

ThunderStar

by Tony Chandler

I have created a monster.

The crimson glistened in dripping gobs on the walls. And then, in crimson clarity, there was the distinct imprint of its huge hand etched in gory detail. Down the center of the darkened hall a trail of half-gnawed food and other ominously scattered debris showed its path.

And there were the screams coming from the room beyond.

I closed my eyes as I prepared to face it.

The Earthophile.

The screams grew louder as I approached the half-opened door, and hesitated. But there was no getting around this grim confrontation. It was time I set the record straight, and saved the dignity of all humanity.

"Dtang!"

I cringed as my eyes took in the sight.

Spread in all directions around his ebony form was such a profusion of broken potato chips, popcorn, pretzels and other remnants from his all-night session... well, the crumbs alone could have fed a small third-world colony.

The Hollith sat with his two legs splayed across my best chair. One hand held a can of beer, a second was cupping a pile of spaghetti dripping with sauce, a third had fingers covered with brown and poised over a gallon jar of choicest peanut butter, and in his fourth hand "my" holographic video remote.

I knew three things right away.

One, Dtang was going to have to learn to eat with a fork and spoon. Two, I was going to have to buy my own jar of peanut butter... and hide it. Three...there was going to be war.

And then there was his HoloVid obsession!

"What are you watching now?!? Your tiny Hollith brain must have turned to mush hours ago watching all those ancient holo-reruns!!!"

Dtang's red eyes glared at me.

"Dtang like Earth shows. Learn about life."

I shook my head.

"And what, pray tell, can a Hollith learn about life from reruns?"

"Dtang now know what pursuit of entire human race is. Dtang knows what is highest goal of humans. Dtang see it in human art, read it in words of poetry, sense it in religious experiences, understand it cause of many, many wars. See it all on HoloVid." His words

paused. "Dtang know it is that which human race seek for all time."

I took a step back as I felt my heart pounding in my chest and my breath grow short. Had Dtang, through his newfound obsession of humanity, actually found the ultimate truth? To the ultimate question? Was it "really" out there???

"What...is the answer?!?" I stammered.

"Naked women."

I suddenly felt the room begin to spin. And then it hit me; the utter beauty of it, the sheer simplicity of it.... wait a minute!!!

Dtang emitted a healthy belch as I returned to my senses.

"You've watched way too many reruns, my ebony friend. And probably too much beer and peanut butter too."

Dtang smiled as he sucked at his vegetable water and then ate a handful of peanut butter. His mouth chewed enthusiastically.

"Even if our culture is full of naked women, humanity does have 'other' noble goals, you know," I ranted. "I mean, look at...." I cringed again as I realized what Dtang was watching on the Holo-screen.

Of all the great sports to originate from Earth: baseball, football, golf, bowling, soccer (OK, football again), THIS was the sport Dtang was enamored with!

I pointed an enraged finger at the screaming pandemonium on the screen. Huge men with gargantuan muscles danced around each other with eyes aglow.

"Wrestling is NOT a sport, Dtang."

Dtang growled.

"It's all fake. Period. I mean, any sentient alien with HALF a brain can see that!"

Dtang emptied all his hands and stood.

"See that guy there," I pointed that angry finger again.

"Him Dtang's favorite. Three-Eyed Assassin best wrestler. Him dangerous, like Dtang." He grunted.

I looked closer. And I realized how dangerous a thing genetic-engineering had become.

"OK, OK. But look at that fake punch, he didn't really hurt that other steroid-pumped bozo. Can't you see that? He just went with it. Now see that, yeah, he didn't really hit him in the stomach. The other guy just danced around it. Wrestling's more like... bad acting."

"Dtang like wrestling. Dtang like... A LOT!"

There's no reasoning with fanaticism. Blind faith is such a pitiful thing, especially in a Hollith warrior. But I had to try, for the human race.

"Now baseball, there's a sport of skill, of strategy. Of dignity! If you want to become obsessed, like a good human, become obsessed about something worth becoming

obsessed about."

He suddenly placed one of his hands on my shoulder. And squeezed.

"Dtang want to be human."

"Don't be an imbecile, Dtang. Look at yourself, you've got too many bodily appendages to be a human." My brain reeled.. "I think???"

Holliths seem to get bigger when they get mad.

"Dtang best man humanity ever had. And... Dtang going to be All-Pro Wrestler!"

I started laughing. "Well," I panted, "You're a pretty bad actor. That's definitely a..."

Things happen quickly with an angry Hollith.

As my body left the floor with a sickening jerk, I suddenly contemplated changing my opinion of wrestling. Maybe it wasn't... the universe was suddenly spinning near the speed of light. And then I was on my back, with an incredibly loud and hollow thud.

My mind raced, trying to outrun the pain signals from every inch of my shattered body.

Body slams certainly look fake, but I guess when an enraged Hollith twirls you around a few times before he slams, and the floor is battle-hardened trialthium steel, well.... it hurts.

As I lay there, numb and unable to move for about an hour, I began to gain a new appreciation for wrestling.

Dtang finally left after the final bout on the Holo, and the feeling had just about come back into my body when it happened.

"Do you always keep this ship in such a mess?"

It was my ex-wife, Natalie. She had been with me so long now, it was almost like we had never gotten divorced. What a feeling.

"It's a good thing we dropped 'my' daughter off at Carna II. What kind of a role model are you?"

"A crippled one?" I said as I tried to stand.

"What am I, your mother? Hobble over to the medi-scan and get yourself patched up." She said.

I love compassion in a woman.

But I did it. After all, I wanted to walk upright again.

She was standing at the bridge looking at a star chart when I found her. The lights from the control panel gleamed off of her blonde hair and twinkled in her eyes. But I know better.

"Figured our position?" I asked.

"Yes, I've been monitoring our little journey. Kind of surprised where you're taking us, though."

I smiled as she punched some buttons and the planet appeared on another console screen.

"Helveterus." She said.

"Home of the famous race, founders of the Confederation of Traders," I added.

She gave me one of those looks. The look. The kind only a woman can give when she's dealing with a man. Or ex-man.

"You're not here to run the 'HemiDemi' are you?"

I shrugged nonchalantly as I sat down in the pilot's chair. My chair.

"I had to, only way to get permission to land this time of year. But I'll back out, even though my ship has as good a chance as any in the Three Quadrants. The real reason I'm here is to meet Haigeg. Old Trader friend of mine... Not to run in the famed Trader's race."

"Pirate is what you mean, right?" She challenged.

I shrugged again.

"No, those days are long gone. It got too... messy. A Trader is a much more... honest way of life."

She snorted.

"An honest Trader? That's like calling a Black Hole a 'disturbance' in the space/time continuum. Who is Haigeg kidding?"

I raised my hands. "Hey, you forget I'm a card carrying Trader too. From time to time I barter some lucrative loads. And look at me."

I should start thinking before I speak.

Oh well, she left anyway. Laughing.

It was time to come out of hyper-space too. Planet-fall was here, and time to see an old friend.

And, to show him my little scan of Kragon's right arm. Haigeg has had his little dealings with Pirates, even Andarians. He's what you would call an expert on that particularly unpleasant sentient race. And, you see, Haigeg and I share another trait.

We both like gold.

The burly First Officer strode boldly onto the bridge of the Avenger. And then he paused as his glaring eyes fell upon Kragon. With a snarl he bowed his head and took the final steps to his leader. There his body went taut as he bowed his head more deeply and stared at his clenched right fist. The Andarian salute.

And there he remained.

"Report, Alarus. And don't waste my time."

Alarus' gaze remained fixed on his fist. One did not release the Andarian salute, not until Kragon acknowledged it. Not unless one wanted to die that day.

"I brought the Trader captain. He has word of the human."

Kragon's steel eyes hardened as the talons on his right hand extended fully with his rising anger. In a flash he was out of the commander's chair and standing in the middle of the Avenger's bridge, staring at the viewscreen full of motionless stars. The dark locks of his black mane fell across his shoulder-armor as he stared.

The warriors on the bridge all grew deathly still. And they waited for death.

Kragon breathed deeply, held the huge breath, and then slowly let it out. With his right hand on his holstered blaster, he slowly turned to the still frozen Alarus.

"This is good. I can feel my claws in the human's neck, killing him."

Alarus smiled at his fist.

"Where is this Trader!?!?" Kragon shouted.

"I am here."

Kragon turned.

It was a Galshan Trader, clothed with black leather over his stocky form and wearing the distinctive long-barreled pistols on each hip. His gloved hands rested over each handle as he advanced onto the bridge.

Kragon's mouth twisted into a snarling smile.

"I acknowledge you, Alarus."

Alarus stood and let out a breath of relief.

"Now, who is this Galshan maggot that has stepped uninvited onto my bridge?!"

The Galshan's eyes narrowed as he stopped.

"I am captain of the Vashloya, honored Trader of the Confederation." The purple eyes narrowed. "I am Gatosh. And I will sell you the information you seek."

Kragon's mighty laugh shook the bridge, and took his warriors by total surprise. Slowly, one by one, as their leader's loud mirth echoed off the battle bridge, their own laughter joined his.

And then Kragon raised his fist.

The silence was a tomb.

Kragon strode forward, his eyes seeing the Galshan's hands tighten ever so slightly on his twin weapons. Kragon smiled.

"You have nothing to sell me, Galshan maggot. Kragon is no wormy merchant, Kragon is no trader cow!"

Gatosh nodded solemnly as he realized his mistake. But his Trader instincts were quick.

"Then, maybe I can barter for my life. Something not of value to you, but of immense value to me."

Kragon's smiled widened.

Gatosh waited as Kragon approached. He realized with crystal-clear hindsight that no one negotiated with an Andarian pirate. And especially not with Kragon himself.

There was only one card left he had to play, and he had better play it right.

Kragon crossed his mighty arms. And then his words broke the icy silence.

"Speak quickly, Galshan pig. Your life in this universe has grown short."

A nervous twitch tugged at the Trader's right eye.

"I have news of the human you seek to kill. I have answered the call which you sent to all points of this quadrant." The Galshan paused. "And I bring word how you may kill him even tomorrow, before the eyes of the entire Three Quadrants."

Kragon's steamy breath caressed the Trader's face like a rising storm.

"Speak."

The Galshan breathed deeply, wondering if it was his last breath.

"The human, Chase Broughton, has entered the annual race at Helveterus. It is the Trader's race." Kragon's eyes narrowed even as the Galshan's words flew out of his mouth. "I can get your ship into the race, and... and I know the little-used maxim that will allow competing ships the use of their weapons. I can do this for you!"

Kragon grunted. And then turned.

The Andarian Captain walked back to his commander's chair and stood with his back turned to the Trader. And the voice of Kragon spoke.

"Take his weapons."

Two Andarian warriors closed with lightning movements and pulled the long-barreled pistols out of their leather holsters.

The Trader stood defenseless, his only card played.

"If you do this, then you may live. Perhaps."

The Trader almost smiled, but caught himself in time.

"I will have to present your ship's request in person, with at least one of your crew, to the Race officials. You are entering your ship late, and there will be problems."

Kragon sat down, once again the conqueror.

"I have only one problem at the moment. A mere annoyance. But as soon as I have the human's ship in range of my guns, that too will be gone. Permanently!"

"State the name and type of ship."

I beamed proudly. I didn't have many opportunities to brag about my baby.

"The Lightning. She's originally a K Class Wayxollian Fast Recon. Built for speed, in and out of hyperdrive. And..." My smile widened. "I've added a few touches of my own."

The race official looked unimpressed.

"That's what they all say. Tell me about your engines, so we can place you in the correct section for the start."

I chuckled. For I knew he would 'have' to place me with the fastest of the contenders.

"I'm running twin Thunderstars, modified." I thumped my chest. "Both Tachyon injected. Plus a dual in-line Manifold with its own containment field." My smile widened. "I've also added a little ol' Matter/Anti-Matter Turbo. And..." I paused for that nice dramatic effect. "for those times I 'need speed,' a Burst-Mode Plasma Super-Charger. Gives 'em both that extra little 'ummp' right when I need it, if you know what I mean."

I winked with obvious pride.

The official yawned.

And then his hand began to move even farther back on the list.

Was this alien an idiot?

Oh well, I had real business here. I couldn't forget about Kragon's gold. And Haigeg.

"OK, OK, just get me registered. I'm in a hurry."

"Let's see," His hand moved to the end.

I hate it when I want to punch somebody out. And I can't.

"Well," I leaned over his electronic console. "I've made one other itsy bitsy modification. It's somewhat for the pilot's benefit, and those twisty sub-light stretches. You know, like the section through the Tree-Mountains. And the part through your Catacomb Moon. Yeah, especially there through that rocky maze."

He yawned again.

"This last one is a human modification actually," I raised my voice, and noticed that heads were beginning to turn in our direction. "Nobody else has got it on their ships. Took me quite some time to synchronize the connections... to get the right 'feel' to it.. Actually, it was the 'hard' decelerations that took the most tweaking. But I got it right." I crossed my arms. "And of course, she screams through the sub-light accelerations."

"Alright, human. Tell me if anything good can come from Earth."

I cleared my throat, and spoke loud enough so that everyone in the room could hear.

"She's got 'FOUR on the floor.'"

There was dead silence.

Have you ever farted in a roomful of aliens? And been caught? Yeah, that's the look everyone was giving me.

I rolled my eyes at their ignorance.

"I'm placing you among the Intermediate ships. That's the best I can do."

I turned to leave.

"Oh, and there's been a change to the course. An old and rare maxim has been called up. The race has been cut in half, and the selective use of weapons approved."

"You don't mean..." My mouth dropped open.

"Yes. It's now a HemiDemiSemi."

I whistled, long and loud.

"And weapons?"

"Only sections of the course where designated. And, of course, only by the rules."

"What if ship destroyed?" Dtang asked with newly awakened enthusiasm.

"Then you are penalized."

I looked at Dtang and shook my head with disappointment.

"Dtang, we can't go around destroying starships just because we want to win a race. It's...it's just not cool. Don't you remember our maxim, 'Guns set to stun.' And then leave with what we came for."

Dtang bowed his head in shame. And growled.

"Actually," the race official continued. "The penalty for destroying a ship is disqualification. The HemiDemi is an old and noble race. We don't go in for that type of racing." His hands typed rapidly over the keys of his console. "I quote from the official rules, 'Weapons shall be used solely for the purpose of slowing down a ship directly in front of, or to the side of, the approaching ship. And only on designated portions of the course where danger to the ships is at a minimum. Failure to obey these directions will result up to and including disqualification for the perpetrator's misuse of ship's weapons.'"

Dtang groaned with disappointment.

"Hey, at least you can shoot at somebody," I comforted. "We'll aim for their engines, and power grids. With weapons at half-power. That'll slow 'em down."

Dtang perked up.

"Well, count me in." I turned to the official. "I wouldn't miss this HemiDemi for all the gold..." I bit my tongue before I slipped and said the 'K' word.

"Hemi-Demi-Semi," He enunciated carefully.

"Yeah, that." I turned to leave again.

"And the Trader's Confederation advises caution, especially in the bars and on darkened streets. Fights and brawls are fine, but we've, unfortunately, had our first fatality."

"Who?" I asked.

"Oh, some poor Trader from Galshan. Shot in the back, they tell me. But most surprising of all, he was unarmed when they found him."

Haigeg hadn't changed a bit.

He was laughing that laugh of his with great guffaws as he boarded with bounding steps. Haigeg could move pretty quickly for an alien that size. And he was sizable, around the waist that is. Sometimes I wondered how he got that huge leather belt latched. Or if he ever removed it.

"Chase Broughton, my old friend. It is so good to see you again." His bearded and smiling face looked me up and down. He put one hand on the blaster on his hip and started laughing again. "I see you are still very much the loner, my human friend. You must eat more."

Natalie suddenly appeared from behind the hulking form of Dtang.

"Hello, Haigeg."

Haigeg's eyes widened. And his laughter grew louder.

"I see your taste in females has not changed either." He hooked his thumb at her and leaned his musky beard into my face as he whispered. "Still too scrawny. Not enough flesh to hang on to."

Natalie's eyes hardened.

"So, what's an old pirate like you doing on a Trader's planet?" Natalie said with icy venom.

I coughed as I looked for Haigeg's reaction.

He just laughed louder.

"Well, she has spirit. That is good for the romance, no?"

I coughed louder.

"Well, Haigeg, actually there is no romance." I said.

Haigeg's laughter faded. "Oh, then you have married her?"

"No, not that bad. We're divorced."

Haigeg looked with puzzlement from me to her.

"Then why are you together?"

"Long story," I said. "But it does have something to do with why I came here to see you."

Haigeg's bushy eyebrows rose with interest.

"Kragon's Gold. I have a scan that may take us right to it."

Haigeg's laughing face finally turned serious. Deadly serious.

"How have you done this thing? And you are still alive!" He exclaimed.

I related the tale, about the death of Kragon and the race to his gold cache. And how Dtang and I wound up with Natalie, and the scan. The entire story, up to the present.

Haigeg smiled. "I wish I could have been along for that ride."

"Maybe not," I sat at the console and punched up the scan.

"Pardon me for leaving, but I never had the stomach for suicide. But, I'll make sure they put on both of your HoloMarkers that it was Kragon who killed you." And with that bit of positivity she left.

Haigeg eyed me carefully. And then he shook his head.

"She's at that awkward age for females, you know. The age between 4 and 90." I added.

Haigeg chuckled appreciatively.

"Yes, that is the way it is with our females too. And, we have wise proverb that explains partially this great paradox."

I waited.

"If one compromises because he is wrong, he is wise. If one compromises because he is right, he is married."

I understood every word. But it was time for business.

Haigeg and I went over every inch of that scan. Up and down, backwards and forward. We looked at every tattoo, every ring, every scar on that gray-furred arm of Kragon's.

I never realized Andarian body fur was so full of insects. And they never scratch!

"It is as I thought." Haigeg leaned back in his chair and rubbed his weary eyes.

It was still all smoke and mirrors to me though.

"OK, Haigeg. Fill in the blanks."

He smiled as his large hand pointed.

"See the ring on his third finger. Yes, that one. The stone is called an Ini." Haigeg said.

"What's the big deal?" I asked.

"It is only semi-precious, my human friend. The stones in his other rings are all fabulously precious. So, why this poor stone among its rich brethren?"

It was still dark.

Haigeg smiled and pointed again.

"See this tattoo, the Camarat dragon. And this one farther up, the 'Crossed blaster and sword.'"

"Yes," I said.

"And finally, you will notice the ancient script on this third tattoo. It is in the ancient writing of the Andarian race. All of these together mean only one thing."

I watched his face carefully.

"Chadras."

It was still dark.

"And that means, in plain Standard?" I asked.

"The Planet of Eternal Mist."

I had heard of that.

"Isn't that the planet where Andarians take their adolescent males, the ones ready to become warriors? They give them little or no food, a day's ration of water, and one weapon." I began.

"The weapon of their choosing. That is the important part," Haigeg added.

"And if they're alive when the ship returns in one week, they're considered warriors."

"Well, not quite. Chadras is only the first step in that sacred process. The first of seven."

I whistled. Thank the stars I wasn't born Andarian.

"I've also heard this Chadras is the only habitable planet never successfully colonized. Why's that?"

A faraway look came into old Haigeg's eyes. And I noticed that his expression hardened, as if he were remembering a nightmare.

"The planet is shrouded by a thick, chemical fog. A fog that never lifts." He leaned toward me. "What is worse, no sensors will work in it. So, the explorer must depend solely upon his five senses. Six, if he has them."

I nodded.

"That's not too bad...." I began, but Haigeg's hand rose to stop my next words.

"Your eyes will only see...maybe one hundred meters. Your ears will hear for over one kilometer. Maybe two," He shrugged.

"OK." I said. But something in his eyes silenced me again.

Haigeg's voice dropped to a whisper, almost as somebody were listening to us now.

"But the reason no sentient race, no, not even the mighty Andarians, have ever established a permanent colony..." Haigeg gritted his teeth, almost as if the next words would cause pain.

"Is because of the beasts."

Oh boy, I thought. Just what we needed.

"Yes, the monstrous beasts you will hear all around you. All around you. But...you will not see them until they are right on top of you!" Haigeg nodded as if in a daze.

"We'll take heavy weapons." I said.

Haigeg laughed.

"OK Graybeard, what's so funny?" I asked.

"These are not your ordinary monsters. No, no." Haigeg held up his hands. "These are nightmarish beasts. Huge misshapen creatures that would make your....now what were they called..." Haigeg began stroking his salt and pepper beard, mostly salt, with sudden thought. With each stroke his motion increased in both intensity and movement. And then his hand stopped its rapid motions. "Oh yes."

"These nightmarish beasts would make your ancient 'dinosaurs' look like domesticated cattle."

"OK, we don't go." I stood up.

"No, no." Haigeg pointed back to the display. "It has been guessed this is the place of Kragon's main gold horde. But no one can survive long enough on the surface of Chadras to know."

It was still dark to me. But I waited.

"No, I think there is something more important here than just verifying the planet where his gold is hidden away. No, there is something else here. Clues maybe. Markers maybe."

And the light finally winked on over my head.

"You mean like a map, or clues, to where it is on the surface of Chadras."

Haigeg smiled at me, and I at him.

"Yes. But I will have to study it some more and compare it with the tiny amount of data ever obtained about the geography of that shrouded planet." Haigeg's eyes suddenly became far off. "If we could land in the right place. And if we could march straight for the cache. We might, just might, have a chance."

"Sounds like a plan to me," I said.

Haigeg rose, and was making his way out when he suddenly turned.

"I think it best tomorrow that I ride with your ship in the race."

His words took me by surprise.

Haigeg waved his hand before I could speak.

"Other facts have suddenly come to my tired old mind. I think important ones." He nodded. "It is now a HemiDemiSemi, with ship's weapons. But, there is one most disturbing fact about the race tomorrow, and the reason I must fly with you and Dtang."

"What?" I asked.

"There are many ships registered. Trotan Corvettes. Vrrn Runners. And a motley array of ships modified from fleets of all the Three Quadrants. But..." He raised his finger. "There is only one Andarian Corsair. And though it is registered under the name of a valid Trader Captain, and the registered name of a Trader ship... still, it is a rare thing."

"An Andarian Trader?" I asked in amazement.

"Bad aliens," Haigeg whispered, reciting the ancient adage.

"An Andarian Trader?" I repeated.

"Perhaps." Haigeg whispered. "Perhaps."

There's nothing like a 'HemiDemiSemi' to get your adrenaline pumping.

I had spent all night and tuned those ThunderStars and tweaked those Tachyon Injectors until I had every ounce of power set at my disposal. Uncle Albert would've been proud of me.

Dtang had taken us into orbit and put us down near the rear of the gathered ships, all primed and as ready as we were. But I had my secret weapon still to bring out.

Haigeg and Natalie followed me as I made my way forward.

Dtang looked up and then happily rose from the pilot's chair.

It was time for magic. Techno-magic anyway.

"Why do you have to wear that stupid hat?" Natalie asked, in a grating, nerve-jangling kind of womanly way.

It was my favorite baseball hat. The one with Earth is #1 blazoned across the front.

Instead of answering, I just cocked it to one side and otherwise ignored her. I had that routine down pat.

"Well?" Haigeg asked. "You had better have something special to get us out in front. And before we reach the Tree Mountains."

I smiled as I started programming the Holo-projector.

"Most starships are controlled by buttons and computers and control pads," I lectured with enthusiasm. "Sooooo impersonal. But a man has to have something more than that. A man has to have....well, something he can grab! Something with feeling!"

Dtang's red eyes began to glow.

"Dtang like man things," He repeated for the umpteenth time.

"Well, I'm out of here. Too much testosterone in the air for this woman. I'll be at my station." Natalie waved her hands in the air as she started to leave. "Next thing you know, Chase, you'll break out into your 'Man Song.'"

Nothing's sacred to women.

Especially ex-wives. Or wives for that matter.

And anyway, I wasn't going to sing it until the grand finish.

"Dtang want to sing 'Man Song.'"

"Shut up." I growled. And then my fingers finished their delicate and artistic task. I stood back and held my arms apart so all could witness the final glory, the finishing touch.

"Behold."

The pilot's chair disappeared. And with it the cold and impersonal control panel that normally graced every starship in the Three Quadrants. Now, something special appeared, something rare indeed, taking their place with Holo-Magic.

"What is that?" Haigeg shouted in complete puzzlement.

I sat down in the low slung leather chair. Looking around with a growing sense of power, I grasped the wooden ball at the end of the stickshift firmly and then rammed the clutch to the floor.

I revved the ThunderStars so that they roared their fury for all the universe to hear.

Haigeg and Dtang reached frantically for something to hold onto as the entire ship twisted under the engine's mighty power that I had suddenly unleashed.

"Why aren't we moving?!?" Haigeg shouted as he realized the ship had not moved forward, despite the terrific display of power.

"It's a human thing," I said. "It's called 'revving'."

Haigeg and Dtang nodded with approval and approached as I let the engines idle back to normal. They gazed with unabashed awe at the dark wood that was graced with large analog displays.

"You know, analog gauges, with their moving needles and redlines, are just so much more, more... fun to use than digital readouts." I said with conviction.

Dtang's mouth dropped open.

"What have you created with the Holos?" Haigeg whispered.

I put my arms behind the back of my head as I explained.

"This, my alien friends, is an honest to God recreation of one of the finest sports cars to ever race across the fields of dear, old Earth. Back in the good old days...before computers and starships."

Blank, but respectful looks followed my own gaze.

"This, with a few small added touches, is the interior of an Austin-Healey 3000 Mark III, circa 1963. With a few added touches from a Jaguar Type E Series 3 Roadster and a Ford CobraJet Mustang thrown in to give it all balance. There's a few more 'bells and whistles' on a starship than on an old-fashioned car." I chuckled. "If you look under the wooden dash," I disabled some of the Holo-projection. "Note how the gauges are connected to the hidden computer panels."

Dtang growled appreciatively.

"But the genius of this little setup is how I synchronized the ThunderStars and..."

A mechanical voice erupted from the comm unit.

"Starships and honored guests. The final countdown for the annual 'HemiDemiSemi' has now begun. All ships, prepare for start!"

It was time.

I sat in the low seat and leaned it far back. Grabbing the wood of the steering wheel, I pulled it back just a tad. That was another concession, a starship goes up and down, not just left and right. Checking my gauges to make sure all the needles showed normal, I knew I was ready.

There I sat: clutch pushed in, right foot resting lightly on the accelerator, and my right hand just above the 'stick', like I was a gunfighter ready to go for my gun.

And I was.

The countdown reached 3. Then 2. Then 1.

"You boys better hold on!" I screamed. "Cause we're gonna 'Rock & Roll!'"

My right hand slammed the stick into first gear. Almost simultaneously I punched the accelerator to the floor. For a millisecond the ThunderStars screamed raw, thundering fury. And then I let the clutch pop up.

The ship ahead of me had just started to pull away, when its form suddenly filled my viewscreen. I pulled back hard on the steering wheel and just barely missed running all over him as we passed above.

First gear was alright.

The RPM (Reactions Per Millisecond) needle raced for the redline while my PPM (Parsecs Per Minute) needle began its sweet ascent. I passed two more ships before my left foot stomped onto the clutch and my right foot and hand went into concerted motion. In one fluid motion my body worked.

We were now rockin' in second gear.

But then the ship shook under the recoil of blasters.

"Dtang! Stop shooting, you just cost us some penalty points." I screamed.

Dtang's face appeared in the lower corner of the viewscreen. Growling discontent.

"Weapons are not allowed until the second orbit, just before we blast down into the atmosphere."

Dtang began grunting something, but I was busy.

My ship was still leaping forward like a comet slamming toward its home star. It was taking everything I had just to hold on and keep from running over anybody. Just as soon as I raced around one ship, the rear end of another began to fill my viewscreen. Up and over, down and under, and then I stood her on her left wingtip and passed between two starships. Sideways.

It was beautiful.

Somewhere between passing all those ships, my RPM needle had entered the orange part of the gauge and was just about to the red.

Left foot in, right foot off, right hand slamming into gear. And then my feet reversed their motions.

Third gear screamed and sent us rocketing on our merry way. Third gear was the best, I could almost ride that gear clean up to Light speed. Almost.

But for orbit, sub-orbit or 'kickin' it out of low orbit, third gear was the gear of choice. Let it rock.

We were flying by ships so fast, and I was so busy just flying, that I wouldn't have known we

had entered the second orbit until folks began shooting at us.

"GO GO GO!" I shouted at Dtang.

Dtang started shooting back.

My feet and arms worked in their fluid motion, and we were shooting along in fourth.

I quickly checked shields, but I was concentrating on the ships ahead of me. We had pulled within the leaders.

And then we shuddered, and the steering wheel almost leapt out of my hands.

"What was that?!?" I looked over at the sensors, and saw the ship closing quickly from our rear.

"It's the Andarian Corsair," Haigeg shouted from the Nav console.

I spat out a few choice words that revealed my true feelings about Andarians and their brain size or lack thereof.

I hate it when I leave the Comm on, and forget that I did.

"HUMAN!"

For some reason, that particular Andarian voice sounded too familiar. Oh well, I always did know just how to win friends and influence aliens.

"Kragon, we've got to stop meeting like this. Like... forever."

"I have come to kill you, gutless human. You will now die."

I pumped up the rear shields even as he fired.

"Dtang," I shouted as my hands felt for the control panels under the dash. "Shields won't take another hit like that. Give me some cover!"

Dtang's face appeared. With that 'stupid' look all over it.

"Dtang! SHOOT THE ANDARIAN!"

Dtang smiled and began peppering away.

But the Lightning is built for speed, not to fight, and I saw the red light begin to flash as our shields fell under the next Andarian blow.

"Chase, we've got to do something. And now is a good time!" Haigeg shouted.

I saw the Avenger closing from the rear, they were almost on top of us. And sensors showed their weapons primed.

I slammed into second gear.

My body shot into the viewscreen at several g's, until the restraining field stopped me with a jerk. Still, I was wrapped all around my mahogany steering wheel like a rubber Xaxtian leech as my ship stood on its nose.

The Avenger shot past us.

I turned hard. And punched it.

But Kragon doesn't shake that easily. Although we were alive for another minute.

"He's turning for us," Haigeg screamed.

It was time for brains. I couldn't outrun him in the atmosphere, but once in orbit again, he wouldn't be able to catch me.

I could see the five ships that led the race just ahead of us on the viewscreen. Five specks getting smaller by the nanosecond. I glanced at sensors and saw the main pack still far behind us. Too far. Brains... brains... The Tree Mountains!

"Hold on to your stomach! However many you got!" I shouted.

I pushed my ship back up to the redline, and then pushed her into third, all the while outmaneuvering the Avenger and its blaster fire. By the time Kragon figured my game, we were already back on the race course and entering the fringes of the famed forest.

The Tree Mountains, living organisms so large that their branches could reach almost half a kilometer, and their roots three kilometers. The ancients of this planet had lived among their sheltering arms, protected from the carnivores below. And as their civilization developed, they had never forgotten their love for the trees, though they had stopped living among their giant arms.

But the Tree Mountains aren't the biggest trees known in the Three Quadrants. That distinction belongs to the Vrnn home planet, where a single tree encompasses the entire planet, where all the population lives in its special ecosystem, among the valleys of its creviced bark. And, as the saying goes; The 'One' tree will always stand beside the Silver Sea.

But that's another story.

The canopy of leaves suddenly cut the sunlight, breaking my thought, and we were streaking through the maze of supersized trees.

But I couldn't shake Kragon.

Every move I made, every leap over alpine branches and every tree-hugging turn around the mountain-sized trunks, the Avenger still hung with us.

"Haigeg! Get us some shields!"

"I am working on that," Haigeg mumbled amid his frantic efforts.

Our ship shuddered and sparks leaped through my Holographic magic to burn my skin. A red light began to flash.

"I'm losing the starboard engine." With one hand on the steering wheel, I reached over and began punching up some damage control.

"Pirates coming for kill!" Dtang shouted as his blasters began pumping.

I saw their weapons powering on from my sensors. I saw our starboard engine choke and die. I saw disaster reaching out to...

I dropped back down into second, but that lone engine didn't have that same punch. Still my

foot hammered her to go.

Pulling back on the wheel, we began to climb the nearest tree.

With Kragon right behind.

I was too busy avoiding branches to watch my rear, hoping that my frantic maneuvers among the leaves might lose them. And then a huge chunk of the tree exploded, knocking us outward again. Back into a large opening.

I couldn't shake him.

"Give me an idea, guys. Anything."

"I have shields back now," Haigeg panted.

But we needed more. If we were going to make it out of this alive.

And then I realized we were still on the racecourse, among the leafy leviathans. But going in the wrong direction now. I checked a mid-range scan. A smile came slowly to my face, an idea blossomed.

And then an explosion burst all around us. Alarms began screeching in my ears.

Haigeg picked himself up and stared in disbelief.

"Shields are down." He reported.

"Hang on, again."

I turned hard left and punched it.

And then I turned hard right and rolled into fourth gear, engaging my SuperCharger.

"Cover me Dtang! Aim for their weapons. We've got to get that starboard engine on-line if this is going to work." We began to pull away, momentarily.

Haigeg's eyebrows rose. "If what is to work?"

"Never mind that, get me that engine!"

In another instant we were out of the forest, back in the wide open sky. I 'felt' Kragon behind me as he began targeting us for the last time. The explosions had stopped. With our shields down, with nowhere to duck and hide, he knew he had us. He would take his time with this last shot, and savor his final victory.

But that's what I wanted him think.

I kept us on a straight and true course.

"Haigeg, you've got sixty seconds, or we're dead."

The bearded alien redoubled his efforts on the engine.

I flipped the Comm switch.

"Kragon."

Silence came. And then he spoke in that cocksure voice of the all-conqueror.

"What are your last words... human?"

I keyed the mute, and signaled Dtang.

"Dtang, turn your gun forward, but hold your fire."

"Me got no fire to hold."

I shook my head.

"Dtang, stop shooting. Wait for my order."

I flipped back to the Comm.

"Kragon, I just wanted you know that we deciphered your secret. From my scan. We know where your gold is." I chuckled to myself, imagining his rage as he leaped from his chair. But I had no time for entertainment.

"And more than that, we know where to land, so we can go straight to it. And get out, before your little monsters get us."

The roar of rage almost startled me. But it bought us time.

"Haigeg...?"

"Almost... almost. Thirty more seconds."

I smiled.

"And Kragon... we've transmitted..."

The second roar made me jump.

"And Kragon..."

"Shut up, human. And die!"

I saw their weapons become fully charged on my sensor screen.

"Haigeg! It's now or never!"

I looked up at the viewscreen, and saw it was full of ships.

We were back in the race alright.

Going the wrong way.

"Dtang! Shoot at everybody!!!"

Talk about a Hollith dream coming true.

I started howling war whoops as the ships we had left behind began zipping past on all sides. That was so I didn't go crazy. Or maybe I was already?

Dtang did good. His cool aim hit about a dozen approaching ships as his guns blazed.

And then they started shooting back.

But I was already pulling straight up. I noticed with a sigh of relief that the starboard engine had kicked into life again.

"Good work, Haigeg!"

Kragon's ship, built first to fight and second for speed, was just a wee bit slower in his maneuver to follow us.

All those tracers streaking for us, hammered the ship right behind us. The Avenger.

I saw his shields falter, and his power grid skip a beat.

That was all we needed.

Kragon's ship was still recovering when we left the atmosphere and I started calculating the jump to hyperspace.

I was almost sad as I turned the Holo off and the control panels reappeared. But it was time for Light Speed.

In a flash of exploding light, we were gone.

"Will we go?" Haigeg asked for the hundredth time.

I sighed, and tried not to think about it.

Haigeg spread his hands wide, and that strange twinkle came back into his large eyes.

"We could retire, you know. Travel to the edges of the known universe. We'd have everything we needed. Or thought we might ever need."

I felt like throwing up again.

"OK, OK. I'll think about it. But that's all you'll get from me today."

That familiar laughter of his began then, from way down inside. And it grew louder.

I rolled my eyes.

"Dtang think we should try. Monsters never stop us before."

"But Chadras is different, you micro-brain idjit. Everything's against us on this one. Andarian pirates, monsters, planet eternally shrouded in a sensor defying mist, armed traps... you name it, if it'll kill us, it's already there." I sighed again.

"Don't forget the pockets of poison gas, that we could stumble into," Haigeg laughed louder.

"Yeah, yeah, let's don't forget that!" I shouted.

"I think we should go."

Haigeg immediately stopped laughing. Dtang eye's widened. And I about fell out of my chair.

Natalie stepped onto the small bridge.

"Yes, don't look so shocked. I said it," She crooned.

I tapped the side of my head.

"And I was beginning to think you were the only one that had any sense, after this last fiasco."

She smiled.

I hate it when she smiles like that. It only means one thing.

"I have an idea. And, it might just work." She said.

"I knew it! I knew you were going to say that!" I stood resolutely. "I'm not going to take on Chadras. And Kragon. And monsters. Not unless, unless, we get some kind of message, some kind of 'no doubt this is how we can pull it off' kind of plan." I sat down, shaking my head vigorously.

"And!" I stood again. "that plan would give us at least a 50-50 chance of pulling it off."

Natalie's smile grew wider.

My hands rose, fending them all off.

"You'll have to convince me. Really convince me..."

Story © copyright 1999 by Tony Chandler