!" Kragon hissed.

They stood before each other as both sets of underofficers backed away. Kragon and Axthran's eyes burned into each other as the room went deathly silent.

"The First: Never cheat me of my ordained cut of the booty!" Kragon growled.

Axthran's right hand slapped onto his blaster as he brought it out in one motion.

But Kragon was even faster. The red tracer went through Axthran's body like it was hot butter as its force threw his lifeless body backwards into several shocked warriors.

Kragon strode forward and eyed the still form.

"The Second: Don't let me catch you, if you dare to try."

A great sound of hearty laughter rose as Kragon's personal troops closed on the remaining officers of the Kilgrath.

Kragon raised his blaster and fired into the air, silencing the rising shouts.

"Take the officers below, to the torture rooms. I will let Mispah deal with them."

A babble of fearful awe rose at the announced fate of the officers of the Kilgrath.

One of them broke free of the grasp of his captor as he threw himself upon the floor before Kragon. Kragon looked mercilessly upon him.

"Please! It is I, Saltha, who have served even upon the Avenger in times past. Please, I ask mercy for my crimes."

Kragon nodded. "You have served me well in the past, Saltha. I will reward you for that good service."

The blaster sounded again as the body fell heavily to the deck, and the rest were quickly taken away.

Two more Andarians approached, albeit much more respectfully. They stood and held their clenched-fist salutes.

"Yes. Report." Kragon sounded quite bored as he holstered his blaster.

"We have word of the human, Broughton."

Kragon smiled, showing his fangs.

"And?"

"He has landed upon Ramaas. The Hollith and the human female from the Impaler's crew are with him. Our contact from the Ramaasian Customs has even informed us that

Broughton has an offspring there." The two men remained bowed to their fists.

"You have done well."

They slowly raised their heads.

"I want him brought here, alive. I wish to kill him myself." Kragon suddenly smiled an especially evil grin. "Dispatch the Nerillian ship; we don't want to attract the attention of the authorities any more than we have lately. Get the offspring and bring it here." Kragon started laughing. "The human will come here for it, if I know humans."

Kragon stroked his chin with his taloned finger.

"Then he will know Kragon's wrath!"

I had thought the worst thing in the known galaxy was an ugly alien. But there was worse: entire families of ugly aliens dressed in loud, clashing colors and all of them wearing shorts. Showing way too much skin. Or scales. Or whatever.

It wasn't a fashion show.

In all my travels to the farthest reaches of that same galaxy, I had never seen a stranger sight than this motley collection. Their knees were the worst of all: armored knees, horned knees, and knees covered and contorted and shaped so ugly that I just had to keep my gaze up at eye level as they approached from every direction. And still a few big alien knees came into view.

We made it, finally. And so I was to be rushed into fatherhood. Well, I could handle that; after all, I had survived Kragon.

Twenty minutes later, and I wasn't as sure.

My heart was still in my throat as I slowly pushed her door open after she had run away crying.

"You know, I didn't even know I had a pretty little daughter with red hair before ..."

I stepped back as she threw herself onto her bed and her sobs rose in volume.

"I hate my red hair!" She cried.

I could tell she was her mother's daughter alright.

I inhaled and exhaled very slowly, wondering if there was anything I could do to make this suddenly sad occasion right.

"Why haven't you ever come to see me?" Her big blue eyes looked straight into my soul. "Don't you know little girls need their fathers?"

I coughed.

"You are going about it all wrong." Prem's voice enunciated carefully from behind me.

I again considered punching that face. Actually, a broken nose or a few missing teeth might help his looks.

"Listen, Margaret. I can't change the past; nobody can. But we have today, and then tomorrow. I can be here for you now, and forever."

She looked up under those red curls.

"And hey, we're on Ramaas; you and I are going to ride every ride on this entire planet. Us, together."

I saw my daughter smile at me for the first time.

By the end of that first week we were almost acting like old pals. I couldn't get over how happy I felt being with her and listening to her laughter. Even simple things like sitting and talking to her.

Dtang had joined us for some of the more exciting rides. We were squeezing our way through the constant morass of beings that was also pushing back on us. You wondered sometimes if you were really making any progress.

As we worked our way slowly forward I pulled out my portable Comm unit and dialed up the public net to check and see if we had been assigned a day and time for Excelsior. Magically, instead of the usual "IN QUEUE" prompt, I finally got a real date and time.

"Margaret!" I shouted through the crowd. But she was nowhere to be seen. I had slowed my pace while using my Comm unit and they had gotten ahead of me. Looking around, I spotted the ebony face of Dtang above the heads and shoulders of the moving throng.

"Dtang!" Do you see Margaret?"

He put his four arms up in a shrug.

This wasn't like her to rush ahead like this. And then I heard something that made my blood run cold. Over the constant crowd noise around me I heard the faint scream of a familiar tiny voice.

Dtang heard it too. He began throwing people out of our way.

And then I heard it again.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

I redoubled my efforts against that sea of beings. Then the crowd seemed to open up magically.

There were two big Nerillians, short and stout with the typical flat noses. One of them had his red-skinned hand around Margaret's throat while the other held a wicked-looking knife to her abdomen. The other one held his knife toward the huge frame of Dtang, who had already caught up to them.

I stepped beside Dtang while their black eyes regarded us evilly.

"Let her go. Now." My voice was deeper than usual. And threatening.

"You have made a very bad mistake human. You must pay for that," said the one to my right who faced a snarling Dtang.

"Let ... her ... go! Or I'll kill both of you right here!" I gritted my teeth with rage as I saw the tears stream out of her blue eyes.

"Then she dies." He snarled.

Reaching over, Dtang grabbed a small flagpole, one of dozens, and easily snapped it into a five-foot club. He handed it to me.

Dtang brought his four tensed arms out in front of his body, his muscles bulging so tightly it seemed his ebony skin would tear.

"Dtang thinks that it's 'Butt kicking time' again."

The knife's point wavered.

Dtang growled and took a step forward.

"Back Hollith!" The shout betrayed the smallest fear. Everyone and everything fears an enraged Hollith.

"I will kill you." I allowed myself a wry chuckle. "But first, I'll let the Hollith here twist your heads clean off, very slowly. Then I'll beat your twitching corpses."

They eyed my dark-skinned friend.

Dtang bared his fangs in a delighted smile.

One of the Nerillians began to suffer from a nervous tic in his cheek.

And then the sound of sirens sounded above the hushed crowd that surrounded our face-off. The authorities were coming.

One Nerillian barked something to the other in their language. The one holding my daughter moved his knife up to her face. Margaret's eyes widened.

Then he picked her up and threw her. I saw her tiny frame hurtling towards me and I moved instinctively to shield her fall. Jumping forward, I barely got my arms under her and kept her from striking the pavement.

She was crying as I held her, comforting her. Slowly her sobs began to subside.

Dtang stood next to us, watching diligently for any other danger.

Finally she looked up.

"Oh daddy, you saved my life!"

And then she hugged me so tight I had trouble breathing. But I let her hug away; it was the best reward I had ever received.

"Oh Dtang," she said through tear stained eyes. "You saved my life too."

And surprisingly, for a big muscle-bound fighting machine, he gently lifted her from me and allowed her to give him a hug too.

We went back to the rooms, after the authorities had questioned us for hours.

"And how did they grab her in the first place? You, as father, are supposed to be watching her." Prem's pristine eyes glared at me accusingly.

"Listen, booby brain. I just had a bad run-in with some Nerillians running amok, who just

about killed my daughter here." I gestured to my now smiling daughter. "And after I got us out of that ..." Dtang growled menacingly at me. "OK, OK. After Dtang and I disposed of these crazies, the stupid Ramaasian police not only allowed them to escape, but they tried give me a citation for carrying a weapon ... a flagpole!" I started to use a few other choice words, but caught myself just in time. I shook my head at the injustice of it all. "So now I have to leave this planet within forty-eight hours. On suspicion!"

Prem shook his head condescendingly at me.

I began to calculate how much I could sell his lifeless and fur-shorn body for on the open market. And I wouldn't need much money either.

"What about the Excelsior?"

I looked down at my daughter. Well, I could tell she had some Broughton blood in her after all.

"Before our little incident today, I had just received confirmation on it."

Those little blue eyes began to twinkle with eagerness.

"We'll travel up there late tomorrow and take the ride of our lives. That's our date."

I received another enthusiastic hug. I was beginning to like those little things a lot.

"Do you think that would be prudent after today? After all, you do not even know the reason for the attempted kidnapping." His eyes stared at me.

"How would you like a one way trip to ...!"

"Now daddy, remember, he's my guardian."

I was going to have to talk Dtang into a little guardian bashing, one day soon.

The rest of the evening went by in relative calm, though I began to wonder what had become of Natalie. Somewhere during all of my father-daughter time the last few days, she had disappeared. Something didn't seem quite right, again.

Tomorrow came.

The Avenger was flying fast and deadly when the communication came for Kragon.

He wasn't pleased.

Sitting there stretched across the commander's chair, he took the bad news as only the greatest Andarian warrior could.

He broke the Comm officer's arm. Twice.

As another warrior helped him off the bridge, being careful not to get too close to his enraged Captain in the process, Kragon nodded his head.

"Chaxsa! Call up the Rapier. She's closest to Ramaas right now. Order Taza to choose his best hand-to-hand fighters. All Andarians, his mightiest. I have a special assignment for them."

Kragon smiled savagely.

"And tell them if they can't get the offspring ... then just kill Broughton and the four-armed clown themselves."

I decided to fly the Lightning because Excelsior was located on the southern continent of Ramaas. Besides, it might be the only time Margaret got to fly in her. I could feel the pull for the open space lanes stirring inside of me. And I had just about fulfilled my stint as father.

Just before we took off, Natalie reappeared, but she still kept her goings-on to herself. She was too quiet. I was going to have to get the facts on this. Something just wasn't adding up.

We flew close in to the fabled coaster before we landed. Mile after twisting mile hung like a necklace around the rocky mountain's sides.

Dtang nodded appreciatively as he watched the blur of a car go into a series of corkscrew loops. He had decided to ride with us, with no coaxing at all.

Natalie and Prem stayed with the Lightning. The three of us took the long elevator ride up to the starting point of Excelsior. For once we weren't surrounded by crowds of tourists. It felt good.

"Dtang think we got to wear this ride out!"

Margaret looked at Dtang with a worried look.

"Don't worry, I'm the driver. We can always slow it down. Each car has the capability for acceleration and braking," I said soothingly.

"But Dtang want to go fast!"

"Maybe I shouldn't ride with ..."

I raised my hands.

"They have all kinds of safety features built into this thing. After all, they couldn't make money if people got killed riding it."

"You can get killed?" she whined.

Dtang's eyes widened with hope.

"No," I half lied, "you can't get killed."

Margaret smiled now. Dtang just looked disgusted.

The elevator finally finished its trip. We stepped out into the large room where the cars were rolled slowly to the starting point as attendants loaded up the passengers.

At least that was what I had expected from the brochures.

It was a large room carved out of the mountain, and the beginning of that torturous track was before us, as well as four empty cars. But other than that, everything seemed dead.

"Wow, this is great. We get to ride all by ourselves," Margaret shouted gleefully.

I looked around silently, every nerve suddenly coming alive. Because the operators kept the crowds to such small numbers at this ride, I realized with a hammering of my heart that this might make a good place for an ambush on an otherwise crowded planet.

Dtang also sensed trouble. I had raised my hand to stop her bounding steps toward the coaster when they jumped us.

There were eight of them, all Andarians, not a small one among them. (What do they feed these guys?)

I rushed the one heading for Margaret as she screamed. My right fist sent him down, but before I could do any more damage I was reeling from a blow by a second one.

The air was full of fists and kicking feet and strangled grunts of pain, some of which were mine. Too many of them.

I twisted away from fists, only to find more. But I did land a couple of well-placed blows. Warm blood trickled down the side of my face as I rolled away from one I had just kicked in the face.

"Help!"

I looked over and saw one of them picking up Margaret. I raced past Dtang who was swinging his four fists at several Andarians, some standing, some fallen around him.

Seeing my approach, the Andarian put Margaret inside the lead car and turned to me. As I swung at him, I noticed with sudden horror that the car began to move on the rail.

I missed. But he didn't, and I doubled over with pain.

He then grabbed me around the neck, trying none too gently to twist my head off. I sent my elbow into his gut, which loosened his grip, and I pushed him away.

And then I was running (well, hobbling anyway) until I had reached the accelerating car that held a wide-eyed little girl. Getting beside it, I lifted my leg high and jumped.

I didn't quite make it.

My left leg was hanging outside as I reached frantically for some kind of hold in the sparse interior. There wasn't much in there except the long, cushioned seat and the loose restraining straps.

My fingers latched onto one of them as something began to happen.

"Warning," a mechanical voice sounded from a speaker on the dash. "You must put on all restraining belts. Keep all hands, tentacles and other body parts inside car. Warning ..."

The speedometer showed us creeping past fifteen miles an hour as my body shifted left, almost sending me out of the car. As I waved one arm around to get my balance, we suddenly hit a right curve. I repeated my wild gesticulations, only managing to get tangled up in the restraining belts.

We hit several more curves before I finally got my balance. I started to put my other leg inside when the track in front of the car disappeared.

And then it reappeared, heading straight down. A long, long way down.

My body was pushed backwards and almost out the back of the open car by a sudden blast of air as we descended that first magnificent drop. I clutched at the tangled mess loosely wrapped around me with both hands, and I clamped my legs against the car, one leg inside and the other outside. I tried to pull myself in, but it was all I could do to keep from being blown off.

As I began screaming, (which seemed to spur my efforts to hang on), I remembered how big the first drop was while the speedometer on the dash became a blur of rising digits.

Margaret's screams rose in crescendo with mine as we roared down. The hurricane force of air began beating me like something alive and insane. I suddenly began to question my passion for coasters.

And then I was falling forward. My face hit that cushioned seat so hard that I saw the entire galaxy before me. We had made it to the bottom of the drop.

I began scrambling with the straps. My right leg was a little numb as I struggled to sit up. Margaret was facing backwards and staring at me as I finally managed to sit. She pointed behind me.

I looked back to see another car just coming out of the drop behind us. Two Andarians with black hair streaming backwards were closing. I looked a little further back. A third car was careening at a blinding speed and if it hadn't been for the four outstretched ebony arms, I would have not have known who it was. Or maybe I would, as I suddenly heard his roar of all-out joy.

"Look!" Margaret pointed higher on the steep drop of the rail.

Way at the top another car was beginning its descent. And then I was slammed down into the bottom of the car by a force pinning me so hard I couldn't even breathe.

We were going through the first of the Dozen.

And then the force released me from its mighty grip. As I rose I was slung bodily to the left, banging my head again.

I struggled and fought to sit upright, but every time I got my bearings we were upside down again, the terrific centrifugal force smashing me down and pinning me once more.

I was inside some kind of craziness, body-slammed to the left, then pinned down into the floor, and then body-slammed back to the right.

Curves and loops, and then all over again.

And then nothing. I was afraid to raise my head from the bottom of the car, but I had to. Shaking from exhaustion, I managed to sit upright.

And the ride had just begun! Putting a hand on each side of the car, I tried to sit still a moment without getting hurt.

"WARNING, safety systems are off-line. Passengers in cars are requested to take over manual controls. Warning: ALL passengers must secure themselves, bodily injury may result. WARNING ..."

Margaret and I stared at the small intercom and its mechanical voice.

"Tell me something I don't know!!!"

And then I fell forward, knocking Margaret under the dash.

They had caught up to us, but too rapidly. The Andarian's car had slammed into us and pushed us forward, away from the Andarian who had leaned forward over the front of his car. He was waving his arms frantically, trying not to fall completely out.

I looked around and forward at the few buttons on the sparse dash. Actually, there were two buttons. One for braking, one for acceleration.

I mashed the GO button, always my favorite.

Our car, already zipping along on the frictionless magnetism, surged forward.

"Get yourself belted in!" I yelled at Margaret as she righted herself into her seat.

"Look!"

I looked back with her pointing finger.

Dtang's car had just bumped into the Andarians behind us about a hundred feet back. I saw fists flailing in the air as their bodies swung precariously out from their cars.

"WARNING, moving too fast for next series of curves. DANGER, safety systems are off-line ... WARNING ... "

I pressed the braking button gently, I thought.

My head knocked Margaret back into the front portion of the car, where she landed in a small heap. My face was one with the dash again as I tried to let go. Gravity was against me and then we were into the first of the curves.

Body-slam left, body-slam right, and one-two-three-four ... and again ...

I was getting beaten to death and still had to fight those Andarians.

Which reminded me. I turned and saw an Andarian grabbing for me. He was half out of his car and into mine. We began struggling. In between, I saw Dtang grabbing and punching, first in one direction, then behind with still another one.

There we were, four cars jammed up to each other. Human, Andarian and Hollith fists punching and scratching while our cars careened wildly around curve after curve. First whipping hard to the right, then racing wildly to the left. I almost fell out several times.

I began to wonder which would knock me out of the car -- the struggling Andarian or the sudden turns. My only help was that he was having to struggle as much as I was to keep from getting thrown out.

Unfortunately, I was again hanging half out of the car, trying to loosen the Andarian's grip on my shirt, when we came to the second drop. It wasn't as big, to be sure, but it was big enough.

Our two cars started to pull apart. Feeling my legs being stretched apart none too gently, I leapt toward him suddenly, and found myself in the car with them while the car holding Margaret sped a few feet forward of us. We fell as Dtang's car rammed us from behind again.

"DANGER ... cars are too close. Please resume safe and courteous riding procedures..."

I wish.

We struggled fiercely as we rounded a long hanging, curve. I was lying across the front of their car with his iron hands bolted under my chin as he tried to force me out. Upside down, I saw Margaret staring at me from a few feet ahead of us. I began to slide off.

With my free hand, I searched blindly over their dash and then found a button. I mashed it just as I saw Dtang leaping onto the back of the other Andarian.

It was the brake button.

Wrong one. Most of my body was hanging out now as I studied the blur that was the ground going by, inches away. It was mainly the force of air that kept me from going the rest of the way.

Dtang had grabbed both of them and was starting to pummel them. I was wondering what my odds were of getting out of this alive.

And then there was that familiar thud as my head hit something solid. It was the back of Margaret's car. She had hit her brake and saved me, sort of.

I flailed my arms and finally found a single, precious hold as the two cars began to draw apart. Grabbing, I pulled hard until my face was inside the front car, but the rest of me was hanging out. And then we hit another curve. My legs and body swung outwards as I held on. I decided another long, loud scream might give me incentive.

"WARNING, keep all arms and legs inside of the car ... next series of tunnels and curves oncoming. WARNING, safety restraints are not fastened ..."

We straightened out. But my problem was that except for my arms, my entire body was hanging out right now. I decided it was time to obey the rules.

Grunting with each move, I managed to pull myself in until just my legs hung out. I tried to throw my leg over, but the force of the buffeting air caused it to slip off.

Margaret screamed.

Looking back, I saw the car carrying Dtang drawing closer. If they rammed, they would mash me between the cars. And then Dtang picked up an Andarian from off the floor and tossed him aside. He disappeared into a cloud of dust as he slammed into the ground.

I flinched. And then Dtang had an Andarian on his back, from the fourth car. The fighting got furious as the light began to grow dim and the front of their car nosed up just before me.

It was time to act. Or time to get crushed.

I threw my leg again. Again I got it over the edge. Again it slipped off. And then I felt pressure behind me. The nose of their car was against me.

It was a blessing in disguise. Letting go with my left hand, I pushed against it and forced myself up. This time my leg went on inside the car as I threw it over. But the car pushed further against me. And then it went dark as something fell on me.

Dtang had fallen forward with the struggling Andarians. I almost went down again, and now I

couldn't see a thing. I felt them struggling just over me as Dtang tried to right himself. My grunts mixed with theirs.

And then I felt the cars begin to separate. I threw my body over as I released my grasp on the car behind. But try as I might, I could only get my body half up. The force of the rushing air, and my current weakness, prevented me from getting inside.

"Margaret! Hit the brake ... GENTLY!"

Of course, she didn't listen to me. She must have mashed it all the way down. It had the nice side effect of throwing me bodily into the dash. Again. But I was inside.

And then came the ever-familiar bump. Their car had closed with us again. Our car shuddered as all of them fell inside with us.

Margaret tried to stand, and as she did her hand inadvertently landed on the acceleration button. The car leapt forward, and another Andarian fell off Dtang's back and out of the car.

Then all of us were slammed into the floor. We were going through the corkscrew loops. The Nasty Nine.

As we came out of the last one, we slowly raised our heads. I was afraid of what was next.

"Dtang tired of Andarian pirates!"

I heard the last one flung out as Dtang chuckled happily. Behind us, the last pirate slowed his car as Dtang beckoned him closer. He was smarter than he looked as he backed his car away. But it was too late. I saw that look on Dtang's face, a look that chilled my soul. A look of intense concentration.

"Margaret! Face forward and close your eyes!"

I looked back as Dtang began to make preparations to "finish" this last Andarian.

"And hold your nose!"

I guess the Nasty Nine had roused Dtang's dreaded bowel, and he was going to use it as a weapon of mass destruction. (And I mean massive!)

I knew I shouldn't have watched; that dreaded sight will surely haunt my nightmares for years to come (especially if any rank smells waft into my sleep). Dtang was bent over, facing forward, when he dropped his "tropical red" drawers. I saw the outline of his big black butt facing backwards. The Andarian's eyes, as he slowly backed his car away, grew large with bewilderment and then showed rising fear.

I saw what no being should ever have to see. The initial blast hit home, covering the Andarian's chest and face. He screamed in despair. I couldn't watch anymore.

Soon after that first blast came the "barking sounds" and the emergence of the "dying foghorn." I actually felt sorry for that last Andarian. He was probably suffocating, and probably wishing he had been thrown off at full speed, like the rest. It would have been more merciful.

The noises abated, thankfully. After all, it had only been a week since the last one. I tried to sit now, as far forward as I could. But Dtang (with his pants on again) soon had two of his arms wrapped tightly around my waist as his war whoops began again.

All that was left was the rest of Excelsior. There were five more minutes of hairpin curves, loops and rocketing drops. It was almost boring. Even so, I was so weak I could only sit there, getting slammed from side to side and backwards into Dtang.

None of us ever got those restraints on. Finally, we slowed to a standstill.

"Occupants of car thirty-six." The voice from the speaker addressed us. "You have disobeyed almost every rule devised for this ride. This could have resulted in your personal injury."

"No kidding," I snarled. "I hope you boys had fun." I looked up at a big, surly-looking Ramaasian security officer. "That was your last ride on Excelsior for a long time," he said.

We were given the official escort, and given the official interrogation, and then given the official Safety speech, which was the worst thing they could have done to Dtang and I -- except when they saw the condition of the car behind us. Then they decided we needed the official Hygiene speech too. It was the worst.

Needless to say, we were promptly kicked off Ramaas and told not to come back -- not in this lifetime anyway.

The Andarian Comm officer rubbed his heavily bandaged arm as he stopped just out of range of Kragon. Kragon was watching the view screen as the stars approached and swept past in eternal splendor. He was lost in thought, or so it seemed.

"You have bad news."

The Comm officer took a step backwards.

"Stop." Kragon began tapping the worn arm of his chair with his talons. He took a deep breath. "This human is much better than I anticipated. Rhaza! Call my officers together, I see I will have to deal with this problem personally."

Kragon stood and raised his clenched fist to the star field.

"But I shall pick the time and place for the next battle, and it will be your last, Chase Broughton."

Kragon spit his rage onto the deck and then strode quickly off the bridge with two warriors on either side.

I was going over the figures in the Nav computer when I heard a sound behind me. I turned to see Natalie casually leaning against the bulkhead.

"We have to drop Margaret and Prem as quickly as possible. A Trotan-controlled planet would probably be safest. And, I need you to tell me our present destination."

There she was, doing my thinking for me again.

"Yeah, I already thought of that. But she's having a good time, and I haven't even wound up my ThunderStar engines for her yet. I promised I'd put the Lightning through her paces one good time."

Natalie shook her head. "This ain't no picnic we're on."

"I know, I know. Give me a week, and ..." I smiled, remembering my old friend Haigeg. He was an alien Trader, some of the time, and a pirate, but not like Kragon. Privateer would better describe him. Really, what best describes Haigeg is that he's a lot like me, just a good ol' Galactic Opportunist looking for the right deal and the right money. And time to spend it.

"I've got to rendezvous with an old friend, Haigeg. I think he can help me with my little Andarian problem. And maybe more."

Natalie eased into my face. "That's right Chase Broughton; no need to stay in the frying pan when you can just hop on into the flames."

That most ancient of adages came once more to my furrowed brow: "Why do women have to ruin everything?!?"

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