

BEFITTING A GOD

The gnawing hunger consuming Hinun did not stem from the physical needs the Great God shared with his worship-pers. To provide for his body requirements, Hinun supped on a normal variety of food and drink. For in form, at least, Shen's one and only god was human.

Human in body and in appearance, Hinun was more, and more too than the creatures he had created to populate his world.

He was Hinun, and he was the Devourer of Souls ...



SPACEWAYS

- #1 OF ALIEN BONDAGE
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- #10 THE YOKE OF SHEN



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SPACEWAYS #10: THE YOKE OF SHEN

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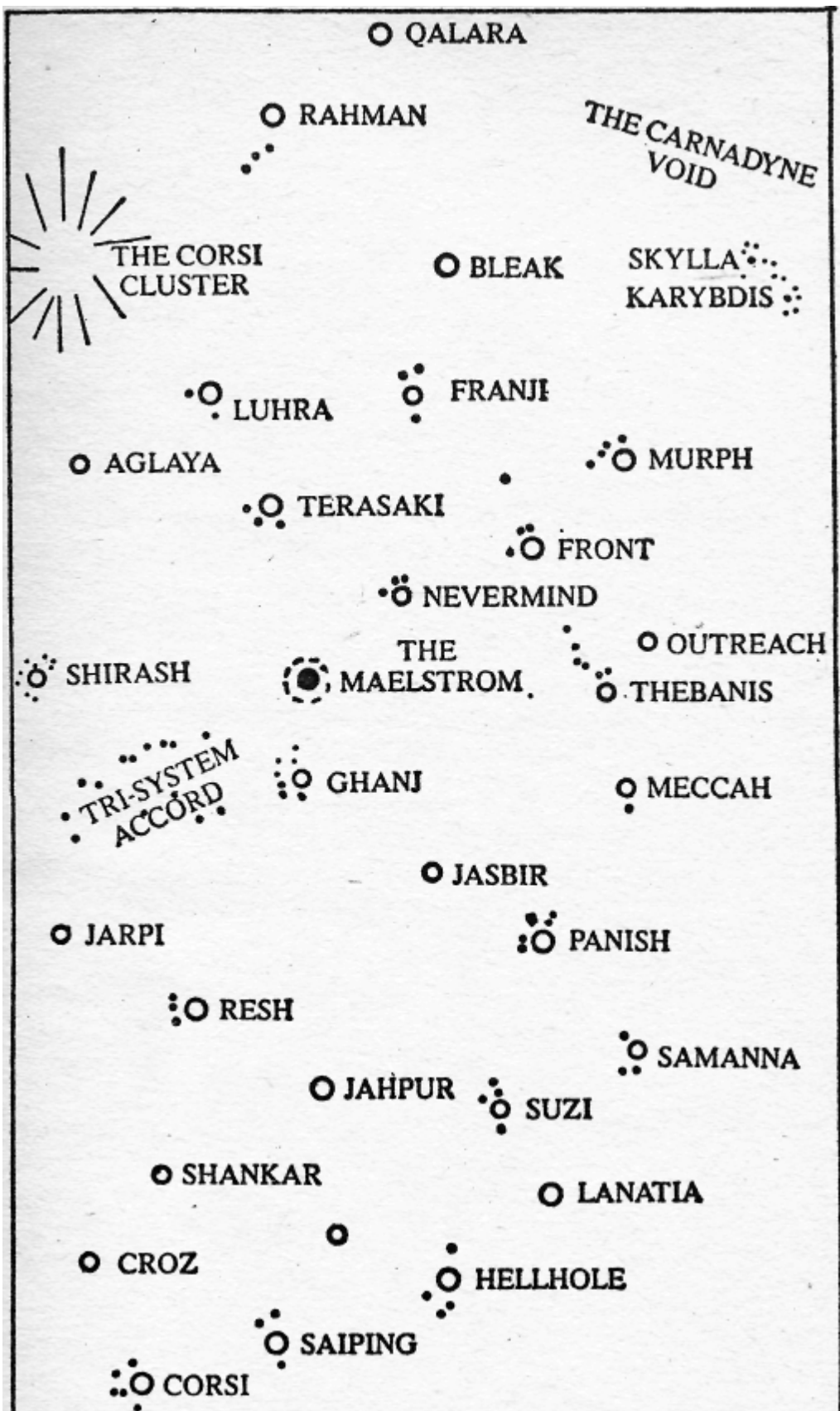
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Geo. W. Proctor, Lanatian



A: All planets are not shown. B: Map is not to scale, because of the vast distances between stars.

SCARLET HILLS

Alas, fair ones, my time has come. I must depart your lovely home-Seek the bounds of this galaxy To find what lies beyond.

(chorus)

*Scarlet hills and amber skies,
Gentlebeings with loving eyes;
All these I leave to search for a dream
That will cure the wand'rer in me.*

You say it must be glamorous For those who travel out through space. You know not the dark, endless night Nor the solitude we face.

(reprise chorus)

I know not of my journey's end Nor the time nor toll it will have me spend. But I must see what I've never seen And know what I've never known.

Scarlet hills and amber skies, Gentlebeings with loving eyes; All these I leave to search for a dream That will cure the wand'rer in me.

-Ann Morris

Prologue

Most cosmological -questions, especially those involving the creation of the universe, were explained as the direct, divine action of one or more superhuman beings. -William J. Kaufmann, Black Holes and Warped Spacetime

First they waited for her, overnight. Next morning they began to seek her. That became a search, and that became frustration.

For four days the four of them searched Yamato. They queried and requested, bribed and threatened, cajoled and castigated, demanded and urged, blustered and pleaded with tears. Late in the second day they even enlisted the aid of the city's policers. Or tried to.

After being shunted from one department to another and another and from one minor official to another, they gained the agreement of Yamato Guardian Agency: the Terasak policers would be on the lookout. Yes, they would even check around, a little.

None of the searchers learned anything, including Y.G.A.

She had come down into Terasaki's capital city from space station Ukiyo. She had come alone, secretly and indeed sneakily, for she had told her companions that she intended merely to do some shopping, onstation.

They traced her to the small hotel where they would never have stayed. She had arrived alone, meaning that she had not been forced off Ukiystation, and so had 1

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intended to deceive and avoid them. They discovered that she had appeared wearing stylish local clothing, which told them that she had done some shopping. They traced her back to that store. The trail ended there-or rather formed a loop. They could find no way out of it. From station to store to hotel to . . . disappearance.

She had not checked out. She had made no calls and received none. She was gone, just the same, as if she had vanished into the wall. Her go-bag was gone, too. There had been no sign of a struggle, the hotel staff assured.

The absence of that ancient cliché, the man in the broad-brimmed hat pointed out to his companions, could merely mean that her kidnapper was the careful sort. A professional, perhaps. At least someone competent.

On the other hand she might merely have redshifted, with a care to leave no trail. Her mental-emotional state, after all, had been rotten. Devitalized.

"She knew we'd try to find her," one of the red-suited searchers said.

They were five, crew of a ship called *Sunmother* and former crew of one called *Satana*, all but one of them. They searched for *Sunmother's* owner, who was also their friend.

They were the spacer's captain, Quindarissa, who was very shapely and very black; and Cinnabar and Sweetface of Jarpi, who were very orange; and Trafalgar and Kalahari Cuw of Outreach. The latter were presumably brother and sister, without one feature in common. A quintet in uni-form: all five wore attractive crimson jumpsuits with wide-bottomed legs and black sashes. One of them also wore a (prodigiously) wide-brimmed hat, and one of the Jarps wore no translahelm but spoke Erts as well as any Galactic.

In quest of Janjaglaya Wye they haunted the streets by days and bars night after night, but got neither drunk nor laid. Every hotel had been checked. The fourth day passed, and then the fourth night.

That evening, in a persimmon-walled bar-lounge hung

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with smoky purple fronds, the one who wore the eleven-gallon hat said, "She was all torn up and mixed up. She lied to Quindy and left us, and she vanished. I say she intended to vanish. We're looking for Janja-and so is Janja. She doesn't want to be found. Not until she finds herself, anyhow-herself and some new purpose, direction for her life."

"Oh dammit damn it," his lean sister-supposed sister- said, wearing a padded bra under her red clingsuit as part of her disguise because her figure provided nothing what-ever to change the suit's drape in front and she had after all

until recently been a pirate wanted on various planets and by various extraplanetary policer agencies.

She stared down at the tabletop and said, "How *could* she! We're her friends! We-we 1 . . . 1 . . ."

Her companions did not comment on her inability to say the word "love" or comment on the fact that never before had they seen her so much as try. They had never seen her display this kind of emotion; the caring kind.

They were two, her companions. Captain Quindarissa and Cinnabar were in another lounge or roaming the nighted streets of Yamato, hopeful of spotting Janjaglaya Wye who had been Janja of Aglaya.

"How . . . could . . . she!"

Trafalgar drew deep breath and Sweetface said, "Please don't answer. We all know. It was a retourniquet question."

"Rhetorical," Trafalgar said without thinking, and quickly put on his best boyish smile while he gave the Jarp a wink to prove that the correction had been automatic and under stress, not serious or really critical.

Sweetface neither returned the wink nor smiled. Kalahari stared down at the tabletop. The silence was dark brown. They were all edgy.

"You know what I think?" That was the Outie-the real Outie.

"No," Kalahari told the tabletop, "but I'll bet I'm going to find out."

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"I think we should quit holding back, and get drank."

Kalahari's only reply was to reach for her plass, made shiny to resemble lacquer. She picked it up and drained its orange-amber contents. Then she held it above her head, at the horizontal. A waiter saw and nodded; Kalahari lowered the plass.

"I'm with you," she said. "No more reds."

The orange hermaphrodite and the man from Outreach nodded. No more little red antintoxicant tabs. They would drink to get drank. In their society that was a matter of choice, as was obesity or even being overweight; and hair color. Kalahari Cuw's, which had been prass (by her own choice), was now jet.

Stupid to be sitting here paying for it, really, when up on the ship they had free source of alcohol! But what the vug-all of them were rich, anyhow. Except Sweetface.

Sweetface was one of them, but it was not a member of the Satana Coalition. The other four were. And Janja was. They had been enslaved on the "unknown" planet Knor and had escaped with enough jewelry-mounted gemstones to make them wealthy. Sweetface was the latecomer. They had also fled their Knorman captivity with that free source of alcohol up on the ship.

After that they drank morosely to get drank, and they succeeded.

They came too to a momentous decision-another one., of more import than getting drank-and agreed solemnly to it. The trio toddled back to their hotel to tell the others, but the black woman and the orange hermaphrodite weren't there. Kalahari and Sweetface and Trafalgar decided to split another bottle and wait so they could apprise the others of their plan, but they fell asleep instead.

Next day, since they had not used antintoxicants and hadn't even taken any vitamin B-1, they all had headaches.

So did Quindy and Cinnabar, who had arrived at the same decision. The first one. All five of them moped and moaned most of the day, but they did agree on their course

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of action. It was about as sensible as it could be under the circumstances, which was not very.

Kalahari Cuw was wealthy. Her ship-*Satana-v/as* gone, traded off to Janja who had traded it off to a banker on Franji for the newer and better-equipped spacer she had named *Sunmother*. The captain of *Satana* (Hellfire, a pi-rate), badly used and hurt and scared, full of intimations of mortality not to mention jail cells and worse, had decided to retire as Kalahari Cuw.

For the present, she would "retire" on Terasaki, in Yamato under the suns Durga and Hubble. Find something to do to occupy herself. And keep looking for Janja. Janjy, Kalahari Cuw called her.

The others would do the logical insanity of clearing ship-Quindy was, after all, captain of *Sunmother* and there'd be no problem in gaining clearance-to begin the impossible mission of scouting the spaceways for *Sun-mother's* owner. What else did they have to do, Quindy said, hoping the question was rhetorical and glancing ner-vously at Trafalgar Cuw, who should have something else to do. But he nodded. It was his idea, anyhow, or his and Kalahari's.

The plan was ab.out as practical as Socialism, but it was what they felt they had to do.

Sunmother's owner was Janja and she had been recruited/ kidnapped from the other hotel, and she didn't know where she was, either.

Strangely, by the time they redshifted Terasaki's orbit-ing docking station, one of her five former companions did.

Before noon of the fifth day-Terasak, spaceship *Sun-mother* had clearance and, without even taking on cargo, departed Ukiystation. In quest of Janja.

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Not how insignificant our bodies are, but rather how potent the human mind is-this is the real lesson of modern astronomy.

-William J. Kaufmann, Black Holes and Warped Spacetime

The Great God Hinun awoke. Not with a resounding cho-rus of thunder and lightning that split the heavens as if

bellowed up from a majestic mountain peak to proclaim the indomitable power and might that coursed through divine sinews. No; Hinun the Eater of Minds came awake with a startled jerk of his head and a half-flutter of time-wearied eyelids.

Hinun, He-Who-Has-Lived-And-Died-A-Thousand-Times (an exaggeration of truth that Hinun cultivated to fan flames of awe and terror among his worshippers-al-though his reign had spanned a millennium). His body betrayed by the rapid approach of the never-ending life/death/life cycle, he felt no surge of unrestrained strength, godly or otherwise.

Today he merely hungered.

Today he would eat.

When the sole deity of the planet Shen dined, feasting tables were not strewn with a bountiful banquet of exotic meats and sweets befitting a god. Neither did Hinun par-take of ambrosia or nectar, the classical epicurean cuisine of the now-forgotten gods of Urth called Homeworld.

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The gnawing hunger consuming Hinun did not stem from the physical needs the Great God shared with his worshippers. To provide for his body's requirements, Hinun supped on a normal variety of food and drink. For in form, at least, Sheh's one and only god was human.

This day Hinun would fill a deeper need, sate a deeper desire. One that had ruled the designer of destiny on Shen for a thousand years. The very essence of human existence would be his fare. Human in body and in appearance, Hinun was more, and more too than the creatures he had created to populate his world.

He was Hinun, and he was the Devourer of Souls.

The sharp sound of buskined feet on polished marble drew the god's attention. To wipe away the cottony vestiges of lingering sleep, Hinun dragged a spidery hand over his face; a shriveled face, lined with wrinkles like fissures. Aqua-irised eyes casually shifted rightward to greet the ten Hinuri who double-filed into the throne chamber of their god.

In silent approval, Hinun watched their entrance; his private guard. Their faces all bore the same determined clench of jaw, the narrow slant to the eyes. In fact the ten faces were identical. What need for variety, when machine-made men were what a god required to protect his personage?

How smart they were in their plumed helmets and gleaming bronze breastplates! Double-edged short swords dangled from studded belts about their waists. Round shields, emblazoned with two air dragons entwined, were held smartly before their chests to gleam like mirrors beneath the glow-lamps that hovered near the ceiling of the throne room.

Energy weapons or even projectile pistols would have been more practical, efficient, and suitable for the Hinuri. They were after all bodyguards to a god. Yet it was because he was a god that Hinun's personal soldiery bore only ancient armaments. It was by far a simpler task to quell a rebellious element whose most potent weaponry

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was bow and arrows, whether that element be outside the Hinuri or within their ranks.

(Several inquiring individuals on Shen had discovered gunpowder during the Great God's thousand-year reign. Those individuals had been put to the sword and their explosive discovery obliterated and forgotten. Gunpowder was not an element Hinun had woven into the design of his planet, or wished to have altering the pattern.

(Nor did Hinun deign to provide the half-million inhabitants of Shen with the simple conveniences of the internal combustion engine, or electricity. Power exceeding the strength of domesticated beasts was reserved for the Eater of Minds. So it had been for a millennium. So it would remain for another millennium, and another.)

The Tyrant God, his worshippers whispered; *the Bloody God*. These, too, were Hinun, the Devourer of Souls. He placed little value in appellations. More important was Shen's design . . . and Hinun's personal fulfillment.

"Great One."

The foremost of the Hinuri stepped forward as he spoke, toward the jewel-flashing throne of the purple-robed god. While his fellow guardsmen positioned themselves about the chamber's marble pillars, he doffed his helmet and knelt at Hinun's feet. He spoke reverently, head bowed.

"The woman you summoned awaits outside."

He-Who-Has-Lived-And-Died-A-Thousand-Times toyed casually with a specter that hung, the size of a child's fist, from a chain about his spindly neck. Only his lips moved.

"Bring her to me," he intoned. "She is to become one with Hinun."

He ignored the tremor of revulsion that he sensed course through the guardsmen when he stood. He allowed his gaze to rise to the massive doors of steel on the opposite side of the chamber. They slid open. Two Hinuri, perfect replicas of the ten already within, entered. They half-dragged,

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half-carried their captive. At once the young woman commenced to struggle.

She was entirely naked. Behind her, mockingly, a third guard bore the shredded remnants of her clothing, a gray uniform with touches of maroon.

A fine sheen of sweat glistened on her ebon nudity as she twisted and lurched against her captors. Her gyrations

were to no avail. The Hinuri's massive hands bound her like bands of steel. For this rather delicate beauty who had fallen from the stars, there would be no escape from union with the Great God of Shen.

Her head jerked up and her eyes flashed at the satin-robed god. "You grat-buggering brother-loving bastard!"

Lunging with all the might contained within her lithe and very female body, she threw herself toward the leathery-skinned monster who sat in judgment over her right to continue living.

With what appeared to be no more than the slightest tug, the two Hinuri jerked their prisoner back. Her body went rigid for an instant. Then a long quiver trembled through her. Liquidly her knees gave way and she sagged toward the floor of pink marble. Her guards provided the only support for that limp form amove now only with quakes.

"You *promised!* You son of a bitch!" Tears glittered in streaks down the sculptured jet of her cheeks. "You prom-ised I'd live! You *promised!*"

Well reduced, Hinun observed. Hardly the officious and confident *person* she had been within the shell of that gray-and-maroon suit! And he nodded, remembering the acts she had performed with seven of his Hinuri, in order to win his promise. It had been an illuminating evening. She had employed every orifice of that supple body as well as both her hands to conquer his seven sturdy studs. She'd been impressive, too. Hardly a squeaky maiden with no idea what it was about!

Of course, she had had no choice . . . since death could hardly be considered a viable choice.

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In a resonating voice that belied the crevasses etched into his face by time, he deigned to make intoning reply.

"That promise will be kept, my Midnight Flower. You will live forever-in union with Hinun. Immortality shall be yours!"

On the right arm of the golden throne, Hinun's thumb located a multifaceted ruby and depressed it. A whispered hiss floated through the vaulted room. The marble floor at Hinun's sandaled feet opened onto a gaping rectangle of nothingness. From that dark, a spotless altar of stainless steel thrust upward to flash like silver.

The Great God motioned to the two Hinuri and their captive.

The moment of truth catalyzed the young woman's strength. She wrenched and twisted in a final attempt to free herself of dual painful grips. She was no weakling, and knew it.

As before, her struggles were fruitless.

Each guard released his hold on one of her arms and grasped her legs. Fingers, several shades lighter in hue than her midnight pigmentation, dug callously into her thighs. Effortlessly the Hinuri lifted their captive atop the metal altar. Black leather straps studded to the smooth steel were opened. Deft and uncaring, hands securely bound the victim with limbs outstretched atop the shining altar.

"They'll search for the ship, you dried up old Bleaker-lizard!" She threw herself against the leather and spat upward toward the Great God. "There'll be other ships. When they come, they'll make a cinder out of this shit-ball you call a planet! Can't you see that, you old idiot?!"

With a wave of a robed arm, Hinun motioned away his guardsmen. Were he not a god, Hinun would have said a silent prayer. Other ships were what he wanted! What he *needed*, to relieve the monotony of his thousand-year exis-tence. Ships-spaceships, *spacers*-were crewed now with human spacefarers.

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Lives! Life; fresh minds to bind to mine . . . to bond with mine!

His fingers found an opal inset in the arm of his great chair beside the ruby. He depressed it. The hum of electric motors awoke. The bottom face of the altar slid down. From the opening extruded an elongated oval dome of crysplas. It folded upward on hinges, then floated gently down to encase the woman still twisting atop the altar.

What a magnificent contrast, the god thought; that black jade flesh, those clean black limbs sweat-gleaming against the silvery sheen of the steel altar!

Hee-noon, she was screaming at him. *Hee-noon* . . . but the cries of a prisoner within a transparent half-egg were muted to mere squeaks.

As though examining an insect pinned to a specimen board, Hinun's gaze roved the spread-eagled form of this fortuitous "visitor" to his planet. A true beauty, he al-owed himself to think. Such night-hued skin was un-known on Shen. And her movements . . .! But now the lust that had once fired him was only memory; a mere hint that taunted his desiccated loins.

How exotic she is!

His attention was drawn by the taut breasts that juddered and heaved with her efforts to tear herself free. So abun-dant, he mused, those mounds of . . . meat. Of equal temptation was the mound of her *sex-stash*, he corrected mentally, for from her he knew the currentmost of the endless euphemisms for vagina.

And soon he would know so much more, from her!

Would that he stood at the beginning of the life/death/life cycle rather than its end! He would have enjoyed more than one pleasure with this woman (who called her race "Galactic" as if there was no Shen in the galaxy!), before time came for her ultimate union with the Devourer of Souls. He sighed. So fetchingly erotic, this one from afar!

Alas, he was indeed at the end of the cycle. It was not

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the delights of the flesh that Hinun craved, but this delicate black orchid's *mind*.

Ah, and her face had changed now; she was pleading. No doubt promising. Hinun looked away. Did she not know that he could not hear her-a useless butterfly under glass?

Hinun sank back. Reaching above him, he grasped the helmet-shaped crown attached to the high back of his godly

seat. He eased it down over his divine (and balding) head. For the third time spidery fingers walked the gem-stones adorning his throne-chair's arm. This time he de-pressed the emerald positioned between ruby and opal.

A scream, a woman's agonized scream into the face of death, filled the throne room despite the sound-muffling shell of plass. Hinun did not hear.

The Great God of Shen was oblivious to all. While his bound prisoner expired in a delirium-like horror, the De-vourer of Souls dined-he feasted on the mind of this one who had been a spacefarer.

In an electric ~deluge, all that had been the woman he called Midnight Flower poured into his brain. Hinun soared, reveling in the ecstasy of the invigorating flow, the total union of minds.

From the instant of birth to her final outcry, she melted into the mind of a god who had reigned for a thousand years. She merged with that multitude of souls who had met a similar fate during that millennium. Her essence, her soul was devoured. It became his. She was no more. She was but a small portion of the ever-expanding mind of a minor deity forgotten amid the parsec abyss except on this one insignificant ball of clay.

Her joys, her pains, her loves, her angers . . . Hinun took and savored each. Relishing the delightful variety that had flavored her short, though full life! This instant was supreme! For this and only this Hinun existed. The union of minds, the gathering of their total experience. This was

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the reason why Hinun had first stepped onto the surface of Shen. In the union, the Great God was fulfilled.

Hinun's age-wearied eyelids opened with a flicker of vitality that had been missing only moments ago. Even this close to the end of his unending cycle, the union brought a renewal of strength. A pleased smile lifted the comers of his age-spotted lips.

His gaze shifted to the still form beneath the encasing bubble of crystal plastic. He thumbed the opal. The shell rose from the altar of steel and slid back into its resting place. The woman it had pleased him to call Midnight Flower did not move. Strange, that though undiminished physically, she looked smaller! Only the rise and fall of breasts like eggplants gave indication that she still lived- physically.

Mentally, Midnight Flower was no more. Her brain had been drained, fed into the mind of the Great God Hinun. Her existence had ended.

Those on whose minds Hinun dined were not allowed to retain one flicker of memory. Their memories, their life experiences could belong to one and only one being, for Hinun was a jealous god.

The biologically alive remains of the woman from the spaceways would not be required to endure physical hard-ship or torment. A benevolent serenity masked the ancient face that stared at her.

For I am not, after all, a cruel god, he mused serenely.

He waved a robed arm at the naked stillness that sec-onds ago had been a functioning human being. *"Remove that. Have your way with its shell and then dispose of it. That can no longer serve Hinun-but she who inhabited that shell has been exalted by him!"*

The sole deity of Shen did not consider the use of Midnight Flower's mindless body by thirteen men-perhaps more than once each-as either torment or abuse. After all, she was no longer present in that shell.

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And I have exalted her. I have made her part of the Great God.

Replaying memories, sampling the life that had been Midnight Flower's in his mind, the Devourer of Souls watched his Hinuri lift the limp body from the altar and bear it from the throne chamber. His smile of pleasure widened as he closed his eyes to immerse himself in the fresh sensations and emotions that were now his, of this unphysical and yet total union.

How different she was! So delightfully different!

Oh, Hinun knew. He had dined on countless minds from among his Shenese worshippers. They were usually tedious. At best, banal with a few moments of interest. What, after all, could such minds impart? Had he not created them? Created them-and all the life on this planet!

But this woman with skin of deepest jet and her two companions who also survived the crash here of their galaxy-traversing craft . . . ah! Now they were truly feasts for a god!

And now they. were so blessed as to be one with the god.

As with those who had first brought Hinun to Shen, the stars belonged to those spacefarers. It was easy to under-stand the pompous appellation they had bestowed on their *homo sapiens* race-*Galactics!* It spoke of strength, of star-spanning power, of a billion alien suns to be conquered!

Ah, if only the other three members of the ship's crew had lived . . .

Hinun had discovered a wealth of knowledge in the three minds he had joined to his. It was not enough. He could not construct a ship-a *spacer*-to carry him from the monotony of this world. Nor could he navigate a spaceship along the space- and time-warping avenues of the *Tackyon Trail*. He could not . . .

The Great God's digression was shattered. Pain tore at his withered chest. He doubled over, coughing in racking heaves, body shaking, caught in an uncontrollable spas-

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modic seizure. Again and again he sucked in gulps of air to combat the onslaught. Eventually, weakened and gasp-ing, he succeeded.

Trembling, Hinun lifted his head and touched the ann of his violet robe to his lips. Droplets of crimson spattered the immaculate sleeve in a fine spray. A silent curse eased from the lips of the Eater of Minds. Why did the end of the

life/death cycle always have to be this way?

Why must I ever endure this pain? Why does . . .

The Great God shook his head. Self-pity was worthless and less than divine. What matter his death-pain, when the beginning of the cycle lay so near? He had endured far worse in previous cycles.

And now there was reason to continue. New experiences awaited him. Out there amid the vast dark of space, amid the glowing suns, were the Galactics-and alien races as well-with which to unite!

"Other ships will come," Midnight Flower had prom-ised, so ringingly.

Would come in search of their sister ship lost among the myriad of stars. Other spacers bearing men and women in their crisp uniforms of gray and maroon; granite and bloodstone.

That was Hinun's hope for the beginning of the new cycle. Hope. How strange the word rolled within his stuffed mind. It was not a word the god had used often during his endless existence.

Hope!

Delicious shivers of anticipation moved in goosepimply waves up Hinun's spine as he sank back into his great chair of state. Once again he would parade Midnight Flow-er's memories before his mind's eye. (Their minds' eye!) Later, hours, maybe days hence, he would neatly catego-rize each and every thought and sensation that had been the Galactic woman, and tuck them all neatly away within the appropriate niches of his mind.

Until then Hinun would savor, with relish.

2

White noise. The constant din of voices spattered with forced laughter competing with, the blaring of wiggle, writhe and flash pop tunes ("Wig-Wri-Fla," to those in the know) from corn-amplified, multi-voiced synthesized instruments; the *clink-a-dink* of cyberbartenders and *wurrr-spiinn* of gaming wheels, the angry shouts and squeals of glee, the occasional profane curse . . . White noise. Back-ground audio clutter that the ears and brain accepted and toned down or tuned out.

Fifteen minutes after entering the Free Fall Palace of Chance, the acute ears of a massive giant had done just that. He bore the name Captain Tober Kiff of the spacer *Lanatia Lady* and he was at the bar. For the past hour and a half, Kiff's attention had been appropriately occupied by three now-empty potties of the legendary beer of Thebanis-Starflare-and occasional appraising glances and even more lengthy gazes at well-turned calves, long oval or super-nally rounded backsides, or free-swinging breasts enticingly displayed by the homebaked cakes of planet Thebanis's capital city.

Like the riotous noise of the Free Fall-a mere name, that, since the place's gravity was Thebanis's nigh-standard 1.011-the titillating glimpses of ultrafeminine anatomy were easy for Kiff to tune out. Oh, he gave the occasional second look to a flashing silver strap-titser on a very female female whose chin flaunted the dimple-scar given her at birth (and promising that she was expert at esoteric

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exotic erotica). In general his mind wandered elsewhere among memories entirely his own, and roved the star-strewn path to the galaxy's edge that stretched before him in the immediate future.

A journey across the parsecs that would resurrect the dead-or allow *Lanatia Lady's* captain to bury memories and ghosts.

For Kiff, this night in Raunch of Thebanis was nothing more than an elaborate charade, a magnificent deception. Kiff and his ship were lies. So were the nut-brown of his skin and the raven-black, over-the-ear wig he wore. The convoluted digressions that wove through the giant's mind were not.

Beneath the dyed skin, wig and the name "Tober Kiff" was Songan of Harb, friend and former genius master planner to the ultra-thief of the spaceways, the man called (among other things) the Demon Cat. Songan of Harb, who now stood as master of spacer *Fleet Return*.

The disguises for captain and craft stemmed from years of habit. The Demon Cat and his cohorts were wanted by every planetary authority in the tightly packed cluster of star-worlds here at galaxy center. Not to mention Trans-Galactic Watch, the uniformed branch of TransGalactic Order, often-mentioned but seldom seen law enforcement organization that spanned the galaxy and maintained order along the spaceways-by its definition.

Spooks or super-spooks, all would relish snaring the elusive thief as much as they would celebrate capture of the equally elusive Jonuta of Qalara. Though those riders of the outlaw trail had never met, each was master of his trade, which existed well around the bend from legality.

His encephaloboosted genius of a mind wandering the avenues of the past and the possibilities of the future, his ears attuned to filter out the noise of his surroundings, Songan seemed far from the Free Fall. As a matter of fact he didn't turn from his stool at the sound of shattering glass behind him.

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It was a voice that snapped his bewigged head around; a feral snarl-growl that fair dripped its lust for blood.

The nasty looking bruiser appeared to be the direct result of crossbreeding a Jasbiri gorilla and a grat. He stood in a classic defiant stance at one end of the Escher table. Square-cut hair cropped close to his simian-shaped skull. A large prass earring dangling from his left ear. It had no mate, because the ugly's right ear was missing.

"My stells . . . or ya ass!" The apish fellow raised a tree trunk of an arm that ended in a balled fist the size of a

sledgehammer. "What'll it be, pretty boy?"

The sledgehammer shook menacingly at the end of the tree trunk. The motion raised a clanking from multiple chain-like necklaces around the bruiser's neck-which looked big enough to swallow a liter of beer, pottle and all. Beneath the chains and open black equhyde vest ex-panded a barrel of a chest that confirmed Songan's suspi-cions that the man was descended from a gorilla. About one generation back, Songan mused unscientifically.

That hadn't been glass he had heard shatter, either; this one-eared gorilla had just busted an "unbreakable" plass pottle!

"Let's not be hasty, my garrulous friend: There is absolutely no substantiation for your hasty accusations." That replying voice was calm and chill as an iceberg. "In a sporting establishment such as this, there must be losers as well as winners. You have my sincerest condolences as to your weighty losses, but please do not expect recom-pense for your lack of fortune."

Songan craned his neck to see the object of the gorilla's anger and owner of that voice, although he didn't need visual confirmation. He would know that silver-tongued glibness anywhere in the galaxy. It belonged to one Varnalgeran Yuw, native of planet Outreach and First Mate of *Fleet Return*, not to mention *Lanatia Lady*.

The overweight Outie sat calmly at the opposite end of the Escher table. Before him glittered a small fortune in

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neatly stacked stells. The tricolored Thebanian notes were testimony to his luck at guessing the path of a ball bearing randomly tossed by constantly reversing energy fields.

Another might have acquiesced to the gorilla's demands and tossed over the man's losses plus a tidy sum to placate his rage and outrage. Another might have scooped up his winnings and made a fear-inspired scramble for the door in hopes of making it outside before the bruiser caught the back of his neck and snapped it with a single flick of an island-sized paw. A panicky fobber would have drawn stopper and fried the one-eared gargantuan where he stood.

The seated Varnalgeran Yuw chose D: none of the above. Instead he raised a hand to edge back the wide-brimmed, feather- and bead-banded Wayne he wore atop his head. His eyes, alight with an impish glint, rolled upward playfully. He smiled.

The two gamers nearest him saw that idiocy and put distance between him and them.

They had mistaken the Outie's casual reaction for the fatal misjudgment of a fool. Songan did not. During the long years he had crewed with Yuw, he had learned that the Outreach-who often dressed and occasionally played the part of jester-was anything but a fool. In that one flippant glance, Yarn Yuw had appraised the mountain of a man who towered before him-all one hundred eighty sems of him.

And two equally ponderous and chain-bedecked gorillas who shifted out of the crowd to position themselves beside Varn's glaring accuser.

Songan slid from his barstool and did some shifting of his own. A slight uplift of Varn's smile was his only acknowledgment of his captain's approach.

"It's stells-stells ya *stoled* from Magenquy of Havoc- that I want, jacko. Not ya smartass lip!" The words hissed in a snarl through the 'Vocker's clenched teeth. "Ya cheated! Ain't no fancy, frilled Outreach gonna do that to Magenquy . . . not an' keep his hide!"

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With a clank of chain, the 'Vocker's heavy-browed head nodded. In willingly obedient response, his companion uglies bulled around each side of the gaming table and vectored straight for the still seated Outie.

Magenquy took the shortest route between himself and his desired destination. In a bound his booted feet were planted firmly on the edge of the Escher table. Plasteel floor-anchors groaned; the table held. Magenquy crouched, threw his tree trunks of arm forward and, with a bestial scream tearing from throat and chest, launched himself headfirst at Varnalgeran Yuw.

A considerably taller man was meanwhile thrusting aside gawking onlookers. His name was Songan and he threw out an arm of bioengineering-enhanced muscles that matched the tree-bole circumference of Magenquy's. Like a finely machined vise, the disguised captain of *Fleet Return* clamped a big hand around the forearm of the gorilla closest to him.

"Tober Kiff" was merely a spacer captain of uncom-mon size. Songan of Harb was another matter. A man who abhorred physical violence, he was uniquely prepared to deal with it-and with this man bent on assaulting his friend. Songan was a lifetime practitioner of the internal discipline of *Tao Chi*. More importantly, the giant had been bred for the Games on his native Harb. There, with his winged friend Dorjan-known to the galaxy as the Demon Cat-he had been part of the deadliest gladiatorial team ever to step into the Harbian arena.

In one fluid movement, Songan jerked Magenquy's fel-low 'Vocker toward him. His arm, which had been ex-tended firm and rigid as a beam of unipolymer plasteel, bent. He released the chain-adorned bruiser and snapped his elbow upward, painfully smacking it into the fellow's upper lip.

Had the carefully placed blow been a centimeter higher, it would have driven the gorilla's nose upward into his

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brain and brought death. Songan had no wish to kill. He intended only to disable, quickly. He did exactly that.

Magenquy's companion, aided by a long, long leg thrust between his stumbling feet, went down howling. He rolled on the unshining scarlet floor. Both hands clutched his face in a useless attempt to staunch the crimson flow streaming from a split lip . . . a lip that only a daktari and a dozen stitches would be able to make whole again.

Songan's movement ended when he whirled to the blood-lusting 'Vocker who catapulted himself toward the plump

Outie-still seated in seeming calm at his end of the gambling table.

Without so much as the flicker of his large eyes, Varn Yuw swiveled left and abandoned his chair with an agility that belied his visibly well-fed physique. He grinned with self-pleased delight when the airborne Magenquy reached his destination.

Arms opened wide to snare a target no longer present, the 'Vocker slammed into the vacant chair. His skull squarely and noisily cracked into unyielding metal back-rest. The chair's synthesteel studs-added as anchors to prevent its being used as a weapon by just such a sore loser-groaned in protest as the impact of man on metal tried to uproot them from the bedrock-hard durofoam floor. Despite their shrieks, the studs held.

Magenquy did not. A mountain of muscle gone liquid, the unconscious gorilla oozed to the floor and lay there like a babe in restful slumber.

"Damn! Ya sawed-off li'l fart!" This from a glo-orange-wigged, war-scarred destrier thinly disguised as a female Galactic who stood beside Yuw. "Ya broke my flainin' foot!"

"Sorry sir-uh, ma'am!" Varn saw that his artful dodg-ing of the angry 'Vocker turned human projectile had not been flawless. One of his needle-nosed, reptile-skin (imi-tating) boots' high heels had come down rudely atop a

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feminine foot the size of a luxury model floater. Family size.

"I'll have your gabbles, ya misbegotten premlix!"

Orange-wig punctuated that roared threat with a widely swung roundhouse to the Outie's cherubic chin.

Varn evaded the punishing blow with a quick backstep. The same could not be said of the puce-coveredalld spacefarer on his left. That unsuspecting gawker received a face full of female if not feminine knuckles.

"Ma'am, I offer my sincerest -"

Yuw's apology was cut short by a full-bosomed darling in a lavender body-stocking. She had been clinging to the arm of the recipient of Orange-wig's mightily swung fist, and now she drowned out Yarn's apology with the screech of her warcry.

"You fat-ass Andran bust! That was my man you hit! I been working him all night!"

She emphasized her outrage with the lash of a laven-dered leg that buried the wedge of a crysplas high-heeled shoe in Orange-wig's very most vulnerable area. The disguised destrier's eyes went all loose and she gurgle-yelled in agony. She also doubled over, predictably hug-ging herself. A bony elbow elicited an *urkh* sound from the thigh-booted man immediately behind her. With a sure recognition of the true source of his discomfort, he back-handed Lavender body-stocking. She staggered back into a slave-collared Jarp, who knocked down the man beside it: "Shiva-damned *Jarp!*" *Whap!* The Jarp was flung aside (into two others, who bowled over two others, who came up throwing punches) and the hermaphrodite's origi-nal accidental victim lunged past to repay the thigh-booted man. Before he could gloat over his defense of the treach-erous attack on Orange-wig's only interesting parts, a fist hammered the side of his jaw. He staggered into someone else, who shoved him with a curse, into the man who had hit him, who staggered back, to be hit by the Jarp, who

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staggered back to elicit a shriek from Orange-wig by step-ping on her hand. An anonymous fist bounced off the Jarp's cheek while its unintended victim grasped and twisted its ankle. Lavender body-stocking got herself to one knee and was hit in the back by an anonymous fist, which was answered by another. And another. And another.

"Hot shit!" A wiry fellow exulted, scrambling onto the table amid the rapidly developing melee and reaching for scattered stell-notes. "Here's where ole Fon gets his first break in-"

Varnalgeran Yuw grabbed his ankle, dragged him back, and dumped him atop the Jarp and the two people it was wrestling with. When Yuw went for the money, someone knocked him sideways a good meter and a half. He was stopped only by a chair. Unfortunately it was occupied.

Songan stared in amazement. In the passing of two or three heartbeats a major melee had erupted within the Thebanian gambling palace. Man-to-man, woman-to-woman, man-to-woman, woman-to-man-not-to-mention-Jarp, the pa-trons of the Free Fall Palace of Chance of Raunch on Thebanis had become as if possessed by the demon of mass insanity.

Two cyberbouncers wheeled out of a swinging door to the rear of the hall. Each clasped a stopper, that eminently effective sonic sidearm common to those who traveled the Tachyon Trail, in one of its three pincer "hands." The automatons were painted a refulgent yellow, which made them very hard indeed to miss.

Before the two constructs could aim their cylindrical weapons, they were whelmed and covered by an undulat-ing wave of attacking human (not to mention Jarp) bodies, male and female alike. And both.

Seconds later two gleaming piles of unidentifiable scrap metal and plass lay strewn about the floor where the cyberbouncers had stood.

If the management of the Free Fall possessed other of

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the peacekeeping cybernetic units, they were kept wisely safe behind the swinging door. Cyberbouncers were not cheap. Only an idiot would send more into a frenetic fray that had already seen to the destruction of two of the expensive metal slaves. The riot sweeping through the gambling house was better handled by policers. Any of the combatants capable of thought would assume that such were being called. Unfortunately that excluded nearly ev-eryone present. Some were already napping as the result of this or that lump or bruise or both. However . . .

They'll call in policers, Songan thought, and his head jerked about in quest of his First Mate. Amid the gigantic

and violently agitated worm-can, Varn was nowhere to be seen.

Damn his Outie hide! This is no place for either of us when policers burst through the front door!

Fleet Return's captain had temporarily to shelve his search for Varnalgeran Yuw. One of the orange-skinned hermaphroditic humanoid natives of planet Jarpi was bear-ing down on the Harbian. It brandished the Starflare pottle broken by Magenquy-wherever that fobber was, under all that mass of writhing punching choking groaning cursing kicking elbowing meat!

"Don't," the truly gigantic Songan said, "be silly . . ."

Across the room, surrounded by the frenzy of madness that now owned the Free Fall, Varn was totally occupied with his own deadly waltz. His partner was Magenquy's second companion.

The chain-necklaced man did not speak as he and the Outie slowly circled. Gone was the playful smile Yuw had worn at the gaming table. Nor did he taunt this gorilla with witty repartee. That had disappeared when the ugly opened the front of Varn's blindingly bright flowered shirt with a humming vibeknife.

That same sonic blade the goon was now passing men-acingly from hand to hand while he edged closer to the unarmed Outie.

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With no warning save for the clank of prass chain, -the man lunged. His vibeknife swept out in a wide arc before him. Varn showed that unexpected speed again, skittering back to avoid the singing knife that would have gutted him like a goldbelly, that gold-collecting fish from the Panishi sea.

Another swiping swing and another backstep to dodge the murderous fang of sound. Then there was no room for further retreat. A wall of unyielding synthestone pressed worse than firmly against Varn's spine.

"Gotcha now, ya slimy lil' bastard. When I'm through withcha, ya'll never cheat another 'Vocker!" A wicked grin spread across the blade wielder's face, in anticipation of his bloody victory. "Fact, ya'll never cheat nobody again!"

Certain of a quick end to the confrontation now, the 'Vocker lunged, intent on burying the humming vibeknife in Varn's rounded stomach.

He underestimated the Outie's agility and desire to sur-vive. Varnalgeran Yuw ducked-

Or attempted to duck.

He dropped and started to scramble leftward with the intention of driving a fist into his assailant's kidney as he rose. He never rose. His left foot landed on a slightly yielding sofplas beer pottle. Container and foot went flying from beneath him. With a "humph!" more in indignation than in horror, he tumbled to the floor to land heavily on his naturally padded backside. Before he could scurry to his feet, the other man lashed downward with the sonic knife.

Yuw used the only defense available to him. He threw up an arm and waited for the burning bite that would sever muscle and bone. Meanwhile his other hand felt desper-ately about for the pottle. It was not in reach. He clenched his teeth, steeling himself . . .

The agony never came. Instead the vibeknife's wielder crumpled to the durofoam floor at the Outreacher's feet.

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Varn blinked. The chain-adorned 'Vocker lay still, deathly still.

"He'll live. I had the setting on Zap, that's all."

It was a husky and entirely feminine voice that answered the Outie's unspoken questions. He lowered his arm and gazed upward into the face of a goddess.

The divine vision snapped her stopper back into a red felt holster strapped to the longest and barest thigh he had ever had the pleasure to encounter. She leaned forward with a bosomy sway and extended a hand.

"You the sort that objects to being saved by a woman?"

"Negatory!" he assured her, taking the hand with en-thusiasm, and was pulled to his feet as though he were no more than a child.

On the way up, the First Mate of *Fleet Return* took in every sem of the magnificent woman who smiled down at him. She stood at least a hundred eighty-five sems* from her sandaled feet-sandals with taut thongs that wove their crisscross way up well-developed calves and onto sleekly-curved thighs-to the luxurious cascade of blue-black hair that sculpted the beauty of her face.

An amazon goddess!

The thought careened through Varnalgeran Yuw's dazed mind. Even with the height of his heeled boots he had to look up to see those lovely almond-shaped eyes and that beaming smile. Corneally dyed or covered with lenses, her eyes were a disconcerting hue. Green? Brown? *Olive!*

"Are you all right, friend?" Her face showed him a quizzical little twist as she arched an eyebrow, peering down at him. "I only saw you hit your butt when you fell. Lost your hat-did you crack your head as well?"

Varn shook his head while she placed her hands on femininely jutting hips. It took a great deal of effort to look away from her, but he did long enough to snatch up his eleven-gallon hat and clap it on. When he opened his

185 centimeters; about *six feet one inch*, Old Style.

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mouth to answer, all he could manage was a swallow. Being this close to such magnificence of womanhood made it damned difficult to breathe, let alone speak.

She nodded, smiling. "I thought you looked like the strong silent type," she said, seemingly without satirical intent.

Silent, he felt weakened by sight of her. She wore . . . he was hard-pressed to categorize her less than modest attire.

A soft doe-gray, it began with a wide-flaring collar that stood stiffly about her neck. Downward ran two pre-posterously thin strips of cloth that crossed over a flat midriff. En route from collar to abdomen, the gray pseudo-suede fabric did little more than cover the nipples of two of the largest breasts Yuw's gaze had ever feasted upon. To add to his disconcert, each of the opulent globes was tipped by visibly thick buttons that shoved as if angrily at the material pretending to conceal them.

Below the crossing of those warhead-revealing straps was a triangle of brazenly bare skin, nicely done in beige-tan. Its center was pitted by a deep, sensual navel-a well, Varn thought dizzily, in which a man could lose himself.

After crossing, the two gray suede strips ended their downward trek by widening into skimpy, skintight briefs that hardly pretended to conceal this woman's rearward cheeks. The cloth barely covered the plump mound of her pubis. Or perhaps lovingly hugged it, was a better description.

A cool finger slipped under the Outie's chin to drag his gaze back skyward to those deeply olivine eyes. He could lose himself in those, too.

"You certain you didn't hit your head when you fell?" The wonderfully sensuous voice questioned with genuine concern.

"Pos," Varn got out, feeling triumphant at having got his vocal cords to function. "I'm . . . just . . ."

"Varnalgeran!"

Songan's voice. He was forcing his way through two

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women doing their best to cripple a Terasak in a torn yellow keemo. Then Varn's captain was at his side.

"We've got to redshift," Songan snapped. "Policer riot-squads will be here soonest!" He glanced around, pointed to a door at the rear of the gambling hall. "That looks like a good bet."

"Bet!"

Varn's head snapped around and his gaze homed on the Escher table and the stells that miraculously remained there. Without further comment, he whirled away from the tall woman and the taller master of *Fleet Return*. Back into the tumultuous storm of flying fists Varn plunged, dodging and darting first this way and then that. He reached the table, scooped up the bills-most of which, incredibly, were still neatly stacked-and stuffed them through the knife-rent in his flowered shirt. Next he sucked in a deep breath, yanked his Wayne low on his forehead, and made it back to Songan on a wisely chosen zigzag course.

She was still there too, staring almost incredulously at the man who was even taller than she.

"Now we can go, Captain!" Varn grinned widely and waved for the giant to lead the way.

Without comment Songan did. Varn took one stride in his wake, then wheeled back to his towering savior. Swiftly he grasped one of her cool hands and pulled her after Songan and the safety of the back door. Fortunately, she followed willingly.

"Now there's a real man," a disheveled woman said with a sigh, as she sat on the floor with her far more disheveled man's head pillowed on her thighs. He wore a colorful new bruise on his jaw and definitely did not hear her. "Lookit that little jacko draggin' that great big man-squeezer out of here!"

Varnalgeran Yuw did not hear. After all, he was think-ing righteously, he was an Outie and no Outie could leave to a riot squad the person who had saved his life!

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Especially not a person as gorgeous as my amazon goddess!

Arm partially extended to Varn's grasping hand so that she did indeed look as if she was being led and almost dragged, the great big woman with the man-squeezer legs looked back at the one sitting on the floor, and winked.

3

The high-pitched whistle of a Jarp shrilled through the practically vacant cocktail lounge of the Hotel Aziza. Unre-strained human laughter counterpointed the joyous (not to mention ear-piercingly loud) sound. The source of the mirth that resonated from the bar's only occupied table was Varnalgeran Yuw. He was recounting with a flourish of wild gestures every detail of the free-for-all at the Free Fall Palace of Chance and his timely rescue by the radiant Valkyrie seated beside him.

The sound was good; welcome. The music of a crew rather than individuals, seated together about a table to share a late night drink or two.

Three months ago, when Songan and Varn had departed HOME*, that hollowed asteroid colony converted to inter-stellar spaceship, Songan had held his share of doubts about the future of *Fleet Return* and its scantling crew of two.

While Dorjan, former master thief of the galaxy, and his bride Lizina led HOME's colonists out from the star-cluttered center of the galaxy toward the Kuzih worlds and the three alien races who waited there to greet them, Songan and Yuw had prepared to leap the parsecs out to the galactic rim.

Revamping *Fleet Return* for the long haul to Hawking,

*Habitat Orbiter: Modular Environment. See Spaceways #7, *The Manhuntress*, October, 1982.

secondary source and still the "cultural hub" of the race called Galactic, had consumed the major portion of those months. Songan of Harb silently toasted Lizina and her Panishi attorney for the aid they had provided in that considerable task.

Lizina, heir to the immense Harith estate of Panish, provided the financial backing to re-equip the spacer. At-torney Huhleem (wise beyond his years in the methods of maneuvering through the mazes of burok) had arranged all Songan had required, and without questions. That was warmly appreciated by two men whose heads were wanted by a slew of planetary policer forces.

Not, Songan smiled, that they would recognize us if they saw us!

Dorjan's insistence on constantly changing disguises for crew and ship had kept both identities from law enforcement authorities for more than a decade. Songan was happy to continue the time-tested tradition. Meanwhile however, *Fleet Return* and its crew had carefully toed a straight, narrow and nigh-boringly legal line.

Songan continued another tradition he and his fellow Harbian had begun on spacer *Misfit*. That spacer of the Demon Cat was crewed only by former slaves. Both Songan and Yuw had once worn the choking collars of the en-slaved. *Fleet Return's* two other crewmembers, Hinote and Mu Tan, had also shared that awful burden.

Hinote had been the first to join Captain Songan and First Mate Yuw. Songan glanced across the table now to the (very) orange-skinned Jarp with its wine-red hair, and noted the changes he detected in the Jarp-in her. (Oh yes, Hinote was from Jarpi and thus a hermaphrodite complete with femininely developed breasts, vagina, and ovary-one-in addition to penis and one testicle; and was an *it*. This one, however, was different. Hinote's habit of exposing its high-set red-aureoled warheads on every possible occasion led to Songan's thinking of it as *her*.)

When Yuw had discovered Hinote in the hands of a less

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than wary slaver on Front, it had drawn within itself and to all outward appearances had resolved to die rather than face a life in chains, figurative or real. After a mere two weeks of freedom on *Fleet Return*-during which time the nickname "High-note dummy" became the name *Hinote*- the whistles, tweets, and eardrum-assaulting shrieks that were speech on Jarpi resounded through the ship's corridors- "tunnels." Within a month under Varn's patient tutelage, Hinote sat ably at SIPACUM (Ship Inboard Processing and Computing Unit: Modular) as ship's computrician.

The Jarp's natural affinity for the work was obvious and a delight. It freed Varn to take the Mate's chair at ship's con.

Mu Tan was another story.

She had yet to break through the imprisoning walls of her former life. Nor would she discuss it. She had been born to slavery on the planet Saiping. Twenty years of unquestioning servitude and servility could not be erased in a mere six weeks.

Onboard *Fleet Return*, Mu Tan still had no official title. Because she did what was asked of her and learned quickly, she was reaching the level of Able-bodied Spacefarer and so Songan listed her. A few kilos of self-confidence mixed with an equal portion of independence, and she would be as fine a spacefarer as any captain could ask. Until then, gentleness and understanding were the ingredi-ents required to bring this delicate Saipese flower to full bloom. Both were in abundant supply within the spacer known as *Feet Return*.

These past three weeks captain and crew had spent "vacationing" on Thebanis while the ship, in orbit around the planet, was fitted with an in-grav boat. Meanwhile Mu Tan and Hinote studied and learned, and all of them had commenced the process of bringing Mu Tan out of her slavish shell.

If the next six weeks bring the same progress, Songan mused now, the yoke of slavery will be no more than a

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bitter memory for her. A memory she will never erase from her mind, true-as I have not-but still. . . only memories.

A series of sharp whistles punctuated by bleeping tweets burst from Hinote's lips.

When all heads turned questioningly its/her way, the Jarp smiled sheepishly, shrugged, and flicked on the system of straps and metal it wore atop a mop of luridly red hair. Now its "words" were instantly translated into Erts, the Galactic tongue, from the musical but entirely indecipherable Jarp whistles:

"To Valustriana See, the *most lovely* savior of our *most* fortunate First Mate."

That toast downed, Hinote leaned toward the scantily clad Valustriana See. In a broad vee the front of the Jarp's shockingly yellow blouse opened to reveal the pair of shining orange coneshapes within. The invitation to Yuw's savior and guest was obvious.

Songan smiled and shook his head. There was no truth in the prejudice-dictated concept that Jarps were in a constant state of rut. Yet that did often seem the case, with Hinote. (*Should the word be rut, or estrus, Songan mused. Never mind! In this case Hinote is displaying admirable taste.*)

"I would like to add my personal thanks for helping out my First Mate," Songan said. "Even with a tendency to find trouble planetside, I would be hard pressed to replace him."

Songan watched little furrows rumple the woman's brow. He had seen that same expression more than once since their escape from the Free Fall, and he was perplexed . . . and then it hit him.

My voice!

Among friends he forgot how inhuman his words sounded to those unaccustomed to him. His brown-subcutaned fin-ger crept to the little circle of voice box inset at the hollow of his throat.

"An ancient childhood injury," he said in answer to

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Valustriana See's unspoken query. "The daktari could not repair my vocal cords. She gave me this instead."

It was a good story, good enough. It was also a lie.

The vocadisc, along with the multi-hued tattoos that covered every seam of his body under his subcutaneous-dye disguise, were souvenirs of his former mistress, Murrha an Rahmyne of Harb. Both were adornments for her amusement. The tattoos were disguisable. The voice box was not, without a costly implant while the former gladiator lay vulnerable in hospital.

Valustriana nodded and turned to Varn. A wide grin lit the beauty of her face. Everything about the woman was along warrior maid lines, including her smile.

"I accept your thanks, Captain. But what else could I have done? I'm an Outie, after all! I couldn't let some 'Vocker scum carve up a fellow Outreach!"

She threw an arm around Yuw and gave him what appeared to be a motherly hug-almost. While her gesture seemed protective, the gleam in those deeply green-brown eyes hinted-just hinted-that she might have Other designs on her newfound admirer from their native planet.

There was no doubt that Varn would welcome the result of such designs, were they to materialize, Songan had never seen his Outie friend in such a state of abandoned glee. His gaze was locked to See's face (a definitely difficult feat when there was so much of the Wagnerian woman just begging for appreciative eyes and more) and he wore a silly half-drunk grin from ear to here.

More amazing was Val See's effect on Varn's attire.

The moment they had reached Raunch's posh Hotel Aziza-more thanks to Lizina's bountiful wealth-Yarn had rushed to his room to discard his knife-ridden blouse and safely stash away his hard-earned (?) winnings. When he joined the rest of *Fleet Return's* crew here in the lounge, he was dressed in a conservatively cut suit complete with lace and cravat.

"Disguise," he said in response to Hinote's comments.

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"The local spooks may be looking for a wildly attired Outie in a big hat. Now I look as staid and conservative as a Panishi banker!"

Well, not quite, Songan reflected. To a man whose definition of high fashion was the brightest colors he could find-and mix-this suit of iridescent gold was conservative. Besides, the cravat was a variant hue-changer. At least the plump man wore his needle-toed blond boots, although he looked strangely naked without the broad-brimmed Wayne atop his head.

Also shorter, Songan had noted, though with them all seated Valustriana See did not look quite so much taller. A lot of her height was in those legs, which must account for ten or eleven decimeters of their 18.5-dem length.

Varn's jaw had dropped and he had stared joyously when he heard her name. "An Outie! That's an Outie name, Songan-she's a fellow Outie! I should have known the moment I saw you standing there, Valustriana See! Ole Outreach doesn't have much, but by Theba's Mask it does produce beautiful women!"

"And big ones, too," Hinote had added, only to be told with austerity by the big woman in question that she was two pounds overweight for her size. "I can see where that is," Hinote observed, gazing at that bemazing chest with lemur-huge eyes, and had gone swiftly on to say, "And strange names, strange names, that's what most of us know about Outies!"

"After we get past the rainbow clothing," Songan drily added.

Now Hinote sat straight in its chair with quiet resignation. Its tendered enticement to the near-naked woman had been ignored.

"Val-uss-tree-anna See," it muttered. "So many syllables could tangle even my tongue."

Songan chuckled. Hinote's Jarp name was unpronounce-able. The human tongue and vocal cords simply refused to imitate those pointy-tongued *too'il'eets*.

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"Try Valkyriana, then," Varn suggested, gazing raptly at her and naming the big warrior-maids of one of Homeworld's old sub-races. He didn't know much more about the Valkyrior, really.

"Try Val," she said, "if it's easier. Family and friends do, friends. The whole thing manages to tie my own tongue, occasionally." Valustriana accompanied her suggestion with an understanding smile sufficient to make strong men quiver with adolescent rut.

"Val." Hinote tried out the shorter version and listened to what its translation helmet did with it. "Val. Ah."

Varnalgeran also spoke the single syllable. It rolled trippingly off his tongue as though he savored a sip of rare old Qalaran wine.

"I would have guessed that you hailed from one of the rim worlds," Songan said, and gestured with his plass toward her waist. "One doesn't see many stoppers like that here in the heart of the galaxy. Your second setting's tuned for unconsciousness. Most spacefarers who travel beyond the Carnadyne Void carry stoppers with that modification."

Val's eyes widened in surprise. "I've done a lot of crewing on Big Ships running between Barbro Transfer Station and the rim. The Zap-mod always seemed more practical than the Two setting in use here at the core. Never had much need to make someone dance to a sonic beam. Much cleaner to put 'em to sleep. I learned that on rim-ship *Chandler*, I think."

With her left arm still draped over Varn's shoulder, Val paused to take a swallow that drained half the contents of the glass in her other hand.

"Fact is, I'm looking to crew on a ship bound for Barbro. Got a job lined up on *Omar Muktar* headed for the Ohoriko Circuit if I can get there before the spacer docks." With another gulp, she finished off her drink. Then the magnificent Outie went on to explain that she had crewed with Captain Anis Ma'alosee's *Chandler* for a year.

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"Ma'alosee decided he and the crew needed a three-month vacation on their homeworld-*Bleak!*" The raven mass of her hair trembled like a great mane when she shook her head. "Bleak! Can you imagine being stuck there for three months?!"

"I was there for three months once ..." Varn said in true sympathy "... in one afternoon." Then he rocked with the giggly squeeze she gave his shoulder.

"Even a Bleaker should know better than that." Songan sucked at his teeth in disgust. "No one in its right mind goes to Bleak on purpose!"

"That's fobbin' sure!" Val's was a deep, rolling-up-from-the-chest laugh. "Better to be stranded on Thebanis for the rest of your life than spend a half-hour on Bleak!"

Songan, Yuw and Hinote joined in the laughter. The spaceways had led each to Bleak, in past-briefly. Bleak needed no other description. It was quite aptly named, it and its capital: Zero. Charming.

"Excuse me, my Captain." That was Mu Tan's first utterance in many minutes. She pushed back her chair. "I must seek the sitter. My bladder is unaccustomed to so much beer."

"Neither's mine," Val said, also pushing back. She stood. "Let's see if we can find that sitter together, little one."

Songan watched his Mate's gaze follow the movement of a hectare or two of bare flesh as Val and Mu Tan left the lounge. There was no doubt about it. The Outie was completely under the spell of the long-legged enchantress from Outreach.

His attention shifted back to the table only when the two were gone, Mu Tan smaller than ever beside Valustriana. When he saw Songan's amused expression, he smiled sheepishly. "She's uh, magnificent, isn't she?"

"To say the least," Songan agreed, his amusement growing.

"And a person in need of our help!"

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Songan put two and two together and came up with Barbro. "Perhaps in passage out to the transfer station?"

"Ah, that genius of a mind! I should have known you'd have thought of it already and doubtless decided to lift her there, right?"

Songan managed not to roll his eyes or comment on the attempt at salesmanship. He flipped five, in that all-inclusive gesture of spacefarers.

"It's a short hop. And it's the least we can do for the *person* who saved you from being carved up like a Lanatian beefsteak! That is, now, if she can be ready by tomorrow."

"Songan, my friend, if you weren't so damned ugly I'd give you a hug and a kiss!" Varn Yuw's eyes practically danced.

"I could bestow them for you," Hinote suggested.

"Keep your distance, Computrician!"

Songan did get a hug and a kiss, though, a loud wet one on the cheek, when Val returned and heard the invitation. So did Varn, although his kiss was planted squarely on the mouth. He made no protest, but pretended to collapse, overwhelmed. All this Mu Tan watched, bright-eyed.

"Uplift at oh-seven tomorrow morning?" Val said, re-leasing Varn from her hug and pretending to prop him up while she looked at Songan.

"Seven hundred hours, Thebanis North Continental Stan-dard," Songan nodded, repeating the departure time of the first shuttle up to Thebanisport, one of several torus-shaped docking stations orbiting the planet.

"That's only a few hours away! I've got to get back to my hotel and gather my gear." She leaned down/over to plant another kiss on Varn's lips, turned, and strode to-ward the lounge's exit.

"Need help?" her fellow Outreacher called.

She turned, continuing her departure backward. "The idea is to get packed and get some *rest*, Varnalgeran! I'll bet I know what sort of 'help' you have in mind," she said, eyebrows providing the quotation marks around

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"help." And with a flashed smile, she swung back and was gone.

Yuw's smile drooped like a dying leaf. Whatever erotic visions he had fantasized for (what remained of) this night had faded with that last hasty kiss and been shattered by her words. "Magnificent," he mumbled, to his beer. Then he killed it.

Songan reached over to squeeze his friend's shoulder, and winked. "There's still the hop to Barbro ..."

"Uh," Mu Tan said, addressing the tabletop, "she is so much my captain's size ..."

"Never mind that!" Varnalgeran Yuw said. "Ah, if only that hop out to Barbro wasn't such a short one, once we clear the Void."

"Oh, Varn!" Val stood in the doorway. "I forgot to ask ... how *did* you manage to cheat that 'Vocker orangutan'?"

"Cheat?" Yuw wailed in fine imitation of a man mor-tally wounded by words.

He also noted that she stood where she was, one hip out to support her fist, her face firm and her olivine gaze

homed on her fellow Outreacher. Reluctantly, he lifted his hand to display a large ruby ring.

"It's an electromagnet. I had power cells strapped to my side." He wagged his fist to make the ring flash. "Plays hell with an Escher table's force fields."

Val held up a hand, forefinger and thumb forming a circle of approval. "Ah, Theba be praised! I was afraid you actually might have been *gambling* on those crooked tables!"

4

The two-minute warning wailed through the cabins and tunnels of spacer *Fleet Return*.

"Right on the button!" Varn called out as he read the monitors and displays from his Mate's chair beside Songan at the con. "We'll punch through at exactly a hundred kloms out. Barbros here we come!"

Toeing open intraship comm, Songan watched the speck on a monitor to his right—a diminishing speck that had been space station Thebanisport but seconds ago.

"Mu Tan, Val, find a place to alight and hold. We're going subspace ahead of schedule!"

Subspace! Songan nudged the intraship communication system off. *The Tachyon Trail!*

They were one and the same—the faster-than-light limbo traveled by spacers, the warping of Einsteinian time and space without which the Galactic race would never have conquered the yawning chasm of light-years between the stars.

For more than a decade Songan had made the transition to and from the Tachyon Trail. The process was simple. A programmed cassette of multi-layered crysplas was slotted into SIPACUM. From there everything was automatic. The fantastically fast, multi-user computer read the information stored in tetradecimal arrays within the crysplas, found the nearest hole in "real" space and shifted ship and crew into subspace at the earliest opportunity. Or rather converted all to tachyons—with a two-minute warning.

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Simple. Automatic. Which was exactly what brought a prickle of uncertainty to the broad nape of Songan's neck.

For ten years he had sat beside his fellow Harbian Dorjan and served as that ship's First Mate. He had been captain of *Fleet Return* for only three months. The change in chairs made all the difference in the universe. The act of turning a ship—*his ship*—over to a machine, even one as thoroughly proven as SIPACUM, was a frightening experience. Should anything go wrong, there was absolutely nothing he could do about it! Just one set of shoulders on which blame for disaster would be placed.

Only a fool or a master seconds away from death would manually make subspace leap. Such lunacy was called a "jam-cram" or going "Forty Percent City." The odds of going City and surviving—with undefined damage to ship and crew—was seventy percent; 59.7731-to-infinity per-cent for survival intact. The remaining 40.2269 percent meant utter destruction, presumably. (Some speculated that the 40.2269 percent equalled being catapulted into another universe—if such existed. No one knew. Those who bought that 40.2269 were not around to reminisce about the experience.)

"Here it co-o-o-mmessssssss . . ."

Varn's words were sucked from him as SIPACUM punched spacer and crew into the void of the Tachyon Trail.

Nerves jangled, stomachs threatened to upheave, vision swirled, eyes refused to focus. There was no gradual transition. The universe was turned inside out for one gut-wrenching instant. In the next, it was over, leaving the five occupants of *Fleet Return* trying to shake that moment of absolute disorientation.

"*T'loo-whEEit!*" Hinote whistled emphatically. The single Jarp word roughly translated into Erts as "fornicate."

"Well put!" Songan attempted to imitate his computrician with little success. He ran a trembling hand over his face and opened the comm. "Mu Tan, check the cargo holds. I

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thought I felt a tremor run through the hull when we jumped. Don't want any containers free-floating below."

"Yes, my Captain," Mu Tan's voice softly came from a grille directly before Songan on the con.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to help, Songan." The tinny quality of the comm grille did little to diminish the husky quality of Val's voice. "*It's boring just sitting alone in this room by myself.*"

"Be my guest. All help is welcomed." Songan toed off the comm and turned to Varn.

"I felt something too, Songan. Like *Fleet-ah, Lanatia Lady* pulled a ligament," Varn corrected himself. With Val onboard, spacer *Fleet Return* would have to retain her false identification until they'd cleared the Barbros Transfer Station. "Want me to go below and lend a hand?"

All the better to be near Valustriana See, Songan thought, but said, "Might as well. Hinote and I can handle the con until everything is checked out."

"Right!" The Outie swiveled from the control console, traversed the cabin in loping low-gravity strides, and thumbed open the door.

"I believe our First Mate is in rut, Captain." Hinote winked a saucer-round eye at Songan as the door hissed closed.

"Not that I can find fault in that, or Val."

Songan's gaze ran over the con panels. All was as it should be; none of the scans or telltales indicated a problem within the ship.

"Ahh, Valustriana See," Hinote said with a musical sigh and slumped deeper into its chair before SIPACUM. "She seems such a waste."

"What?" Songan's head jerked around. "A waste? What in Sheol do you mean?"

The Jarp answered with a glum expression and a hope-less shrug. "Such a waste that one as beautiful as she should prefer the company of a human male to that of a

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Jarp. Especially when a Jarp is capable of fulfilling her needs dually."

Hinote sighed forlornly again before adding, "And at the same time."

Raising a hand to cover an unsympathetic grin of amuse-ment, Songan looked back to the con. Meanwhile he did his utmost to stifle the urge to shake his head in disbelief. He did admit there was more than a seed of truth in Hinote's statement. Otherwise the natives of Jarpi might not have found so many eager admirers, male and female, among the Galactic worlds.

"*Songan, Val located the problem,*" Yuw's voice hissed from the grille. "*One of the mooring studs has torn loose from the ingrav-boat's cradle collar.*"

"How bad is it?"

Songan asked the obvious. Any damage to a spacer on the Tachyon Trail was bad. It was just a matter of degree.

"*A collar stud on the slide platform. No damage to the hull. A double cold weld should secure it until we reach Barbro.*"

"Triple weld it, Varn. I don't want to take any chances with that much mass tearing loose. If it did, it could poke a hole through both our hulls!"

(Songan silently thanked the various gods humanity wor-shipped for the stroke of luck. Had the stud been attached to the inner hull . . . He had no desire to dwell on the gruesome possibility of such a disaster.)

"And-Varn-double-check the other studs. If one failed, there could be other weak ones,"

"*Mu Tan's ahead of you, Captain. She's been over each of them four times. No visible signs of stress. We'll have SIPACUM run an analysis while we're down here.*" The grille went dead for a second, then Yuw's voice returned. "*Anything we've overlooked?*"

"Sounds like you've covered it all. Let me know when you've got it wrapped up. I'll be in my cabin." Songan glanced at his computrician. "Hinote'll be first oncon."

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"*You'll know the moment we finish,*" Varn concluded with a sharp click of the intraship comm.

Songan swiveled from the con, stood, and stretched. His palms pressed flat against the overhead. *Fleet Return* was not designed, nor was any spacer, for a captain who towered nearly two hundred twenty sems.*

"Hinote, keep the bay under full monitor. I want to know if anything goes wrong below-immediately!" Songan's tone and expression left no doubt as to the high priority of the order.

"Full monitor and immediate notification if anything goes wrong," the Jarp dutifully repeated the command while its captain redshifted from the con-cabin.

A single push of a button and the monitor's green screen winked out to leave a square of flat black staring up at the captain of *Fleet Return*. Songan rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head with displeasure.

Like it or not, he would have to use the commercial cassette he'd purchased to guide the spacer on its journey to Hawking. There were too many factors, too many stars between the galactic core and its rim to compute an efficient course the first time out.

Commercial cassettes were notoriously outdated, but nothing else was available. Spaceship captains kept their own routes to themselves. Speed along the spaceways, the ability to deliver cargo ahead of schedule, often was the narrow edge needed to pay off creditors and keep one's ship beyond the uncaring clutch of greedy hands.

"Damn you, Dorjan!" Songan cursed his friend (who by now was among the Kuzih planets half a galaxy away). "You never hinted that the captain's chair weighed so flaming much!"

He had gained his unexpected position onboard the spacer by default. Dorjan had given the ship to Varn and him.

*220 centimeters; over seven feet. Old Style.

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Yuw, however, had been Dorjan's computrician, while Songan had served as First Mate. Their new roles onboard *Fleet Return* were a matter of natural selection based on years of experience. Songan could handle a spacer; Varn was just learning, although accomplishing that task with a speed as startling as his clothing.

Pushing from the chair in front of his cabin's computer terminal, Songan repressed the urge to button open intraship comm and see how the work below progressed. Rule number one of a successful spacer captain: delegate authority. He had given an order and asked for a report when the task was completed. His crew was highly competent and able. There was no reason to breathe down their necks unless the situation warranted it.

Songan stepped across the room and stretched out atop the imperially wide, giant-long bed that filled half his cramped quarters. The size of the bed was a matter of practicality rather than luxury. The former gladiator of Harb was big. And long!

"Songan?" A light rap on the cabin door accompanied the softly questioning feminine voice.

"Come in, Mu Tan." Songan swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up as the door hissed open.

"Varn said I was to tell you personally that everything is secure in the bay," the diminutive Saipese said in a voice that was little more than a strong whisper. Her dark eyes hesitantly rolled up to the Harbian before shifting their gaze to the floor. "He and Val have relieved Hinote at con."

Songan smiled at the announcement. Con-watch wasn't exactly where Varn wanted to be with Val, but it was certainly better than being without her.

"My Captain . . ." Mu Tan began, her voice trailing into uneasy silence.

Glancing up, Songan studied the small black-haired woman who appeared lost in the oversized work coverall of light olive. Booda! How he wished he could ignite a

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gleam in those sad brown eyes. One sparkling glimmer that reflected the joy of living—the pleasure of just being alive!

Time, he reminded himself. A flood of bitterness surged within his gut. Never forgotten hate streamed in black twisting strands from the core of his soul. *Six weeks can't cancel the conditioning that comes from wearing a slave's collar for twenty years.*

"Is there anything you want, Mu Tan?" He forced every trace of his rage from his voice.

His anger was not directed at this frightened child. Those who had so skillfully broken her will and drained her of any trace of spirit—it was they he wanted standing before him. Those who bartered human flesh as though it were a common commodity.

Timidly, Mu Tan's eyes shifted upward to gaze nervously upon the Harbian. "Varnalgeran also suggested that you would enjoy companionship, my Captain."

Songan's groin tightened and retightened. The offer contained in Mu Tan's innocent sounding words was not a game of tridee chess in high resolution graphics on the computer terminal. *Fleet Return's* master had learned that to his surprise—and pleasure—shortly after the girl-like woman had been taken from her home planet.

His immediate reaction was to shoot out an arm and drag the diminutive Saipese into his ultra-large bed. He did not; that was not his way.

Once a breeder in the slave stables of Murrah an Rahmyne, he had often taken helpless women against their wills. With his escape from Harb, he had vowed that those who shared his bed would do so by their choice, never forced into sexual submission.

Others along the spaceways, like that infamous flainer Jonuta of Qalara who thrived on the quasi-legal slave trade, surely would only find folly in such a moralistic attitude. Songan viewed it not as a matter of morals or the

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lack of same. His eyes were tinted by the darkness of having stood within the shadow of Hell.

"Mu Tan . . ." he began, while he stood and walked to the young spacefarer. Placing a finger under her chin, he lifted her face. So fragile and delicate were her features, like the fine porcelain produced by the artisans of her native planet. ". . . you no longer have to submit yourself to others. It isn't *required* of you here."

"I know that, my Captain." Her eyes, in spite of their slanted lids, seemed so round—so vulnerable.

"But do you understand?" Songan's hands trembled. The desire to sweep this woman-girl into his arms and protect her from the universe was overwhelming. Towering over her, he tried to think shorter.

And that was exactly what he could not do. Freedom was what *Fleet Return* offered. To shield Mu Tan from anything, even pain, was nothing more than slavery in the cruel disguise of caring.

"I understand that I am alone onboard this ship." Mu Tan's voice contained a firmness Songan had never heard before. Her face tautened with determination. "Varn, Hinote, and you, my Captain, all have each other. I am held apart, exiled to myself."

Songan's brow furrowed. *What is she trying to say? She's as much a part of this crew as any of us!*

"It is you who do not understand." Slender fingers brushed Songan's chest. "Varn is so careful when he is around me. To him, I am a small child who must be gently led, guided into a new world. You, my Captain, walk on tiptoes when you are near me as though you fear I will shatter if you tread too heavily or too closely."

She paused. Her brown eyes, liquid with a trace of tears, meeting his gaze without a hint of timidity. "Even Hinote, who is unable to keep its hands off man or woman, shies from me. Does it, too, fear that I am breakable?"

Edging back from her captain, she slipped her hand to the neck of her faded work clothes. The merest tug opened

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the ridged strip of molecular binding that ran down the front of the jumpsuit.

Familiar tightness returned to Songan's core. Sleek golden flesh gleamed within the coveralls. And skin was all he could see there.

Mu Tan tossed back her shoulders. The loose-fitting jumpsuit fell away to gather about her ankles in a crumpled heap. She kicked it away. Naked and unashamed she stood before her captain, her gaze defiantly locked to his.

"Do not mistake my size for weakness." Her voice was more determined than it had been but seconds before. "I'm not a child, my Captain. Nor am I made of glass. I am a *woman* . . . a *strong* woman! Were I not, I would not be standing here. The weak do not survive on Saiping. There is no demand for weak slaves!"

Songan's gaze drank in the loveliness of her. How could he have been such a fool! The encephaloboosted genius of the brain Murrah an Rahmyne had given him did not prevent lapses into temporary blindness.

Mu Tan was *delicate*. There was no other way to describe her shoulders or small apple-ripe breasts or fine gleaming hair or the willowy calves and thighs that invited his gaze upward to the smoothly depilated mound of her stash. This daughter of Saiping was as delicate as the most precious of spring's blossoms—flowers that endured the

ravages of torrential thunderstorms so that their petals might spread to the sun.

The foremost definition of delicate is exquisite, he re-minded himself, *not frail*. Mu Tan was most definitely that-*exquisite!*

"I am a *woman*, my Captain. *And I* am here because / choose to be . . . for no other reason." The sensuous young Saipese's voice retained its defiant tone. "Unless . . . *you* wish me to leave."

Sometimes foolish, but never a fool, Songan aptly answered with a simple sweep of a broad arm. Mu Tan offered no resistance, not even a feigned squeal or squirm-

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ing writhe of mock escape. She came to him, on straining tiptoes and taut calves, her mouth eagerly accepting his lips and the hungry probing of his tongue as he dipped at the knees to equalize the discrepancy in their size-almost!

Nor did the golden girl-small woman protest when this giant she called Captain slid an arm beneath the pillow contours of her backside and lifted her from the floor. If those massively muscular arms were the least bit strained by the task, she could not detect it.

All throaty and low, a pleased purr rolled from Mu Tan's full, red lips. Her captain was a man who did things *his* way! More than one man on her home planet had bent to taste the perfection of her breasts. Songan did not! He brought the fruity cones of flesh to his mouth and busily sucked their nipples to attention.

All the while, he carried her across the room to the bed that could easily have accommodated six Mu Tan-sized women, but would be just perfect for one Mu Tan and one overly large captain of a spacer called *Fleet Return*.

Songan left her alone atop the bed just long enough to skin away the flight jumpsuit he wore. When his arms encircled that so-thin waist again, it was to savor the warmth of flesh on flesh.

"I miss the wondrous illustrations that adorn your body. Even a slave on Saiping appreciates the beauty of well-executed tattoos. It is an ancient and honored art form." This she whispered while she squirmed half atop her cap-tain. Her cool hands roved over the broad expanse of his absolutely hairless chest. "It is a sin to hide them."

He chuckled. Most women found the tattoos with which Murrah an Rahmyne had marked his skin repulsive. Others were stirred by a strange eroticism on viewing the multi-colored images that covered every sem of his flesh. Only Mu Tan found the flowing patterns and shapes to be art!

"Vam and I blew part of our cover with Val during our rapid retreat from the fracas at the Free Fall. We used our real names. Booda!" He groaned when the Saipese mouth

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found one of his own nipples and tauntingly nibbled. "Ahh . . . yes, firm, that's good, good . . . uh! Sorry, woman, but it's surely best that my colorful corpus and face remain concealed."

Mu Tan's head shifted and her mouth sucked at his unattended nipple. To increase her captain's pleasure, a hand crept to his loins and encompassed the awakened serpent dwelling there.

"I especially miss the intricately detailed dragon," she managed to tell him in her high voice, between wet flour-ishes of her tongue which made him shiver and itch to grasp her head.

She gave that glossy head a little toss to remove a stray strand of onyx-black hair from her forehead. Her gaze rose to meet his, and a sly little smile upturned the corners of her mouth. Deliciously wicked, that gamic smile . . . as her hand, in a fist she could not close, rode up and down his rearing slicer as a reminder-that she had not forgotten where that tattooed dragon resided, under his current dye- and as a titillating act that made him suck in his breath.

"Uh . . . ease off . . . on *that* action," he murmured in a taut voice. "You're tampering . . . with a volcano, woman!"

"Good," she said very low, smiling, but she did ease off. Her little hand slid under to cup.

His own hands were far from inactive. He slipped his left beneath her; it was big enough to cover and cup one of her rearward cheeks. That was not his intent.

Gently he tickled a finger into the snug little crevice between the silken sleekness of her thighs. He felt them go all tremulous. Ever heated and now moist, the channel opened to him with the drifting apart of her legs. A purr transformed to moan escaped her throat as he probed. Her head went back, back.

Her hands lifted automatically, briefly to press her breasts-hardly shaped so as to be called "warheads," those gentle irruptions-while she stared upward at noth-

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ing. Then a great shiver took her. Her head came down fast and her eyes glittered.

A teasing finger was not what the golden daughter of Saiping desired, and already she had gone impatient. She had been celibate as long as he, and he had not known that the drive was high in her. The almost childish body was totally deceptive.

She moved swiftly and a new groan erupted from her as she tugged herself off his impaling finger.

Then she was wiggling fully onto her captain, looking all the more diminutive even atop him. With a fixed look in her eyes and the aid of one hand, she squirmed down to bury the solid column of his sex deep within her.

Her eyes and mouth went wide and Jarp-round. Doll-woman and man-giant gasped in unison.

"You see," she throatied, shivering, "I am more . . . impatient than you!"

She sat, knees splayed wide while she rocked to and fro with a gently increasing rhythm of her undulating pelvis. He stared up at her, stared at her face gone all lovely in lust, at her breasts which hardly moved, at her writhing form.

Hers was a slow dance that elicited a perfect counter-tempo from the giant of a man who lay beneath her.

Together, with roving, exploring hands, with licking tongues and teasing lips when she bent far forward to him, they fed the molten want that surged at their cores. His hands moved over and over her tiny waist, her hips, around to

the tensing, surging buttocks, up her back and over the smoothness of her waist again.

And all the while she was moving, moving.

Until his hips were jerking helplessly in release and his cry was almost a yell. She smiled, cooed, jammed herself down hard to take, and take.

Arms wrapped clingingly about each other's sweat-sheened body, they collapsed to melt together in what some called "the small death." No longer did the distinc-

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tion between crew and captain separate them. They were man and woman, and they shared that marvelous difference in absolute bliss.

When she at last rolled from atop him, she whispered, "The dragon remains," then curled at his side to sleep a gentle, fulfilled sleep.

Her captain, arms gently cradling her, followed her example within moments.

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A thousand voracious hordes of ravenous rats gnawed through the stomach of the Great God of Shen. Poisonous fire ants chewed agonizingly within the muscle fibers of his arms and legs. In the depth of Hinun's lungs, slime leeches regurgitated the feast of blood that they had sucked from his weak body. The crimson flow welled up to bubble from the corners of his mouth and trickle down his chin.

So it felt while the hand of Death methodically closed its bony grasp about the Devourer of Souls.

A god Hinun might be, but he stared into the face of a mightier deity whose ultimate power dimmed those of the Eater of Minds to insignificance. In the end, Death would win-it always won.

A mirthless smile of irony twisted Hinun's blood-flecked lips. His aqua-irised eyes, dulled by a sickly film, stared vacantly at a featureless white ceiling. He died, there was no escaping that. Frail flesh could not survive uncorrupted through eternity.

But . . .

Hinun's would-be chuckle of victory transformed into a body-wracking seizure of what seemed interminable coughing. And the pain. The damnable pain!

He resigned himself that his body's rebellion would last until his final gasping breath. How ignoble those anguished remaining minutes would be! Like a fish stranded out of water he would flop and twist and gulp the air. Struggle as he might, in the end he would die.

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The choking subsided as abruptly as it had begun. Grate-fully he lay motionless on the lab table, unfocusing eyes blankly raised to the monotonous whiteness above.

How many times have I climbed upon this cold, steel table? How often has Death come to claim his due?

And been cheated!

Palms flat, Hinun pressed against the unyielding metal-lic surface of the laboratory table that served as his cata-falque. In truth, he could not recall the times he had come to die in this solitary room concealed beneath the palace of a god.

The antiseptically white chamber with all the mechanizations contained within was his unconditional secret. Should any man or woman suspect its existence or blunder by accident into the well-hidden tunnel that gave onto its sole entrance, that person would never succeed in opening that door. Both passageway and door were heavily and ingeniously booby-trapped. So protected were all chambers containing the ancient secrets of power that Hinun so closely guarded.

The Great God's head rolled to the left. He forced his eyes to focus on the three forms resting, waiting within the mist-filled crystalline cylinders so neatly racked against one wall. A smile returned weakly to his fever-cracked lips.

How many times he had cheated Death during his thousand-year reign did not matter. That he would do so again-that mattered. And he would! / *will!* With the aid of the three fully developed but yet-to-be-born bodies that slumbered within the preserving caress of the mists. Waiting.

Soon you will live, all three of you!

All three of us! One life-death cycle ends . . . another begins! Hinun shall die and Hinun shall live. The god is dead . . . Long Live The God!

And so, so it will continue, shall continue, until time and times end!

The agony of those voracious rats in his gut diminished,

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dissipated. They were replaced by a serene numbness. Hinun was just able to sigh with genuine relief. The (private, secret) narcotic he had injected into his veins before climbing atop the table was finally, blessedly taking effect. Gradually the numbing veil would spread through each cell of his diseased body to bring a total release from the constant pain. Followed by sleep. Then death . . . physical death.

Only physical death.

For the consciousness that was the Great God Hinun there would be no death. Ever.

It would be as though he had entered gentle slumber and awakened fully refreshed-with one brilliant difference. Three Hinuns would walk Shen. Through the three he would at last conquer the curse of godhood: *tedium*. The monotony of living day after boring day for more than a millennium, the drudgery of experiencing that which had been experienced lifetime upon lifetime upon lifetime.

Each of the three who would soon be awakened carried a microtransceiver implanted at the base of its skull. A similar device with its nerve-fine filaments woven into the spinal column nestled near Hinun's spine. While the Great God's transceiver only transmitted the impulses of his dying brain to the massive computer that was crammed within this hidden chamber, the ones that now awakened within the three did so much more.

Electronic impulses from Hinun to computer and thence to the final link, the three who waited. Rapid transfer of a thousand years of knowledge and memories from the dying god. Those bodies would contain the reborn Devourer of Souls. It was through the same process that Hinun drank away the minds of those he chose for union-with one major difference.

This transfer was non-destructive. Those joined with Hinun had their memories wiped, erased. For Hinun was a jealous god.

As he lay dying, he was also being born. His memories

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converted to electronic signals that were converted to computer-recognizable bits, only to be reconverted to electronic impulses and re-assembled memories to furrow the baby-smooth brains of the three. This frail shell he wore would die, yet *he* would live.

And such an intriguing life-lives-it will be!

His faltering gaze probed the mist-cloaked figure within the first cylinder. Unable to discern the features, he could recognize the flaring, feminine contours of the first who would awaken. The body of a woman (always the most beautiful) was not unknown to Hinun, although wearing and experiencing a female body had lost its novelty centuries ago.

The second crystalline container held the body of a man, one who was as young as Hinun was old. He, too, Hinun had constructed for physical perfection.

And the third cylinder with its shadowy form . . .

Hinun's eyelids closed under the gentle insistence of the narcotic coursing through his bloodstream. He did not need to see that dark shape. It loomed joyously in his mind's eye. How he would revel in this his newest of bodies!

Three bodies. Three Hinuns! Each the same, yet with subtle differences that went beyond physical appearance. Each would carry additional memories within its brain, memories unknown to the other. That was the brilliance of the scheme of Hinun, god.

Three Hinuns could not exist on Shen. There could be one and only one grand designer to weave the planet's destiny. Equipped with a special set of memories to aid him/her, the three would battle one and the other to gain the jeweled throne.

The actual victor was inconsequential. Nor would the memories and knowledge gathered by any of the three be lost. The transceivers surgically implanted in their skulls would transmit the experiences to the computer. Here within the securely concealed room beneath the palace

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those electronic records would wait to be fed into the brain of the sole survivor who at last claimed the throne of godhead.

The fight! God battling god for supremacy! There will be nothing boring to my new lives!

Hinun trembled with anticipation. The excitement awaiting him beyond death could not be denied.

How delicious it will be!

Narcotic numbness thickened his thoughts. The absolute blackness of a moonless night sucked him downward toward a sleep from which this frail body would never awaken. He welcomed it. His new incarnation awaited him.

If only the spacers Midnight Flower promised will come- filled with men and women wearing gray uniforms! No god could desire more!

Eagerly, Hinun gave himself to the darkness and rushed with open arms to greet death.

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Across the light-year-yawning distance of the void humans called "real" space, onboard the spacer that threaded its way through the dust, gas, and cosmic debris-strewn portion of the galaxy aptly named the Carnadyne Void, Songan of Harb was also lost in contemplating death and resurrection.

Alone he sat at the controls of *Fleet Return's* most recent acquisition. His excuse for being here in the ingrav-boat (given to his crew) was to familiarize himself further with the small atmospheric craft's controls. In fact he needed no further practice at the con. He and Varn had been fully accredited at piloting the vessel before it was stowed in the spacer's belly.

He came to the boat for the solitude it provided. Locked inside the ship, he could sink deep into the pilot's seat and think.

Here, unseen by the eyes of his crew, he attempted to unravel the tight weave of the doubts he harbored about

himself and his reasons for hopscotching ship and crew from unknown star to unknown star in search of the planet Hawking. A voyage that would take *Fleet Return* from galaxy center out onto one of its spiral arms. These same doubts had plagued his mind for three months.

Time and again he had considered abandoning the star-spanning quest. An equal sum of times he had realized that he could not. A solitary reason for making the journey outweighed all those against.

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Her name had been Yoluta.

Yoluta. Even a mental whisper of the name brought tears to the Harbian giant's eyes and twisted his insides into tight, aching knots. Nor did the hurt ever subside. It was always there tearing at him.

Dorjan and Songan had rescued the young Lanatian and her brother from Thebanian slavers in what seemed a lifetime ago and in reality was only a matter of a few months. The sister and brother had chosen to travel with their saviors to HOME, that asteroid colony for escaped slaves the Harbian captain and first mate had established in the planetless Pascal System.

There Yoluta had vowed her love for the former gladia-tor. Grotesque tattoos and inhuman voice box were of no concern to that lovely daughter of Lanatia. She saw beyond the surface of the bioengineered giant Murrah an Rahmyne had created for her amusement and entertainment. It had been to Songan the man she had freely given herself.

Musla! Songan ineffectually wiped the moisture from his eyes. An unrelenting barrage of bittersweet memories tormented him. The same memories that drove him on toward Hawking.

Yoluta, his darling Yoluta, his love, was to have been his bride; their lives joined as one.

Their wedding rites were never spoken.

In a treacherous raid on HOME by Captain Ganesa of Resh, Yoluta had been butchered while she valiantly de-fended her newfound world from the invaders. While she was cut down by the beams of plasma pistols, Songan had been deep at the galaxy's center aiding the Demon Cat in the illegal liberation of a sizable portion of Lanatian wealth.*

Misfit and crew eventually took their revenge on Ganesa and her brothel-spaceship. In a daring raid at Barbro Trans-fer Station, Dorjan had taken Ganesa's *Be Lively*, bound

*Spaceways #5, *Master of Misfit*.

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captain and crew and jam-crammed them into subspace. Neither Ganesa nor her ship had been heard of since.

HOME'S own daktari had suggested that a means might exist to bring Yoluta back to life, in essence: produce a clone of the dead woman. The physician had provided Songan with tissue and brain cell samples needed for the process. (They lay in quik-freez, securely tucked away within one of *Fleet Return's* cargo holds.)

Hakimit Med Center on Qalara admitted to its participation in "certain cloning projects" but refused even to consider Yoluta for such a "project." Cloning simply was not enough. Yoluta's body could be reproduced, but not her mind. Periodically updated brain scans were necessary for information to imprint on the clone's vacant brain.

A scan *was* an individual-personality, memory, con-scious and unconscious. Hakimit (had it been willing) could bring Yoluta back to Songan as a shell, a living body. Anything beyond that simple biological process exceeded Hakimit's capabilities.

The woman Songan loved had been so much more than a shell!

Hakimit had dangled one hope before him. A star that had once been named Centaur and the planet still called Hawking that circled it. *Away* out, only four light-years from Homeworld. There researchers theorized that the DNA in each human cell contained a chemo-electrical code of each individual's long-term and executive memories. The research was only in its seminal stage, having demon-strated zero conclusive evidence of the theory's validity. Yet it was a possibility, no matter how chancy. That was all Songan needed. A possibility; a chance.*

To hold Yoluta in his arms again! To hear the singing sweetness of her voice! He would cross the galaxy from rim to rim and back again a million times! It was no less than any man would do to reclaim the one woman he loved.

*Spaceways #7, *The Manhuntress*.

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Static crackled from the comm-grille in a rude intrusion on Songan's reverie. He flicked the toggle and acknowl-edged, without enthusiasm.

"*Mu Tan here, my Captain,*" the unmistakable little voice said. "*Varnalgeran said that I was to inform you it is thirty mins before Barbro transition. He said that you wish to be oncon for the jump?*"

"Right!" Songan straightened in the pilot's chair. He had not realized that he'd been down here in the bay so long. "Tell Varn I'm blueshifting. Thanks for the remind-er, Mu Tan."

Thumbing off the comm, Songan swiveled about and headed for the small craft's open hatch. Back on the Tachyon Trail again, it would be a simple matter of hours before docking at Barbro. Once Val was deposited on the ship awaiting her at the space station, *Fleet Return* would turn its tail to galaxy center, kick in the double-P drive, and be on its way chasing a chance.

Hinote was ecstas. It flew like a spiker asoar with a treb flash of eroflore sizzling in its veins. All without the assis-tance of a single micron of the highly addictive narcotic. Nor'did it employ the use of any drag, unless one counted two zap-potent Musla Slidebackers it had downed in the Yakez Room of Barbro Station's Star-Flung Lounge.

(The Jarp didn't consider the two drinks *drugs*, nor would any spacefarer.)

Its high came from the tempting cake whose arm was locked about its waist as though she clutched a skweez-pak of everchil pop. Hinote enthusiastically returned the wom-an's hug and fondled a flaring hip approvingly. The action elicited a giggly laugh of excitement from her. It was a *Jarp* hand that squeezed, and that second thumb made the gesture all that much nicer.

They had met in the Yakez Room, the woman named Chastelarn and the nonhuman who was called Hinote by humans unable to pronounce its melodic Jarp name. After sharing two drinks and the *tete-a-tete* needed to assure each other that their desires for the evening were mutually com-patible, they left the lounge. With left arms about each other.

Thus pleasantly linked, they had walked the brightly lit avenues of Hometown, the uppermost of Barbro's twelve levels, gazing at the enticing displays packed into shop windows. Hinote would have preferred less of the leisurely window gazing and commenting, but acquiesced to Chaste-lam's desire.

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It sensed an unrooted disquiet in the prassy-haired cake; she did want an exotic-erotic interlude with this romantic humanoid. Yet Chastelarn was uncertain as to exactly what to expect, and of what was expected of her.

Once we are alone, my freshbaked cake, I will fully demonstrate exactly who does what to whom and when. T'lee, it will be a pleasure you will not soon forget, my pillow-rumped lovely! Twoo, you will never forget!

This it thought, but said little other than the unspoken promises of its hip-caressing hand. Nor did it believe Chastelarn to be freshbaked. It did sense in her nervous-ness that she had never taken a Jarp as lover before. That, in its own way, was virginal-and really quite titillating.

Years ago Hinote had learned of humans and their pecu-liar sexual attitudes. Never were there creatures who talked more about sex and did so little! Jarps were completely opposite. Why should one talk when there was so much more that could be shared? Humans could not even curl up for a lovely 138, but had to (try to) content themselves with a mere 69!

So it walked, it listened, it nodded, and it occasionally answered while Chastelarn, dressed in a tan jumpsuit worn by the station's controllers, convinced herself that she did indeed want to spend the night with this startling purple-clad native of Jarpi.

After an hour of her convoluted mental gymnastics, the pleasantly buttsy lady pointed the way out of Hometown's public sector and into the long, curving corridors lined with living quarters for the ten thousand workers on the gargantuan space station.

They had proceeded no more than ten meters down the immensely stretching tunnel when the lights overhead flick-ered. Twice. Then they winked out to leave them in utter blackness.

"Damn!" Chastelarn said with disappointment in her tone. "This has been happening for months now! Ever since some jacko fragged our memory banks. Sometimes it

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takes hours before they get 'em online again. We could be stranded here all night! We'd never find my apartment. It's a hundred and twenty-three doors ahead of us."

Hinote didn't know that the jackoes who had monkeyed with the station's computer were the very same men it now served under on *Fleet Return*. Had it known, it wouldn't have cared a jinkle. What mattered was finding the hundred-and-twenty-third door directly down the corridor and in-troducing the cake at its side to the pleasures a Jarp could provide.

While Hinote preferred slicing in the brightest of lights- the better to revel thoroughly in the nakedness of its partner-darkness would suffice. Hinote, simply put, was horny.

"Hold on tight and we'll be at your door in a fingerflip!" Hinote said, and began to emit a sustained series of high-pitched notes from the little round aperture of its mouth.

"What! *Ohhhhhh!*" Chastelarn was doubly startled: first by the shrill warble, then by the tug on her waist.

She was being dragged along, at a pace considerably faster than normal-and totally blind. "Hinote, what are you *doing?*"

The Jarp didn't stop its high-pitched whistle or its head-long rush down the unseen corridor. It merely squeezed that two-thumbed hand firmly against her hip in reassurance.

It came to her as she stumble-trotted along beside the Jarp. Unrelated pieces fell neatly into a precise image of what was occurring. Hinote's rounder than round eyes and the trilling notes made perfectly logical sense.

"You're like a *bat!*" She was definitely excited about having made a discovery Hinote thought had been obvi-ous. "You use sonic echoes to *see* in the dark!"

"Not exactly, but close enough," Hinote said in an end to its Jarpish demonstration of sonar--and its headlong rush through the dark.

It had to tighten its hold about Chastelarn to keep her

from sprawling face down on the floor when it abruptly stopped. Hinote then turned her so that she faced left.

"And this, you beauty even in the dark, should be apartment One-two-three," it proudly proclaimed.

It felt the prassy-haired controller reach out in the black-ness and carefully read the door's room number with her fingertips.

"It is! Theba's eyes! You're brilliant!" she squealed in amazement.

The innate ability of a Jarp had nothing to do with intelligence. However, Hinote didn't mention that fact. If she wanted to think it was brilliant, it had no intention of destroying her illusion. Especially not this close to her apartment.

"Now let's see if the thumblock still works," Chastelarn said as she continued to feel around in the darkness.

The hiss of an opening door directly before them whispered softly in the cave-like blackness.

Thank Booda's potent pole! Hinote had not considered the possibility that the power outage might affect more than the corridor's lights. *This floor is far too hard to have been comfortable for her . . . or me!*

She pulled at the Jarp now, carefully directed it through the doorway of her apartment before thumbing the lock for a second time.

"The bed is to the right. It's built in and has . . . Ooohhhh!" Her surprise came from a scarlet hue that washed away the darkness.

Chastelarn's head nervously turned one way and then the other, trying to find her visitor in the unexpected deluge of light. Hinote stood directly behind her. Its face, sweet and innocent as only the face of a Jarp could be, radiated a light of its own.

"They brought the emergency power up faster than I thought . . ." She swallowed the rest of her sentence.

Hinote was peeling away its purple blouse, which appeared black in the erotic red glow. Its now exposed

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warheads, set higher than those of a human, were a shock-ing orange, even bathed in the emergency light.

"But . . ." the station controller began.

And was promptly cut off by the Jarp. "I will give your butt my undivided attention . . . in due time. First we shall . . . by the way, do you have preference for male or female?"

"I . . . uh . . . I . . ."

Hinote stepped to the stammering woman and opened the front of her jumpsuit with the gentlest of touches. Its two-thumbed hands slid beneath the fabric to fondle the very human breasts it had itched to touch since their meeting.

"Male or female, it doesn't matter to me. It will be fun finding out just which one you like best," Hinote said, smiling ever so sweetly.

Chastelarn stiffened when humanoid fingertips found her nipples and playfully pressed inward as though they were no more than fleshy buttons designed solely for the Jarp's amusement. A sharp, pleased hiss sucked between her teeth.

"You're so fast! Couldn't we . . . yessss . . . talk . . . ahhhh . . . or . . . uhhhh . . . something . . . mmmmmmm." Her words came in sharp staccato bursts mingled with increasing desire.

That desire was ably fanned by the slim sharp tongue and lips that busied themselves with one of her melonous warheads and then the other. When her lover had the tremulous woman purring like an overfed cat, it lifted its head. Its palms and fingers continued to knead the pliant globes of flesh.

"We *have* talked-in the lounge and as we walked. To talk any longer would waste what little time we have together. And it would be *such* a waste! There are so many things we *must* discover together. Words will not help us find them." All the while, its strangely warm hands never stopped their tingle-wakening massage.

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Chastelarn's gaze rolled up to the Jarp and she stared at it beneath desire-weighted eyelids. Her mouth, red lips atremble, opened only to produce the moist flicker of her tongue and, from the back of her throat, a moan.

Her answer came not with words but with her own hands rising to Hinote's so very *orange* warheads. They were *warm*, as warm as its palms, and noticeably warmer than human body temperature.

Still testing, her fingers squeezed gently. The fleshy mounds did not break; they molded about her fingers. Thoroughly delighted, she kneaded with considerably more determination while her head leaned forward to take the bright red nipples into her mouth. She tasted one, tongue quivering, and then its twin.

While she licked and sucked in mounting enthusiasm, Hinote managed to get her out of her clothes and out of its own. They did have to pause long enough to fold the built-in bed out of the wall. That was enough time for Chastelarn's inquiring gaze to shift hesitantly to Hinote.

Its erection greeted those questioning glances. Smaller than its human counterpart to be sure, but not that much smaller.

Beneath Hinote's obvious mark of maleness, a testicle, and slitted vaginal opening. Both were as proportionally diminished as its penis. There was only so much room for all the sexual equipment a Jarp sported between its legs. Having it all compactly situated in one convenient location brought trembly shivers racing goosepimpily up and down the woman's spine.

Once it had got them onto the bed, Hinote did not rush its human partner.

With approving *T'lee* sounds, it allowed her to explore and delve into the differences in human and Jarp anatomy to her delight and to its. It had no doubt that it was this prassy-haired beauty's first nonhuman sexual adventure. Hinote

intended to make sure it was too memorable to be her last.

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Her hand about its erection, fingers dipping to taunt a single testicle, Hinote moved its fingers into her. It wig-gled them. She shuddered, pelvis thrusting forward and sliding back to lurch onto its hand again.

Now and then a timid finger nudged Hinote's vaginal mouth, then made a hasty retreat. It ached to have her finger, or fingers, within that moist slit. After all when aroused it was totally aroused, male and female organs alike. Both desiring attention.

However, Hinote didn't insist on that attention. Some humans clung to their incomprehensible concept of hetero-sexuality. Others were simply shy and hesitant about trying the unknown. Whatever category this exciting human fe-male fit, Hinote could and would satisfy her.

And me.

After a minutes-long kiss during which their hands stroked and palpated, Hinote slid atop her at the gentle, but very insistent tugging of the hand so firmly wrapped around its erection. It entered her with one solid thrust of its hips that sent a groan-awaking shudder through her dark-skinned body and left the domed forms of her breasts quaking.

In a gradually building rhythm, it plumbed and plowed the liquid heat of her until her arms stretched out and around to lock clutching, clawing hands on orange, tight-cheeked, bobbing buttocks. Urged by the obvious demon-stration of her soaring lust, Hinote's lithe body jerked and pumped and swung in a swivel-hipped frenzy. She replied in kind. Her body arched and thrust, humped and undulated.

And she came, shuddering and keening her cries of flashing ecstasy. Human and Jarp soaring, flashing. To-gether. They clung delightedly. Both were delighted.

It was just a beginning. Before Barbro's artificial dawn called Chastelarn to her duties at the control board, Hinote had discovered exactly what the woman's sexual prefer-ences were, time and again, although it would never tell. Hinote was a Jarp and to a native of Jarpi sex was some-thing to be possessed and engaged in, not talked about!

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On the outer edge of the Carnadyne Void (which was not a void, but a stretch of space without star or planet, packed with rock, dust, and gas) hung Barbro Transfer Station. Like the space stations orbiting Galactic worlds, Barbro was torus-shaped. A spinning wheel that generated centrifugal force and the illusion of .8 normal gravity. In the case of Barbro, though, there were twelve wheels. Each was three times larger than a planetary space station, connected by a cylindrical hub that ran through the center of each.

Here came the *Big* ships with holds cram-packed with goods ultimately destined for the center of the galaxy. These vessels served the Rim Worlds. They stored their cargoes with Barbro in waiting for the smaller spacers that scurried around the star-dense galactic core (any of which could easily have been fitted into one hold of a *Big* ship) to carry them inward.

In turn the gigantic ships, laden with goods from the core worlds, returned outward.

In was on such a spacer, *Omar Muktar*, that Valustriana See was to have crewed. Employment onboard the *Big* ship was the reason *Fleet Return* had brought her to Barbro. The one small hitch in the plan was the absence of *Omar Muktar*. The vessel was not docked at Barbro.

"Controller's report says it sustained substantial damage during an attack by three pirate ships," Varnalgeran Yuw recounted to his captain and friend. "It happened way out on the Mariyanda Circuit. Wherever in Musla's hell that is?"

Songan had no idea where the Mariyanda Circuit was either. The galaxy was crammed with billions of stars and planets and only a few had been visited by Galactics. An even smaller number had been seen by the Harbian's eyes. The planet Ginneh was as far as he had ever traveled beyond Barbro.

"Three pirate spacers? I'd have to have an armada at

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my command before taking on a Big ship!" His comment was an avoidance of the real issue-Val.

Varn nodded and sank back in his chair where he sat silently for several heavy moments. Drawing in a deep, steadying breath, he cleared his throat and looked at his companion.

"Songan, I've been with her today. We've tried every ship docked at Barbro. No one's looking for a crewmember. Val even tried the Barbro Transfer Authority. No luck there either." Varn sat staring at nothing, with a solemn shake of his Wayne-adorned head.

Songan sucked at his teeth, sighed, and still said noth-ing. He had not been prepared for this kind of decision.

"We can't leave her here! Dammit, Songan, this is *Barbro*!" Varn said, pleading. "It would be kinder to put a plasma gun to her head and pull the trigger!"

Plasma gun or leaving the Outie Valkyrie on Barbro- the results would be exactly the same, Songan realized. Dead was dead no matter how it was dished out. A pistol to the temple would be quicker, not kinder.

Barbro Transfer Station was no place for an unattached spacefarer. An individual without a ship did not stay that way for long-or did not live. Barbro was a tight-knit, self-sufficient artificial world. The transfer authority had absolutely no tolerance for those unable to support them-selves. The welfare state was unheard of on Barbo. Its government stole no money as "taxes" and so had none to "give" away.

A down-on-its-luck spacefarer's lifeline was exactly as long as its credaccount if it were stranded on Barbro. The

moment its stells ran out, the spacefarer, man or woman, would mysteriously take a deepspace walk-without the niceties of a spacesuit.

Songan looked at his friend and sucked at his teeth again.

"Valustriana would be a good addition to our crew. She

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knows how to handle herself on a spacer," Varn said eagerly. "She proved it all the way from Thebanis."

Val was a seasoned spacefarer, Songan couldn't deny that. Val had proven helpful during the jaunt from Thebanis to Barbro, willingly taking on any task asked of her, or even mentioned. Nor could *Fleet Return's* captain lightly weigh the advantages of having another veteran of the spaceways as a crewmember. Mu Tan and Hinote *were* capable, but green and untested.

Songan nodded. "I'll probably go personality frag with two Duties on the same ship, but tell Val she's officially a member of the crew."

Varn's grin grew wider than Lao Tzu Nebula that had once been named the Crab. Jumping from his chair, he swung a friendly jab to Songan's broad shoulder.

"I'll tell her, jacko! That I'll do!" Varn executed a light-footed jig across the cabin to the door.

Songan shook his head in amusement when the hatch hissed closed behind the Outie. If Varn hadn't been bitten in the ass by a terminal case of love fever, it was damned close to it.

Not that Varnalgeran Yuw wasn't overdue. In the long years Songan had crewed with the Outie, his attention span with women had never exceeded one night. (Unless one counted his obsession with Setsuyo Puma, hyper-star of the Akima Mars secret-agent holomovie series. Varn's lust for Setsuyo and her hyperdeveloped chest [touted as "The Biggest Pair In The Universe"] was strictly fantasy. Yuw had never met the actress, nor was he ever likely to.)

Swiveling back to the con, Songan stretched and called Barbro control on intership comm. If Val were going to be part of the crew during the hop to Hawking, *Fleet Return* would have to continue its charade of being a legitimate spacer. It needed a cargo to fill its holds.

And you, captain, will have to retain your cell-dyed skin!

Songan shrugged as a controller's voice answered his

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call. In all honesty he hadn't missed the multi-hued illustrations that covered his body.

"*Oh, is this Hinote's captain?*" the controller asked, and she sounded breathless.

Eyebrows up, Songan stared at the commbox.

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Con-watch, oncon, con-duty-no matter how one said it, the fact remained that sitting and watching the occasional twinkle of the lights on a control console was *bor-yawn*-ing.

Taking one's shift oncon eventually fell to every mem-ber of *Fleet Return's* crew. That everyone shared in the monotonous task of monitoring what was already moni-tored by SIPACUM far more accurately did nothing to relieve the four hours of tedium required to complete a shift.

Tonight (by the spacer's inboard clocks, since night and day did not exist on the Tachyon Trail) Varnalgeran Yuw had drawn mid-evening shift. He sat back in the Mate's chair, hands locked behind his neck, booted feet propped on the end of the con, and Wayne tugged low on his forehead.

Beside him SIPACUM hummed for a moment as the computer accessed additional data stored within the crysplas cassette shoved into its slotted mouth. Here and there lights winked on and off in green and gold and azure while the computer ran through its every-five-minute systems check. No warning buzzers or alarms sounded. *Fleet Return* remained airtight and totally functional.

Varn Yuw remained bored. He resisted the urge to glance for the umpteenth time in the last ten minutes at a chronometer inset in the bulkhead just above the con. Watching the seconds flick by didn't help them move faster.

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Nor did realization that the rest of the spacer's crew were in *his* cabin, using *his* holoprojector, watching *his* copies of Akima Mars mellers that were the totality of *his* private collection of holomovies. The fact that he could quote in sync each line from the fourteen features and could describe in detail each jiggle and wiggle of Setsuyo Puma's larger-than-life warheads did nothing to ease his self-pity.

That Val sat watching those highly erotic adventures without him served to increase his fobbing down.

A rush of shame-guilt suffused the Outie. Here he sat feeling sorry for himself because he couldn't be beside that lovely amazon while his best friend faced the possibility of never holding the woman he loved this side of Booda's nirvana.

It was a rootless, silly guilt. That aching hollow feeling a human being had when someone it loved was hurting and there was nothing to be done to ease that hurt.

Not that the overgrown Harbian makes it easy to help him. Damn his Taoistic bullshit! What will be, will be-Theba's pimpled backside! Can he really believe that?

Songan could and did, Varn realized. While *Tao Chi* was only a philosophy, the former slave of Harb who walked

The Way adhered to that belief as religiously as those who followed the teachings of Booda or Musla. Perhaps more so.

Maybe it's for the best. Hawking may prove as barren as Hakimit Med on Qalara.

Varn didn't care for the prospect of failure, yet there was no way to avoid its spectre. The Outie held little belief in miracles. Raising the dead definitely fell into the cate-gory of divine intervention, which he had never encountered along the spaceways. All that the gods of humankind had ever given Yuw was a series of names to take in vain. Something he did frequently. (Theba of course, *favored* death. That was why every Outie who left the planet

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cursed her, once he was sure of being far enough away to avoid falling skies . . .)

Whether or not Songan placed his faith in miracles was something Varn had been unable to discern.

Songan could be such a stoic bastard when it came to what went on in that brain-boosted genius mind of his! He was far worse in matters of the heart.

An ironic smile twisted the Outreachers' lips. *But then what do I know of the workings of the heart?*

His thoughts narrowed to one heart-the one that beat within the well-developed chest of Valustriana See. The amazon goddess, in her own way, was every bit as mad-dening as Songan. His frustration level squared each time he was alone with her.

And that's been flainin' often . . . perhaps too often. Constant! Is familiarity breeding contempt?

He thrust aside that possibility the instant it entered his mind. More often than not, it was Val who sought his company.

And in spite of everything I've tried, she's never been closer to my bed than I have been to hers! Grabbles! Not to mention Musla's ass!

A flicker of uncertainty flittered like a spiked icicle in his mind. *No! She couldn't be a freshbaked cake. Virgins just don't exist along the spaceways . . . at least not for long!*

He admitted that his physical appearance simply mightn't flash Val. It was a possibility he hated to face. In an age when physical perfection was as near as the closest daktari, plumpness was a matter of preference rather than glutton-ous overeating.

Varn had not been given the choice. He had been *told!* His size arid added kilos were the costume *they* had pro-vided for a pawn in the game *they* played. He admitted the strengths of his chosen costume. He looked soft, weak, slow, and harmless. He was none of these things. If anything, he was just the opposite.

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The second time around they give you a choice. Third timers get absolutely nothing . . . except the chance to go on living! They only want you to . . .

He caught himself in mid-thought and sucked in a deep, lung-filling breath. A chuckle drifted mirthlessly up from his throat.

That unexpected mental soliloquy had left every muscle in his body as stiff as plasteel. He took another calming breath and unlocked his fingers from the arms of the chair.

Remembering the past was useless. There was nothing he could do about it. Only the future offered any hope of final freedom.

And only a bug's shot at that. There are always hooks, neatly concealed hooks ready to drag you back. Always the damned hooks! No way to avoid the hooks.

The Outie closed his eyes and visualized Val in that enticing doeskin gray outfit she had (almost) worn that night in the Free Fall Palace of Chance. Sem by sem he reconstructed the alluring image to edge less pleasant mem-ories back behind locked doors.

Val's revealing attire was nothing more than memory. Since stepping onboard *Fleet Return* she had worn only standard issue jumpsuits. Even those couldn't hide the voluptuous contours, of course. They just evoked fantasies of languorously peeling them from her incredibly propor-tioned body.

"Hey, you're supposed to be watching the con, not napping!" said the vision of beauty floating in Varn's mind. "What kind of image is that for ship's second to set for his crew?"

It wasn't his daydream talking; it was Val!

Varn's feet jerked from the con and he snapped around in the swivel chair. There in the doorway, Mu Tan at her side, stood the flesh and blood object of wistful fantasies.

"Sorry, I'm late," Mu Tan said in her whisper of a

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voice. *"From Resh with Love* ran ten minutes longer than I expected. Songan said that you wouldn't mind filling in for me."

"No problem . . . *From Resh with Love!* You watched *From Resh with Love!* That's my favorite . . . it's Setsuyo at her best! How could that klom-tall bastard show it without me there!" Varn cried in mocked rage.

Mu Tan, barely muffling a giggle behind a tiny golden hand, scurried across the cabin to the vacant chair before SIPACUM. "Mu Tan not-so-heavy-of-warheads reporting oncon, most honorable Varnalgeran Yuw."

"And there you'll sit all the way to Hawking if I have my way!" Varn added the exclamation point in the form of a throaty growl.

"Stow it, Varn. If you keep it up, she might believe you!" This from Val. "Besides, we saw *Sheikh ofSekhar-* my favorite of the Akima Mars series."

Something in Val's voice brought Varn's head around- something very suggestive. That same unspoken suggestion

was gleaming cat-like in her eyes. Yuw's heart leaped and wedged thump-a-thump in his throat.

"When the sheikh kidnaps Setsuyo and carries her to his red room . . . mmmmmmmmm-mmmm!" Val ran a hand from hip to thigh and shivered with delight.

Yuw's groin tightened. There was more than mere suggestion in the way Val held her body. There was *promise!*

"If you're not too tired from con-duty, I was hoping you'd let me buy us a drink," Val said in that husky sensual voice.

Varn stretched and yawned as he walked toward the lovely goddess. "I was planning to be in bed early tonight . . ."

"What I have in mind will not interfere with those plans in the least!" Val's hand snaked out to grab his arm and hasten him from the cabin.

Yuw needed no further convincing. Arms tightly wrapped

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around each other, son and daughter of Outreach vectored straight for Val's room where she produced two everchil skweez-paks of Starflare beer.

Downing a healthy portion of the cold brew, Varn moved to the edge of Val's bed and sat down. The feline gleam in Val's dark eyes flared. There was no doubting that hungry look.

To think Setsuyo Puma did this! Hell, I didn't even know she was an Akima Mars fan!

Of course there was a lot about the raven-haired goddess who crossed the room to kneel before him he didn't know, he realized. How many hours had they talked? Countless! And still he knew nothing of her past. (*Nor she of mine, naturally.*)

At the moment, he didn't care about her past or the secrets that might be concealed there. Now was all that mattered.

Val reached out to take the beer from his hand and place it on the floor with hers. Her hands returned to cup his face.

"You have been so patient. So understanding." She leaned toward him. "A woman appreciates that in a man."

Her mouth and lips teasingly brushed his for a fleeting, electric moment. She eased back. Dark and deep as the seas her gaze probed, as though searching and finding the answer to an unspoken question.

"There have been other men, my darling Varn. Men who trifled with Valustriana See. They left wounds that have taken a long time to heal." She traced a fingertip over the curve of his lips. "I had to be certain you were not like the others."

Her mouth returned to his, this time rounding open in invitation to his exploring tongue. With the gentleness that the moment demanded, Varn enclosed the bosomy amazon in his arms and held her close. A heart that had seemed

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empty for so damned long was overflowing with all the things a man desired for the woman he loved.

Love?

That one word-*love*-how frightening it sounded after all the years! For Varnalgeran Yuw, *love* was never to intrude. There was no place for it in his life. Yet here it was, full born, thrusting itself so wonderfully into an existence programmed to thwart all but surface contact with those he encountered.

It was the magic he had first discovered onboard *Misfit* and within the space colony HOME. They had awakened the dying flicker of humanity within the man who denied it behind his jocular facade. He had learned to care again when all he had thought was left in his heart was numbness.

From this radiant woman of his homeworld, he had been given the greatest of gifts. He had found the desire to love.

Still, he didn't flatter himself with false hopes or roman-tic castles built on clouds. *For Valustriana tonight might be the only portion of her life to include an overweight clown from Outreach.*

If it were, then this night he would be totally hers in mind, body, and soul. And she would be his. It would be enough.

Unwilling to break their embrace, Varn gently eased Val from the floor and onto the bed. Her hands crept upward to the collar of his jumpsuit. Taunting fingertips deftly parted the molecular binding and slid beneath the open fabric.

And quickly withdrew.

An alarm blared through the room!

"Flainin' scut!" Val's head jerked about as though she were lost. "What the vug is that?"

"SIPACUM!" He was on his feet moving toward the door with Val at his heels. Disheveled, both of them.

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Outside they were greeted by Mu Tan's terrified voice calling for her captain and mate on the intraship comm. Varn was the first to reach her at the con.

He didn't ask for an explanation of the warning alarm. Everything he needed was there on the blinking monitors. It made absolutely no sense, but it was there!

"Jerk that cassette," Varn ordered as he dropped into his chair.

Mu Tan responded without question. The inslotted cassette was yanked free of the computing and processing unit.

"Damn! It didn't help!" The Outie couldn't disguise the desperation that crept into his voice.

A sickening heat prickled over him as his fingers punched glo-buttons and flicked toggles. The scrolling columns of calculations and coordinate readouts blipped by in a mad-denying blur on the displays.

Yuw slammed a foot downward to open intraship comm. "Dammit, Songan! Treb time it! Now!" Without closing the

intercom channel, he swung around to Mu Tan. "Move it! I need that terminal!"

The diminutive woman did just that and barely missed being hurled to the floor as Varn pushed by her to take the seat at SIPACUM.

"What is it?" Songan rushed through the half-opened door to the cabin.

"A two-minute warning," Varn said, his fingers pound-ing SIPACUM's keyboard.

"We aren't supposed to punch out of subspace for another eight hours," Songan said as he took his chair at con.

"We aren't leaving the Tachyon Trail. We're shifting onto it!" Varn still did not look up.

"That can't . . ."In one sweep of the con Songan saw that was exactly what was happening. "How?"

Varn never answered. A sledgehammer slammed into

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his gut and some jacko pointed a stopper on Fry and squeezed. Somewhere in the distance, beyond the wave of molten pain that swelled up to engulf him, he heard a scream-his own.

The universe exploded around him, its very fabric shred-ded into a billion spinning, careening shards of fiery crystal.

Then there was nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

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Her name was Kaleena, and she was extremely pale for a Shenese. Even by Galactic standards this delicate blossom of Shen was considered fairer than fair; she was nearly white!

It was not terror or revulsion at the task she performed that brought the creamy cast to her skin. In all truth she thoroughly enjoyed the duties she shared as one of the hundred priestesses to the Great God Hinun and gave the outward appearance of enjoyment. The young woman's enthusiasm for excelling in the sacred rituals required of her could not be debated. That willingness to serve her world's sole deity she demonstrated with unselfish abandon.

To have given less would have resulted in her death-or worse. Kaleena's terrible god was known to all as the Devourer of Souls. She had no desire to be chosen as one of the souls Hinun feasted upon.

Subserviently Kaleena knelt on the hard, cold marble whose polished surface formed the floor of every room in the sprawling palace of her god. As a faithful worshipper she bowed, no longer aware of her painfully aching knees and shins. The throbbing pain had subsided long ago into numbness.

She was attired only in vegetable paint-and her shackles.

Nor did the fair Kaleena notice the flesh-nipping cuffs of gold tightly snapped about wrists and ankles. The cuffs were bound ankle-to-wrist by chains of five small golden links. As with her knees, numbness had relieved her the

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burdensome ache of shoulders and back so unnaturally strained.

Oh yes, Kaleena could have snapped the delicate links of gold with one hearty tug of her arms. For all the value humankind had placed on gold through the ages, its true worth lay in its beauty and rarity, rather than in its strength.

The possibility of breaking those soft chains never flittered into her mind. To have broken them would have been to incur Hinun's anger, and that meant death-or worse.

Kaleena's devoted attention focused solely on the divine scepter of Hinun's manhood she eagerly sheathed with her wine-hued lips.

Neither Kaleena nor the handsome young god at whose feet she so adoringly knelt paid any heed to the pigmenta-tion of her skin or to the startling golden-yellow of her waist-length hair. Unashamed of her bound nakedness, she was engrossed in mouthing and licking and sucking at the rigid staff that pressed toward the back of her throat.

The possessor of that erect scepter only casually noted the pale blond's avid performance. He hardly glanced down at green-dyed eyelids or lavendered areolae.

The Great God-Hinun who had been reborn young, virile, and strong-divided his attentions among three of his recently acquired priestesses. While Kaleena hungrily licked and laved, Hinun's fingers were deeply entrenched in the most intimate of treasures possessed by the two priestesses seated beside him on the bed. His mouth capri-ciously kissed and nibbled at the four breasts they thrust forward for the sampling of a god . . . who appeared to be no more than twenty-five years old.

Had Hinun realized the rarity of the pale-skinned woman who lovingly worshipped at his loins, he might have granted Kaleena his total attention. Among Galactics such delicate coloring was highly prized. Slavers the caliber of Captain Jonuta of Qalara or even Zo of spacer *Catenary* could have procured a small fortune for one as fair as Kaleena. Twice

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that amount for man or woman whose true hair color was so golden. The price for novelty.

The vaguely pink-hued skin that had once been called "white" was unknown among the browns, bronzes, and

occasional blacks that made up the Galactic race. Even Universal Edutapes contained no reference to the word "Caucasian." When the vast majority of the peoples of Homeworld-once-Urth had seized the planet and migrated into space, they had made a thorough job of destroying the old ruling minority and overwhelming its genetic lesser pigmentation. Not even the yellowish hues found among the natives of Terasaki and Saiping could compare to the pallor of Kaleena's flesh.

Then again, had Hinun realized the exotic and erotic value of his priestess-slave among the star-journeying race he so desperately desired to join, he might have viewed it with no more than jaded amusement. True, Hinun was young and muscular in his new body. In mind and experience however, he remained the tyrant who had reigned on Shen for a millennium.

A thousand years, even for a god, was an interminable span of time. The thrill of new experiences and delight in novelty had long ago lost their human definition for the Great God. Only youthful lust held him here this afternoon . . . and what else was there to do?

Novelty was what Hinun sought. A freshness to his existence and within the minds he joined to his.

The first he had achieved with quite pleasing results. Somewhere on Shen two other entities who shared his memories were at this moment scheming to usurp the throne from which he reigned. That he was unaware of their identities-or even their sex-served as a peppery spice to his new life.

He smiled while his teeth rudely bit at a thick, erect nipple outlined by a painted orange flower. The raven-tressed priestess on his left groaned. Whether in pain or pleasure he could not discern, nor did he care. The slut

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was here to please him and not vice versa. If she received satisfaction, it was an ancillary accident not by his design.

Nor was his smile elicited by any of the three. It stemmed from the first inklings of the battle that would rage in bloody fury before one and only one claimed the jeweled throne of Hinun.

Already there had been two assassination attempts. Had it not been for his loyal Hinuri, his throat would have been slashed from ear to ear or he would have ended his short period of godhead on the end of a spear, skewered like a shank of lamb for the roasting.

And-this touch he truly admired-there had been several raids on the farms that surrounded his walled city of Esharista. Fields and huts set afire! Cattle butchered afore-time, their throats ripped from their massive necks! Violence and cruelty!

Delicious diversions . . .

Whispered grumblings of insurrection reached his ears. The peasants feared that the Hinuri were no longer capable of protecting them. They spoke of dark demons who came in the night to flaunt the authority of their deity.

In Shen's only other city of Mienna sixty-five kloms east of Esharista's walls, there had actually been open riots.

Riots! In defiance of the will of their God! How awful of them! What delicious diversions!

For a thousand years rebellion had never once reared its head. Violence had been unheard of! Now a hundred corpses rotted in Mienna's streets as an example to those who sought to defy the Great God and his Hinuri.

And tomorrow . . . ?

Ah, almost he smiled. There lay the novelty of it all- the brilliance! What tomorrow would bring was *unknown*. He couldn't be certain of what the minute, the next second, would hold. A single Hinun no longer wove Shen's design. Now there were three whose minds contained the

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personality and memories of the Hinun who had ruled before them.

Even one of these lovely bitches awrithe on my hands could be my adversary. Or the yellow-haired cake mouth-ing my slicer!

To use the argot of Galactics pleased him. And before the afternoon ended, the light-skinned beauty would definitely be sliced by the scepter her lips caressed.

Or by the slicer of one of my Hinuri!

The possibility replayed in his mind. It was one he had never really considered before. Such an obvious possibility!

Yes! I will have to watch carefully those who serve me. Perhaps even place a spy or two within the ranks of my guards!

The intrigue was delicious. If there was a core of rebels in Mienna, it would be wise to see that one loyal to the Devourer of Souls was infiltrated among their number.

What of my legion of priestesses? How could they conceal an implement of death? They come to me naked. Often bound.

His tongue flicked out to busy an unattended nipple.

Poison!

For a chilling moment he hesitated over the scarlet-rouged point. Poison was something he had not considered. A drop or two in the paints so carefully applied to scented breasts or rubbed into vaginal lips would be all that was required.

He grinned. How seductive such a death would be! He would have to take precautions against just such an attempt. Since the possibility had occurred to him, two other minds on Shen were capable of a similar concept.

Henceforth my playthings shall be tested before they are deemed the privilege of serving their God. My Hinuri shall thoroughly probe each orifice with tongue and slicer before the entry of their creator! Best that I decree the paints be applied to other parts of these so-willing anatomies.

"Great One," a reverent voice called low-a male voice.

The Devourer of Souls turned from the pendulous pap pressed firmly in his mouth. A Hinuri knelt on one knee at the doorway to the Great God's bedchamber.

"What is it, Gan?" Hinun made no attempt to hide his displeasure at the untimely entrance. "If this interruption is without importance, I shall personally preside over your death agonies!"

The Hinuri called Gan (all Hinuri were so named for all were of one mind and one body), spoke without ever lifting his gaze from the floor. "The monitoring room, O Great One. Your eyes that search the heavens have seen another of the vessels from the stars."

"A ship?" Hinun could hardly believe he had heard correctly.

"Yes,-Great One," the Hinuri confirmed. "I came as I was ordered . . . the instant the ringing alarm sounded."

A ship! Hinun shoved away the two priestesses sharing the bed. (One splatted to the floor. No matter that the floor was marble; her number was legion.) *Ah, my Midnight Flower, your dying curses were not without substance!*

The Eater of Minds reached down to the fair-skinned Kaleena. He did not thrust her from his groin. Instead he grasped the silken strands of golden hair and pulled her forward. The announcement of the ship had set him afire. Greased lips enveloped his lust. He needed a release for the burning that suddenly raged in him. This young woman would serve as the vessel for that release as well as any other.

Brutally, Hinun's hips lurched to ram cruelly into the tender mouth so tautly stretched about him. He saw Kaleena shudder, felt her shudder, but she did not offer protest. No groan or moan or piteous whimper escaped those lips so faithfully attentive to his desire.

With that same slavish adoration (less would have brought death, or worse) she eagerly drank the seed that gushed from the loins of her god when at last his fiery release came.

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Lust sated for the moment, Hinun grabbed the robe from behind him on the bed and stood. A knee firmly thrust into the luxurious valley of two heavy pink breasts removed the now tiresome obstacle kneeling in his path.

Kaleena bit her lip to hold back the cry that tried to work up from her pain-throbbing chest when she fell to her side on hard marble. Golden cuffs and manacles cut into her ankles and wrists. This anguish she also concealed as her gaze followed Hinun from his bed chamber.

Soon, O Great One, you will feel the wrath of Kaleena! How or when, I know not. But . . . soon!

For the moment, Kaleena's schemes to rid her world of its bloody tyrant were only that-schemes. Although she held no doubt that she would eventually find the means to implement those cherished dreams.

Until her scheming could blossom into reality, she would perform every effacing act required of her, a slave to Hinun's most trivial whim.

It is a ship!

Hinun's temples were apound as he stared at the image transmitted by the ancient satellite orbiting beyond the atmosphere and gravitational pull of his world.

Like the craft that had brought Midnight Flower and her companions in their gray uniforms, the ship's form lacked a sense of the aesthetic. It appeared to be no more than an elongated egg with domed blisters set on its skin with no attention to symmetry. A thousand years had brought changes in the structure of vessels designed to sail between the stars.

Hinun didn't mind the spaceship's ugliness. Beauty was not a prerequisite for traveling across the vastness of space. The fact that this craft circled his planet proved it had accomplished that. And that was all that was important.

It was on such a vessel the Creators had come from the stars a millennium in the past. And on the same sort of

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ship they had returned to the stars, leaving him to care for Shen and its development.

This time I must be careful. So very careful!

His eagerness to have a spacer at his command had caused the crash of the ship belonging to Midnight Flower and her crewmates. That ship would have placed the stars within his grasp. It would have allowed him to fulfill his destiny-the destiny of all that he had created on Shen.

In my excitement, I overreacted. I used too much force and destroyed the spacer and two members of its crew. Not this time. I shall maneuver this ship ever so gently. It will be mine!

And with it, the minds of those who rode within its dull metallic hull. By the Creators, he would feast. A thousand years of knowledge would be his! For he was Hinun and he was a ravenous god.

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Varnalgeran Yuw floated upward from the yawning obliv-ion of nothingness, and he fought every sem of the way. His head roared and his stomach threatened to hurl up its contents. Much nicer to sink back into the comforting blackness.

The hand wouldn't allow that. With steadfast determina-tion it shook his shoulder until his eyes painfully opened to stare into the face of an angel.

"Val?" *Fleet Return's* First Mate drew in a breath to fight back the waves of nausea.

"You've got a knot on the side of your head the size of a prelix egg. There's some blood, but it looks like only the skin is broken," Valustriana See said while she slipped her hands under his arms and pulled him to his feet. "You've got to help me wake the others."

Head still athrob and eyes barely focusing, Varn glanced around the control room. Mu Tan, Hinote, and Songan all lay unconscious on the floor. The steady rise and fall of their chests relieved his worst fears—they lived. All five were alive! They had survived whatever in the Third Hell the spacer had been thrown into.

"Help Mu Tan and Hinote. I'll see to Songan," Varn said, not all that certain he was capable of crossing the meter of deck to get to the Harbian.

Waking his friend was easy. It took Val's and a woozy Hinote's help to get the hulking giant to his feet and into his captain's chair. While Songan tried to focus on the

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con, Varn shakily returned to SIPACUM. His fingers jabbed at the keyboard in search of the answer to a million questions.

"Ship's status?" Songan said, his gaze methodically taking in the various monitors and displays.

"Secure. As best as I can tell, we're still in one piece. No serious damage to the ship. Except . . ." The Outie's voice trailed off.

With increasing insistence, Varn's fingertips hammered the terminal keys. "Theba's backside!"

"Dammit, Varn, what the vug is it?" Songan snapped, with understandable impatience.

"I don't know. SIPACUM isn't responding to all of my commands. I can't get a coordinate reading!" Varn glanced at his captain, face twisted with puzzlement.

"We've got an injury." This from Val, who stepped behind Varn to give his head another quick examination. "Mu Tan has a broken arm."

Songan twisted around to locate the Saipese. She sat on the floor, back to a wall with an unnaturally bent arm protectively resting in her lap. Her gaze lifted to her captain. She shrugged, but then winced painfully.

"Val, get her to shipdoc and get that arm set," Songan ordered, swinging around to the con.

"Neg on that, Val!" Varn stared at Songan. "Sorry, Captain, but we've no assurance that space isn't waiting outside the door. If SIPACUM is malfunctioning, all the readings we're getting could be wrong."

The anger on Songan's face faded. Varn had had every right to countermand his order. He should have thought of the possibility of false data readings. Even the cybermedical unit called shipdoc could malfunction.

"Right," he nodded. "Full manual systems check, be-ginning with life-support. Hinote, take the Mate's chair. I want Varn at SIPACUM until we're certain we're not all sitting in a floating coffin."

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Without so much as a *t'lee* the Jarp did as ordered. At the con its six-fingered hands reached for buttons, switches, and toggles. The systems check began.

"The fact is, every reading says we're still a fully functional ship," Songan said an hour after the check had begun. "But there is no way of knowing for certain until we open that door. The majority of readings to the con are still branched through SIPACUM even during manual checks."

Outside scans of *Fleet Return* showed no visible damage to the ship's outer hull. Nor did scans of each of the spacer's compartments indicate damage. That did not pre-clude hairline cracks in the engine mountings, which were beyond the view of the scanning interior and exterior telepresences. Each of the spacer's compartments was self-sealing against the possibility of the hull's being breached. Thus there was no assurance that the tunnels beyond the door were not now part of the vacuum humankind called space.

"As you said, there is only one way to find out," Val said as she walked to the door's lock. She held a hand above it, looking her question.

Songan nodded.

Val's hand slapped the lock. With a hiss the door slid open. That was all.

A nervous chuckle of relief rippled through the five crewmembers who stared at the open door as though ex-pecting one of the jelly-blobs of Shirash to come undulat-ing into the cabin.

"Come on, Mu Tan." Val gingerly helped the diminu-tive Saipese to her feet. "You've got an appointment with the cybermed."

"Everyone has," Songan said emphatically. "I want a clean bill of health on everybody." He swiveled to Hinote. "Go with Val and Mu Tan. After all of you have had a mediscan, I want an eyeball check of every cabin onboard."

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From all indications the ship is totally functional, but I want it treb-checked."

"*T'lwee!*" The Jarp affirmative transformed into a "yes, captain" when Hinote flicked on its translator helmet.

As the Jarp rose from the Mate's chair and followed the two female members of *Lanatia Lady/Fleet Return* from the cabin, Songan turned to Varn.

"And, I want that rock-hard Outie skull of yours med-scanned as soon as the cybermed runs those three through!"

Yuw tenderly tested the fleshy egg lumped on the side of his head while doing his best to conceal wincing of pain. His hat lay beside him, forlornly.

"It's nothing. A little NuSkin and I'll be fine. It's SIPACUM that needs the cybermed," he said, with dis-gust. "I'll

have to pull its face and take a look around inside. If I have to, I can replace the whole unit. We've got components stocked two deep below."

Neither Songan nor their former captain Dorjan had ever questioned Varn's caution when it came to the electronic computing and processing unit that was the brain of their ship. On occasions such as this, it was blatantly obvious that it was impossible to be too cautious about the delicate interior of SIPACUM.

"Damn!" The snarled word accompanied the roving of Songan's gaze over the con-for the thousandth time in an hour.

The displays told him no more than he had known when he first looked at them.

"Where the flaining hell *are* we?" he said, slamming a fist to the arm of his chair.

A multi-colored, high resolution image display to his left showed *Fleet Return* in elliptical orbit about a Sopur-Class planet that was also orbited by two moons. The planet was the fourth that circled a yellow dwarf of the REV4QK type. The actual location of the star in relation to the rest of the universe was what SIPACUM could not determine.

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"We're out about a hundred and fifty million kloms from that yellow star," Varn said without glancing up from the keyboard, which he had dismantled and carefully lifted from SIPACUM. "Relative to what, where in the galaxy, is something I can't tell you. That is if we're still in *our* galaxy. If SIPACUM actually did as it indicated it was doing, we could have punched through into another . . . dimension? Your guess is as good as mine-or SIPACUM's-at the moment. I'll know more when I get this wirehead operational and take a look at the cassette. If I can determine where the ship broke out of its programmed trajectory, I'll have a starting place."

Another dimension!

Songan hadn't wanted to consider the possibility. It was simply too mind-fragging. For centuries scientists had theorized the existence of other dimensions. To date, their existence remained unverified. It made nice settings for metiers-other dimensions with exotic bioforms to threaten heroes and heroines cast atumble into the unknown. But it wasn't reality-known reality.

Yet, where does a spacer go when it's on the Tackyon Trail and is thrown into tachyon transition?

Songan had no answer to the question.

"The mother board looks clean and the . . . wait a minute!" Varn said, his head poked inside the open chest of SIPACUM.

The Outie's right hand shot into the computing unit and vigorously pumped up and down. With a grunt, he pulled it free. In his hand was a fifty-by-fifty-sem component board. He glanced at both sides of the board and passed it to his captain.

"There's our problem!" Varn announced with a proud but cheerless grin spanning his face, "Take a look at the circuitry."

"This is the LLBP board!" Songan was unable to over-look the melted circuitry that connected the two hundred microchips on the board.

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"*Fleet Return* is going nowhere quick without that," Varn said with a shake of his head. "Every machine language subroutine needed for navigation is on that board. Without it we're a chunk of useless metal floating in space."

The statement was an exaggeration. *Fleet Return* still had full use of maneuvering rockets and engines. Using them would be a matter of calculating even the most minute shift in position. Without the LLBP, SIPACUM was one step above a calculator when it came to navigation.

"But you *can* repair it?" Songan asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Absolutely not. You can poof that board in the con-verter," Varn said with a shrug. "However, I *can* build another from scratch."

"How long?"

"Give me eight hours and I'll have the board installed and the program on our cassette disassembled into its source code."

"Take nine and make certain you visit the cybermed before you start on the board," Songan insisted, and waved the Outie from the cabin.

Sinking back in his chair, the Harbian rubbed at his temples with both hands.

Another dimension?

He shook his head and let his gaze return to the high resolution image of *Fleet Return's* orbit.

By Theba's merciless eyes, it could be worse. We could all be dead!

"There it is again!" Val jabbed a finger at the monitor on Songan's left.

"Let me make a few adjustments and see if we can pinpoint its location," Songan said, his fingers running over a series of purple glo-buttons.

"What've we got?" Varn asked from a SIPACUM whose face and chest were neatly sealed back in place.

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"Bioscan has picked up what appears to be human life on the big ball below us," Val answered. She shot a flashing grin of excitement to her fellow Outie.

Hinote and Mu Tan, left arm rigidly encased in a crysplas cast, edged to the con at the announcement. Both craned their necks to see over Songan's massive shoulders.

"I thought bioscans were neg?" Varn swiveled toward the con and leaned forward, grateful that the tall and incredibly well-proportioned woman wore that beige coverall. On the other hand, if only it weren't so infernally *tight*, here and there . . .

"On continents one and two we picked up traces of plants and primitive animal life," Songan said. "Three, however, is teeming with life . . . Yes! There it is!"

The monitor went bright yellow. Pinpoints of equally attention-demanding red began peppering the background. Each speck of red represented a SIPACUM-identified human being. Within seconds two distinct clusters had been delineated.

"Cities?" Mu Tan whispered softly.

"Got to be! The plotting is too dense for anything else," Songan said, while his fingers once more jabbed at the con. "Every reading is neatly confined in a hundred-by-hundred-klom square."

"Relatively primitive agri-based society with little or no industrialization," Varn said and added, "the dots around the clusters are farms needed to support the two cities. Totally human population half a million, give or take a few thousand."

The four heads of his crewmembers turned to Yuw, their faces questioning his pronouncement.

"A matter of simple deduction," he said pointing to a monitor just over Songan's head. "Scans show no indication of concentrated energy use. No industrialization or SIPACUM would have picked it up. Cities don't feed their inhabitants, so the dots scattered about the two main clusters have to be farms. As for the population, that's

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SIPACUM's estimate. I added the plus or minus a few thousand to be on the safe side."

Val winked at the Wayne-adorned First Mate and chuck-led. Songan grinned and shook his head in amazement. Even his brain-boostered genius was no match for his friend when Yuw sat at SIPACUM. Songan asked:

"How does this system, planet, and human population compare with the Galactic-inhabited worlds in SIPACUM's data files?"

"It doesn't. There's no reference to such a planet. Sorry," Varn said, the corners of his mouth twisting in a sheepish grin.

"Which means we still don't know where we are!" Songan sank back in his chair with disgust.

"There are half a million people down there who just might know," Val suggested. "Think it would be worth the effort to ask a few of them?"

Songan's head snapped around to the Outie Valkyrie.

"Lady, I like the way you think! It's worth a shot!" He looked at Varn. "Any objections to using the in-grav boat to reconnoiter?"

Varn's head moved slowly from side to side. "SIPACUM will be disassembling the cassette program for an hour. I won't have a source code until then. Two more hours or so to wade my way through it . . ."

"With luck, in three hours we just might know what we've punched into," Songan said, and pushed from his chair.

Varn rose, too, only to receive a firm shake of Songan's head.

"Sorry, but you and Hinote are needed right here to work on the source code when it's ready. And Mu Tan isn't going anywhere with that arm." Songan spoke firmly. "That leaves Val and me. In three hours we should be able to scout every sem of that hundred-klom square."

Varn flipped five. "No arguments here . . . as long as you beam us on the intership comm every fifteen minutes.

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Im just getting used to the Mate's chair. I have no desire to be left with the captain's seat, Captain."

"Every fifteen minutes," Songan agreed and gestured Val toward the cabin's door.

Varn glanced to the two remaining members of *Fleet Return's* crew. "I suggest that if anyone's hungry, you eat right now. As soon as the source code's ready, I intend to work our butts off!"

Within the spacer's immense belly, Songan and Val strode across the bay and entered the in-grav boat. Once they were strapped within their seats, their fingers danced over the smaller ship's con. The hiss of air being pumped from the bay came from outside the hull. Within seconds the zero pressure inside the bay matched that of the black chasm of space that yawned beyond the protection of *Fleet Return*.

Glancing at Val, who nodded in answer, Songan de-pressed a pulsing green glo-button on the con. *Fleet Return's* seamless hull opened before the smaller craft. The clang of the opening cradle collar reverberated throughout the in-grav boat. Gently, like a slowly extending metallic tongue, the slide platform edged forward and pushed the vessel into the star-speckled darkness of space.

Songan's fingers once more dipped to the con. Maneuvering rockets fired aft. The in-grav boat moved forward, its needle nose pointed to the cloud-banked orb and the half million humans who dwelled on a green and brown-flecked continent below.

A roar blasted from behind Songan-thrusters cutting in for a two-second burn. The nose of the in-grav boat dipped,

increasing the angle of entry.

"Atmospheric contact," Val called out as she read the continual array of figures that scrolled upward on the co-pilot's monitor.

Rockets growled again to slow descent. The craft's nose elevated. The small ship leveled onto a gentle glide path to conserve the limited fuel within its tanks.

"I'm taking us in low. We came to take a look at this ball of clay and that's exactly what I intend to do." Songan slipped the boat into a sharp bank.

For just a moment her extraordinary eyes stared at the massive contours of his arms, emerging from the sleeve-less brown tunic he wore.

The churning milk below the delta-winged ship took form-thunderheads that thrust upward like mountains in the sky. Here and there nature's fireworks danced from cloud to cloud in actinic bolts of blinding white. Thunder rolled upward, its bellowing voice discernible over the howl of growling rockets.

An occasional rift in the cloud banks brought a shad-owed glimpse of the terrain below. Songan strained to pick out one identifiable topographical landmark—a forest, a river, a mountain. He couldn't. There was only the storm-swept gray and black of the thunderheads and the darkness of the land they obscured.

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"Scans indicate a break in the storm front directly ahead," Val announced.

"We're in luck." Songan glanced at the grid on the monitor before him. "It appears that our hundred-klom square is free of the cloud cover. That'll make things a damn sight easier for us."

Skimming forty meters above the tops of the angry clouds, Songan eased the boat beyond the front and began a gentle descent toward the sun-bathed terrain.

"We're ten kloms south of the square's southern border," Val announced. "Present heading will place us over the larger of the cities in approximately ten minutes."

Songan leveled the in-grav boat thirty meters above the forest below. For as far as he could see, the rich carpet of green stretched out on all sides.

"There's enough wood below to make every inhabitant on this planet wealthy, if they ever decided to export it to other worlds," Songan idly commented, staring at the lush green running from horizon to horizon.

"We just crossed into human inhabited territory . . . Hello there! What this?" Val reached out and flicked a toggle.

"I've got five human bioreadings about two kloms to the northeast," she said, nodding to the monitor on the con before her. "Want to check them out?"

"Might as well. Five people will be easier to deal with than a city. Give me a heading."

Songan adjusted the boat's course to match the coordinates Val called out to him, and the terrain below changed dramatically.

Wide swaths ate into the forest. Land purposely cleared by the hands of humans. The unmistakable furrows of a plow were easily discernible from the boat's low altitude. Odd. From this height their unevenness was obvious. Single-blade plows?

Varn's suggested farms surrounding the cities apparently wasn't far from wrong. While Songan saw no hint of

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human dwellings. These were fields, and their surface had recently been broken. Primitively.

"There, Songan, to the right!" Val shouted, pointing outside the boat's bubble canopy. "There's five of them and they're mounted on . . . horses!"

"Horses?" Songan craned his neck to find the five.

He did. Val was right. All five were mounted on horse-back! Songan had seen the mammals on but two planets—Saiping and Terasaki—and there only in limited numbers for use in the ritualistic pageantry of those worlds.

When humankind leaped toward the stars in its great migration from Homeworld, it took little more than itself throughout the galaxy. Oh, rabbits, goats, and fish were carried by the ancient colonists because of the protein sources they offered. Cattle traveled to the stars too, although in far lesser numbers (the stellar price of a Lanatian beefsteak was testimony to the rarity of those cloven-hooved creatures). Other large animals, such as horses, were simply too expensive to transport across the parsec abyss. What need did early colonists have of beasts of burden when mechanical, even cyber-devices were at their command?

Certainly horses were rarity enough, but the riders arched Songan's artificial eyebrows even higher. .

Oh, they looked human enough. It was just that the four wore armor-plumed helmets and breastplates that gleamed in the bright sunlight. The fifth was clad in purple robes that furled flowingly about him. All five of the men brandished stubby *shortswords*!

The double-edged blades flashed as they rose and fell. Wildly the five slashed at a pack of shaggy, gray saliva-frothing, fang-snapping, grating creatures that leaped at the riders and their mounts from all directions.

"Beam Varn and give him the scrute," Songan said while he edged the in-gray boat toward the battle scene. "We couldn't have asked for better circumstances to announce our arrival!"

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Val grinned widely as she flicked open intership comm and announced the intentions of two would-be rescuers from

the stars.

"A low buzz should be enough to break things up a bit . . . and a short burst of the thrusters to add the appropriate sound effects!"

Eyes agleam, Songan pulled the delta-winged craft up at ten meters above the ground.

Three of the riders never saw the in-grav boat that screamed across the clearing to their rescue. The jaws of the massive gray beasts removed any hope of rescue from the men's minds, along with the life from their bodies.

Yellowed fangs sank into fetlocks and tore viciously. Three horses went down, carrying their riders with them. The madly swinging shortswords proved no match for the ocean of sharp-snouted creatures that swarmed over the fallen men to tear away throats as easily as fetlocks.

"Damn!" Songan slammed a palm to the con.

Rockets roared, thundering as though the very sky had split open.

Val's neck craned back as she stared at the scene below. "It helped! Most of those grat-things are scattering!"

"The riders?" Songan was swinging the craft about in a tight, G-generating turn that brought them around for another pass.

"They've still got their hands full. Too many of the creatures left for them to make a break."

"I'm taking us down. Break out stoppers, Val. No, make it plasma pistols! We want something with flash and noise!"

While he maneuvered the craft downward to the tilled field, Val nodded, unbuckled herself, and scurried to the interior of the craft.

Songan, with more attention to expediency than to gentleness, brought the in-grav boat to a bumping rest on the ground. Val waited for him at the hatch, plasma pistol and

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power pack waiting. She held a similar weapon, power pack strapped to her thigh.

Songan didn't bother with the niceties of attaching the pack to his leg. Energy source in left hand and leveled pistol in right, the dark giant raced outside with Val a step behind him.

"Son of a bitch!" the curse growled through Songan's clenched teeth as he watched the last rider, the one in purple robes, go down with his horse. "Open up on them!"

Harbian and Outie fingers tightened around triggers. Cracking bolts of blue plasma energy erupted from the muzzles of their pistols to streak at the speed of light across the thirty meters separating them from the snarling pack. Again they fired. Again.

Those quick volleys were all that was needed.

Blood-lusting growls were transformed into whimpers of fear as the bolts sizzled home. Four-legged bodies hurtled through the air, charred and smoking. Howling in terror, the remaining monsters tucked their tails between their hind legs and scattered into the dense forest. Those that remained would never run again.

"It appears the great saviors from the sky arrived too late, Captain," Val said as she walked at Songan's side toward the bodies of man, horse, and grat-creatures strewn bloodily on the ground.

Songan didn't answer the obvious. He stepped his way over the black bodies of the plasma-sizzled creatures toward the still forms of the riders.

"Uhhhhhh . . ."

The Harbian's head jerked around. The moan came from the man in purple.

"He's still alive! I don't believe it!" Val shouted as she ran to the fallen man to drop to a knee at his side. "He's got a few scratches, but that's all."

Holstering her gun, she carefully ran her hands over the

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purple-clad rider's arms and legs. Next she tested his rib cage.

"He seems to be in one piece . . . no broken bones," she reported.

"In one piece . . . and very much alive." The man's eyes fluttered open weakly to reveal strangely colored irises of pale aquamarine.

"So much for Varn's other-dimension theory," Songan said, crouching beside Val. "That's Erts he's speaking."

"Of course it's Erts . . ." The man bolted up, eyes wide and head twisting from side to side. "The dyre-wolves!"

His eyes rounded even wider when they rolled up and up and up to the tunic-dressed giant with the less than human voice.

"Easy, my friend. Easy," Val said softly. "They're gone. We fried a few and the rest were last seen as they jam-crammed into the trees."

"Gone?" purple-robe gazed at Val and then Songan as though seeing them for the first time. "They'll be back. I must get to Esharista. They won't attack in the city. The walls will keep them away."

"Let's get him to his feet and into the boat," Songan said. He stepped behind the befuddled man, slid his arms about his chest, and lifted him. "I doubt those . . . dyre-wolves will be back, but there's no need to take chances."

Half carrying the sole survivor of their rescue attempt, Songan led him to the boat and deposited him in a passenger seat. Between saucer-eyed gazes about the ship and klom-a-second questions about his two saviors from the sky, he explained that his name was Selye and that he was an advisor to the Hinun in the city of Esharista.

Selye also managed to down two skweez-bulbs of water and allowed Val to bathe the scratches he carried as

sou-venirs of the attack. That activity seemed very much to his liking. His eyes constantly shifted to give silent approval

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to another portion of his nurse's extravagant physical attributes.

Songan had to admit the appraising glances were not limited to Selye. Val's own dark eyes took in the muscular, handsome young man with their own silent approval.

He carefully avoided mentioning the fellow's appearance when he contacted Varn.

"He calls this planet *Shen*. Says if we'll escort him back to the city . . . *Esharista* . . . this *Hinun* will welcome us with honor due heroes," Songan said over intership comm.

"Just make certain those heroes keep their crewmembers appraised of what's going on in that city. You two aren't going to be dealing with a few farmers, Songan. There are at least a quarter of a million people in there. Even with plasma pistols those are awfully high odds to be going up against if everything isn't on the pos." Varn delivered his lecture in stern fatherly tones. "And Songan . . . wait just a moment."

The Harbian was left listening to the static crackling from the grille. A glance over his shoulder found Val still nursing Selye.

"Songan, I just ran '*Shen*' and '*Hinun*' through SIPA-CUM," Varn's voice returned to the grille. "There's no record of either. This Selye might speak Erts, but his planet isn't known to any Galactic world!"

"Which makes this jaunt to Esharista all the more interesting. I'll beam in again when we've reached the city."

After beaming off, Songan moved swiftly to assure himself that their Shenese guest was recuperating and in shape to withstand the short flight to the walled city. He was; with Selye strapped safely into his chair, Songan and Valustriana returned to the ship's controls. The captain relayed SIPACUM's lack of any data on Shen.

The Outie ran a hand through the long strands of her black hair and shook her head.

"No telling what we've got here," she said. "I remem-

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ber newscasts when I was a child that told of a TGW ship re-discovering the planet Alachin."

Songan raised an eyebrow. He had read of how TGW had stumbled upon Alachin more than fifty years ago-twenty years before his own birth.

Age and appearance along the spaceways could not be equated, as Valustriana See so vividly reminded him. She looked to be no more than twenty-five. The youthful appearance common among the majority of Galactics (those who could afford it) was a matter of an occasional visit to a daktari.

As to Shen's being another Alachin, Songan could not disregard the possibility. Humanity's migration to the stars had been a helter-skelter spewing of ships from Homeworld. Like seeds from an exploding pod, colonial spacers from more than one "nation" sought habitable worlds through-out the galaxy. As with seeds, some died and some took root wherever they found an environment suitable to provide sustenance.

"With luck, we'll have our answers in Esharista," Songan replied, with a glance over his shoulder at the boat's sole passenger.

Selye's eyes grew even wider with wonder when Songan's fingers tapped at the con and the craft gently lifted into the air.

Boldly a dyre-wolf stepped from the shelter of the forest as the strange, winged ship rose upward toward the sky. Its dark head lifted and its gaze followed the craft until it had disappeared behind the tops of the lofty trees.

A low, angry growl rumbled from deep in its throat and blood-matted lips curled back to reveal long, recurved fangs. It had been cheated! The man in the purple robes had been his! No more than the width of a whisker had separated it from the soft flesh of the man's neck with the two had come from the sky with their blue fire.

Its narrow-eyed gaze shifted to the charred bodies of its

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pack members. Ten in all lay dead among the bodies of the armored guards and horses. Ten!

The two from the craft had killed the ten--butchered them in no more than a heartbeat.

The big dyre-wolf padded its way through the carnage he and his pack had wrought in mere minutes. Pressing his long snout to the ground where the two from the sky had knelt beside the one in purple, he memorized their smell.

A male and a female-they had killed ten of his pack. For that, they would pay. He would feast on the two as surely as he would feast on the one they had pulled from his very teeth.

How he would accomplish the impossible-creep like a shadow into the walled city in the north-he did not know. But he would find a way. Had to find a way!

The dyre-wolf lifted its head once again and bayed. From the forest around him, the pack came to gather in a ring about their leader. He eyed them, his glaring meeting each pair of ferocious eyes that glared back. None challenged his right to stand in authority. Fierce they might be, and fearless, but those that ran with him were not foolish. They recognized the power of his body-a body that at the shoulders stood ten sems above any of its packmates.

The image of the man and the woman, their bodies torn by the pack's hungry jaws, flashed within the dyre-wolf's brain. It was a vision of simple and exact revenge. An end suitable to those who had so arrogantly cheated him of his prey.

Then he lowered his head and wagged his tail. Before those who followed him could aid in his search for the man and woman they needed strength-as did he.

Their leader no longer in a stance of defiance, the pack moved in to feast on the warm-blooded bodies of their kill.

"Booda's cubes!" Varnalgeran Yuw swiveled away from SIPACUM in disgust. Hinote's *t'loo-wheel* imitated the irritation of its First

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Mate. The whistle brought a chuckle from Varn's throat. He shoved his Wayne back and sucked at his teeth.

"I don't know why I expected it to be easy, my orange-skinned friend from Jarpi? It never is. Not when one is dealing with electronics as complicated as those contained within this marvelous hunk of chips and circuitry!" Varn bestowed a loving pat on SIPACUM's gleaming frame.

"There is always another bug, Varn," Hinote said, repeating the centuries-old adage.

"The problem we face is not to find another bug in this cassette, but to find the first one!" Varn pulled out the inslotted cassette that contained the tidily disassembled source code of *Fleet Return's* trajectory program. "The damned thing looks clean!"

Light fingers softly tapped at the Outie's shoulders. He looked up to find Mu Tan's apologetic almond-shaped eyes staring down at him.

"Varn, there is something you need to see." She pointed to a display of the spacer's orbit around Shen. "With each revolution, we appear to be edging closer to the planet."

Varn stood and stretched while he examined the display more closely. His lips pursed and nodded.

"We'll have to keep an eye on this," he said unhappily. "Shen seems to be generating some sort of gravitational anomaly."

His fingers ran over the con encoding the information needed to take *Fleet Return* back to its original orbit. Maneuvering rockets fired, their chemical hiss barely audible through the spacer's two hulls.

"Until we've got the bug out of the source code, I've got SIPACUM's LLBP board disconnected," Yuw said, turning back to Hinote and Mu Tan. "So ride our orbital readings while you're oncon. They'll have to be adjusted manually."

The two nodded and Varn went back to SIPACUM for a second go at the program.

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At Songan's insistence, Selye reluctantly released the straps securely holding him in the seat. He moved to a chair directly behind Val's as the in-grav boat approached his city.

To eyes accustomed to the sprawling wonders of the planets at galaxy core where the action was, Esharista appeared to be no more than a series of mud-brick build-ings rising out of the dense forest. True, a wall did surround the city, as Selye had described . . . but a child equipped with a grapnel and rope could have scaled it in a matter of seconds.

"Esharista covers more than three square kloms," Selye said proudly, arm sweeping before him. "This is the first time I have ever viewed all its beauty at one time."

Val glanced at Songan and raised an eyebrow as though she also questioned the beauty their Shenese companion exulted over. She said nothing; Songan was banking the boat to circle the city's perimeter in search of a suitable landing spot.

"Any suggestion as to where I should put us down?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder at Selye.

"Why, at the palace, of course!" Selye said, his voice as gleeful as a child's. "Hinun would never forgive me if I didn't bring you directly to him. He will wish to thank you personally for all that you have done for one of his advisors."

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"Palace?" Val's eyes squinted, searching the city below for anything that resembled a . . . *palace*.

"There, at the very heart of Esharista," Selye said with pride, pointing to the center of the walled city.

Songan smiled with amusement. There was *something* to his left. At first glance it appeared to be no more than another series of the dull brown buildings. On second inspection it looked *big*. Massively so!

Easing the boat toward the structure, Songan slowed their approach until they soared as slowly as a gliding bird. It would be enough of a shock for Esharista's inhabitants to see the craft so alien to them. No need to scare them out of their wits with thrusters growling through the sky!

On the narrow streets below, he watched the heads of pedestrians turn upward to watch the delta-wing craft. Here and there he saw heads poked out of small windows to stare at the boat's progress.

It was not difficult to imagine the awe on those faces or the thoughts-fears-that bustled through Shenese brains. To people who rode *horses*, for Booda's sake, and armed themselves with swords, the boat must seem a winged leviathan descending from the heavens to devour their city.

"There is a garden within the palace that should accommodate your wonderful craft," Selye suggested, while Songan winged closer to the center of Esharista.

The palace was massive. Like a single block of granite it seemed to push upward from Shen's soil. While no other building the boat had passed over stood more than two stories, the palace (or its main building, Selye corrected) rose at least six. Wide windows, complete with ornate parapets, dotted the six faces of its angular U-shape.

The garden Selye promised was within the open mouth of the "U". So were several lesser buildings, each con-nected to the palace main by arched breezeways.

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Again, Songan could see necks crane up at the sight of their approach. While many of those within the garden ran toward the shelter of the palace, he was more concerned with the small army of helmeted and breastplated guards who filed down what appeared to be a klong or five of stairs leading from the palace. Each of the soldiers carried an unshathed shortsword or wickedly tipped spear.

"The Hinuri," Selye said, apparently noticing Songan's frown of concern. "They are Hinun's personal guard."

Songan didn't ask why this *Hinun* required such a large force of armed men or that his city be walled. He and Val were strangers far from their own worlds and he had no indication as to how questioning of Shenese customs would be taken.

Thrusters switched off and the sound of landing rotors whining from the belly of the ship, Songan descended on a perfectly vertical path. He landed on a wide strip of mani-cured lawn stretching between two bubbling fountains. The grass was the wrong hue, but it was green.

The Hinuri, swords and spears leveled against attack, surrounded the grounded metal bird. Faces shadowed by their helmets, they appeared ferocious, if primitive. On the other hand, not one of the armored soldiers braved an approach closer than five meters to the ship.

"Perhaps it would be best if I spoke to the Hinuri before you show yourself, Cap-tain," Selye said. "These are troubled times on Shen and the guards fear you have come to attack Hinun."

Without unstrapping himself, Songan swiveled his chair to Selye. He nodded. "We'll handle it your way. Val and I will remain inside until you call for us. I'll open the door as soon as you get back to it."

The Shenese nodded, rose, and trotted back to the boat's hatch, which slid upward for him. With a glance at his two saviors, he stepped outside.

"Have you taken a close look at all these soldiers' faces?" Val asked in a whisper. "They're all the same!"

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"Like cyberunits off an assembly line." Songan was taking his pistol from the floor beside him and attaching its power unit to his brown-tightsed thigh. "If there's any trouble, swords and spears shouldn't be much of a match for these."

Val pointed outside the canopy. "They're leaving. Selye seems to have said h'is piece . . . and they listened. Advisor to the, uh, ruler no less!"

"Uh. If we were in a meller, he'd have been the Prin-cess Royal," Songan muttered.

"Hmp. What've you got against a prince?"

The comparison of the armored Hinuri to cyberunits echoed in Songan's mind while he watched the soldiers retreating up the stairs into the palace. With almost perfect precision their arms and legs pumped in rhythm as they moved in double time.

"My friends," Selye called when he poked his head back inside the small boat, "I have sent word ahead to Hinun telling of the great service you have given one of his advisors. If you will follow me, I shall arrange a meeting for you with Hinun."

Songan answered the questioning shift of Val's eyes by lightly touching the grip of his bolstered pistol. Even within the palace, the weapons had the firepower to blast their way back to the boat-through the walls if necessary.

"Give Varn the scrute. He's to come down and get us in three hours, if we don't beam again," Songan said.

Val gave him a perplexed look. "Uh . . . Captain . . . *Lanatia Lady* isn't an atmospheric craft."

"No, but Varn's an Outie, isn't he? He'll think of something." Songan winked at the beautiful amazon from Outreach in an imitation of his Mate's cavalier style.

She was right. *Fleet Return* wasn't designed for atmo-spheric entry. Very few spacers were. Yet the ship could withstand the rigors of such a brutal descent if need be. It could also get itself off a planet back into the freedom of

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space so long as the planet's gravitational pull didn't ex-ceed 1.64 G.

Hawking was a long way from the center of the galaxy for two ex-slaves whose knowledge of the spaceways was limited to a relatively small sector of its vastness. The three months spent revamping the spacer had provided for the contingency of having to make planetfall in *Fleet Return*.

"... *Tell that ugly Harbian, that's exactly what I intend to do if Lizina doesn't hear from one of you in three hours,*" Varn's voice crackled from the grille.

"Give Lizina our regards," Val said, and flicked off the comm.

She glanced up at Songan and received an affirmative nod. Varn had given them a single code word-Lizina-to use when they next contacted the spacer. A simple knife to the throat was often enough to make man or woman speak as ordered. No matter whether the next transmission to *Fleet Return* came within the three-hour limit, if that single word wasn't included in the first sentence, Songan had no doubt that his friend would bring the spacer down atop the palace.

With Selye in the lead, Songan and Val left the boat (door carefully sealed behind them) and marched up the stretching flight of steps into the palace of Hinun.

The exterior of the massive building had given no hint of the beauty that greeted the offworlders. Marble of pink and chocolate, polished to a glossy sheen, was everywhere- floor, walls, ceiling, and row upon row of tree-trunk-sized pillars. Tapestries hung from every wall, displaying bril-liant hues and intricately interlocking patterns. Huge

dra-peries could easily have been fitted as sails for the gigantic ships of Lanatia's seas. Instead they cascaded downward to cover the doorways leading to the immense rotunda within the palace's entrance.

The ceiling, arching upward the total height of the palace, was a dome of colored glass that shattered sunlight
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into every color of the spectrum. As with the magnificent tapestries, the glass had been skillfully worked into intricately interlocking motifs. Their pattern lay asplashed on the floor.

While Songan found the style too introverted for his own tastes, he could not deny the artistry of its execution.

Noticeably absent within the rotunda was the army of Hinuri who had greeted the in-grav boat's arrival. That absence brought a quiet sigh of relief from the Harbian. *Fleet Return's* crew had enough to contend with. They could do without having to battle their way off a planet that had been overlooked by time and humankind for centuries!

The trio was not alone. Faces, very human faces, peeked out from behind the draperies to stare at the man and woman who had descended from the clouds.

"Selye," a man's voice called from the left.

The Shenese stopped and turned to face a guard who entered the rotunda from behind one of those fabulously expansive draperies and motioned to the advisor. Excusing himself, Selye hastened to the Hinuri. After a brief exchange of words, he turned back to his rescuers.

"Hinun is presently engaged in a conference of his advisors to which I have been summoned," he said. "I must leave you in the care of this guard, who you may call Gan. He has been directed to provide for your every need. Hinun has ordered that you may freely explore the beauties of his palace. Or if you prefer, rooms are being prepared for you, should you desire to cleanse and refresh yourselves. Or perhaps partake of a light repast. After he has finished with his advisors, Hinun will meet personally with you, when that is convenient to you."

Songan eyed the guard, remembering the horde armed with their swords and spears. He glanced to Val. Her dubious expression said that the same image played within her mind.

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"Or, of course, you might prefer to wait in your ship," Selye added hastily.

"I believe it would be less an inconvenience to do just that . . . until Hinun is ready to receive us," Songan answered.

"As I said, the palace is yours, Captain," Selye said humbly. "But if you prefer your skycraft, I will come for you there when Hinun's council has ended."

The Shenese walked them back to the stairs and watched while his two strange rescuers returned to the in-grav boat . . . and waited. -

Songan was lying stretched across two of the passenger seats when Val called him forward. He found her on the comm chatting with Varn. Yet the transmission wasn't her reason for calling. She gestured toward the minor procession that came down the stairs of Hinun's palace.

"What the vug?" Songan glanced at the Outie, who fingerflipped to say "Your guess is as good as mine."

"Whatever it is, Selye's at the head of the parade, in another violet robe," Songan said when he turned back to peer through the canopy. "Tell Varn it's three hours max until our next transmission . . . by Theba."

The last two words changed the code just in case their transmissions had been monitored. The likelihood of such electronic spying on Shen seemed farfetched, but Songan relied on standard operating procedure.

Outside, evening had come to Esharista. The last rays of a setting sun cast a pastel hue of rosy-gold on castle and procession.

"I think Hinun has decided to grant us an audience," Songan said, once more strapping pistol and energy pack to waist and thigh.

Val stood to follow him to the boat's door. "You have to admit those torch bearers are impressive . . . in a primitive sort of way."

"Terasak tri-horned bulls are equally impressive and

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primitive-also damned deadly," Songan said as he thumbed open the door. "It'll be dark soon. Keep your eyes open, Val. Tricorn bulls like to attack hunters from out of a shadow. That makes them doubly dangerous!"

Val needed no further explanation: she had never taken off her sidearm since setting foot on this world that time had passed by.

Outside they were greeted by Selye, four Hinuri torch bearers, and six women. They were dressed in little more than their natural attributes accented by strands of spar-klung gemstones draped from neck, shoulder, arm, and hip. They bore golden platters laden with fruits, breads, and roasted meat.

"Friend Selye," Songan called to Hinun's advisor, "has your leader deigned to meet with us?"

"Alas, my two newfound friends, I must apologize for a small deception I was forced to employ this afternoon," Selye said with an embarrassed bow of his head. "There is no Selye, but only Hinun. I hope that I may in part make recompense for that deception by asking you to join me in a humble repast here by the fountains in the cool of Esharista's evening."

"Selye" waved a violet-robed arm toward the nearest of the bubbling fountains.

Val's jaw dropped several sems in surprise. "You're Hinun?"

"Selye and Hinun the Caretaker of Shen are one and the same," he said, reaching out to take Val's hand and lead her

toward the finely woven carpets the Hinuri spread on the ground.

"Such disbelief on the face of beauty! Your captain shows no surprise. We share an understanding of the need for caution when one is faced with an unknown situation."

Hinun smiled pleasantly, his gaze shifting to Songan and then back to Val. He waited for them to seat themselves.

"Why the identity of Selye the advisor?" Songan said

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as he seated himself on a thick carpet the color of blue-berry wine.

Val did likewise so that she faced her captain from a paler blue rug. Somehow her coverall had got itself open halfway to the waist. She glanced down to make sure.

"For the same reason that you two sit so that you guard each other's back, my friends," the Caretaker of Shen said, waving the gemstone-attired women to place the platter before his guests. "The dyre-wolves were no accident this afternoon. They had been sent to kill me."

Hinun lowered himself to the carpet and selected a fruit of orange and crimson from a platter. Balancing it in one palm, he looked back to Songan.

"There are those on Shen who wish to see me dead, my friend. To see the position of Caretaker destroyed and plunge this peaceful world into chaos." Hinun spoke in the gravest of tones. "I regret my earlier caution, but after the dyre-wolves and what they did to my men, I was not prepared to trust even strangers who had so obviously come to Shen from the stars. Too, you are both of . . . intimidating height."

He glanced at Valustriana, looking unintimidated. While she and Songan helped themselves to the small feast served in their honor, Hinun explained that he had ridden into the forest for a personal investigation of reports of bestial raids on surrounding farmers, flocks, and herds.

"The reports were obviously well-grounded!" Valustriana said.

Hinun nodded without smiling. "Indeed! The wolves were quite real, and I am certain the pack is responsible for the numerous attacks." Hinun dropped the fruit back onto the platter. "Just as I am certain that those wolves had been trained by the hand of man."

The dyre-wolves had never attacked human farms in the thousand years they and human had co-existed on Shen, Hinun told them while his gaze returned to Val and lingered there. The open top of her coverall spread a bit

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wider and remained so until the handsome ruler glanced away and she released her breath.

"There is no need for the wolves to seek humans or their cattle and sheep. I provide an abundance of natural prey for their hunting packs," Hinun said.

"You *provide* their natural prey?"

"As I provide all the environment on Shen-or at least this continent which we have settled," Hinun said with obvious pride. "It is the task of the Caretaker to look after all of Shen's inhabitants, even the dyre-wolves."

"It sounds like a heavy burden," Songan said. "Nor do I understand how one man can handle such a tremendous responsibility."

Hinun's gaze shifted to the captain of *Fleet Return*. Just for an instant Songan thought that he detected a flicker of anger in those pale aqua eyes. He couldn't be certain; the torchlight cast shimmering shadows across the Caretaker's handsome face.

"One must understand Shen, to grasp the importance of the position I now fill," Hinun said. "More than a millen-nium ago the first Hinun was created to do the job that has been passed to me."

"Created? A cyberunit?" Val asked, her attention shift-ing from a slice of the honey-basted lamb to Hinun.

"Nothing that crude, my lovely Valustriana." Hinun chuckled and shook his head. "The first of the Hinun was a human replicant; an android. Totally biological, although with certain genetic-engineered improvements. In the case of my ancient predecessor, the modifications were to his brain. He was the closest thing to a bio-computer that his creators could design."

Unmistakable awe freighted Hinun's voice. Songan raised an eyebrow but said nothing. His gaze lifted to the Hinuri and those faces that matched feature for feature.

"At the command of Emperor Kabir Anane, a research center was established here on Shen. Its purpose was two-fold. First: the Emperor possessed an intense interest

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in the exotic and extinct creatures that had once walked the worlds of humankind. The center was to re-create such beasts for the emperor's private preserve," Hinun said. "Secondly, and far more importantly, Shen was to spear-head the research and development of cyborgs and androids capable of colonizing mineral-rich planets with environments too hostile for humans."

Hinun explained that during the almost forgotten time in humankind's past-the short-lived and highly unsuccessful galactic empire-anti-technological sentiment had run high amid influential segments of imperial society.

"Fear of artificial electronic intelligence and decision-making machines was rampant among the empire worlds. For a decade the development of computers was banned! So was their use on the more reactionary worlds." Hinun made a shrug of incomprehension. "While the researchers on Shen had the use of computers, they sought to develop a biological counterpart-an android-that would be acceptable to those who feared electronic devices. Thus Hinun was created. An artificial human whose memory capacity far surpassed that of even the most intelligent human."

Songan felt a twinge of sympathy for that long-dead creation. Hadn't Murrah an Rahmyne attempted to create her

own human computer with the brain of a gladiator-slave, using repeated encephaloboosts to provide that brain with hyper-genius . . . *my brain?*

The original Hinun's purpose on Shen, Selye-Hinun told them, was that of administrator. He was to gather and coordinate all the knowledge of the planet and each re-search project. He freed the researchers of the tedious paperwork and day-to-day worries so that they could devote themselves to their various projects.

"The center existed two years before Emperor Kabir's assassination. His successor cut funding for Shen and re-called three-fourths of its personnel," Hinun said, and his tone was thick with bitterness. "Shortly after the withdrawal, an alien virus infected the remaining researchers.

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They died one by one, unable to discover a means to combat the disease."

Believing in the feasibility of their work, the center's scientists first instilled Hinun with the command to continue what they had begun. They also left the android with a promise that other humans would eventually return to Shen.

"It was their hope that their android servant would create a showcase world that they could flaunt in the face of their emperor," Hinun said with a shrug that lacked the indifference it attempted to convey. "However, the re-search teams never returned."

Of course they didn't, Songan mused. He saw the design forming in the story his host wove. *The use of androids has been all but abandoned along the spaceways!*

In the old days, when humans first began the migration from Homeworld, androids were sent out in scoutships to save their creators from the boredom of the interminably long non-tachyon journeys. Human resentment of the replicants hastily put an end to that practice. Humans after all were human. And humans *needed* to accomplish! The most boring of tasks could be an accomplishment, provided it held a measurable value at its completion.

The discovery of new worlds--habitable planets--on which humankind could grow was the grandest of endeavors. Humans decided that it merited human and only human involvement.

"Hinun remained here on Shen and did as he was commanded," the Caretaker of Shen said.

Though he, too, was infected with the virus, the android created another body for himself. Using the methods left to him by his human masters, he encoded his memories into a computer, and transferred them into that body before the disease took its toll.

For a decade, this Hinun explained, Hinun died and was reborn as the virus consumed each of his new forms. Persistence eventually brought victory. The android defeated

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the virus. Hinun detailed those early days of Shen's development.

"He then began the work left to him by his creators. With the equipment and materials left behind, he created android workers to mine and process more materials. From those he created the animal life that now flourishes on Shen's only inhabited continent. The variety here is spectacular. Animals from twenty different worlds walk this continent. Creatures that existed on Urth when humankind huddled in the security of caves! Next Hinun then turned his efforts to molding human androids to ease the loneliness of his existence . . .

"The fact that androids were sexless entities and incapable of reproducing was but a minor hindrance. Hinun had at his disposal the tools of bio and genetic engineering. The men and women he designed to live on this human abandoned world were exactly that--men and women! They bred and bore children. So did their children and their children's children.

"Those scientists who left their servant with the unfinished task would have been amazed," Hinun said, his pale eyes asparkle in the flicker of the torches. "Any creature a human could imagine, Hinun could create in a matter of days!"

"And you are a descendant of the original Hinun?" Val asked of her handsome young host. "You are the caretaker of this world carrying on the work originally assigned to an android?"

"No." Songan spoke his thoughts aloud.

The total weave of the Caretaker's story was clear to his excellent mind. Its intricate design equalled the brilliant tapestries that hung within the palace. The era-spanning scope revealed in that design was mind-fragging.

A thousand years! Maybe more!

"Ah, lovely Valustriana, see how perceptive your captain is. He has guessed my secret!" Hinun ended with a wide grin and a wink for the beautiful Outie.

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Val glanced at Songan, her brow furrowed in question.

"Our host *is* Hinun . . . the original Hinun," Songan told her. He turned to Hinun. "If not in body, then in mind. Hinun has lived--has *endured*--the long centuries. His knowledge, his memories have passed from one body to the next to the next!"

Hinun clapped his hands and laughed with obvious delight. "You are perceptive, friend Songan! I am that Hinun who was abandoned on this fair planet more than a millennium ago."

"You're more than a thousand years old?" Val said, staring at the obviously young man in disbelief.

"Only the memories contained within my head, dear Valustriana," Hinun replied with amusement. "And experience, lovely one."

Songan did not miss the obvious, sexual connotation of Hinun's remark, but he paid it no mind. (The comment did affect Val, whose gaze shifted with flustered embarrassment to the carpet on which she sat.) Songan's wandered

elsewhere, to a small container that lay in qwik-freeze onboard his ship.

His temples pounded and his heart raced crazily. It was too much to hope for! But . . .

"Cloning, Hinun . . . have you used cloning in your work here on Shen?" Songan asked, unable to contain the question any longer.

"The process is too slow," Hinun said with a shake of his head.

"But . . ." Songan swept an arm to the Hinuri.

"Ah, my guards! They are rather obvious, aren't they?" Hinun glanced at the nearest soldier. "Once I had a loyal and brave Hinuri who served me. When he was killed in a hunting accident, I recreated him and have used him as the model for all Hinuri since."

Hinun paused to turn back to Songan. "I use simple cellular analysis and reconstruction, Captain. And, of course, accelerated growth tanks. It's easier and simpler than clon-

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ing. A clone takes months to develop fully. An android requires only a few days . . . since they are created and not developed. Although I defy anyone to find one difference in humans and the replicants who dwell on Shen! It is only a matter of ancestry that differs!"

"And if you had cell specimens of a dead man-or a woman?" Songan pressed nearer his goal.

"With cell samples it is a minor task to reconstruct a body," Hinun replied. "But a body must have memories. Therein lies the difficulty . . ."

Hope sagged. An all too familiar coldness stabbed within Songan's chest. This was Hakimit Med Center painfully replayed.

"There is an ancient saying that a person lives as long as his memory is carried in the minds of the living," Hinun continued. "I have used the memories of the living to structure artificial memories for a reconstructed body. To resurrect the dead in the image of the memories of others is tricky, but I have done it."

Again hope lived and Songan's soul soared. Here, lost on a forgotten colony of the short-lived Galactic Empire, Booda only knew where along the spaceways, a man-a thousand-year-old *android!*-dangled a key before him. The very key that could return his lost Yoluta to him.

From my own memories, etched with love, can my Yoluta live anew?

"Now I offer the hospitality of the palace to my newfound friends once again," Hinun said as he stood. "Although the choice of remaining with your ship or enjoying the comfort of restful beds for the night remains solely with you."

It took only a moment for Songan and Val to decide and transmit their intention to the orbiting *Fleet Return*. Moments after having received Hinun's second invitation, they followed the Caretaker of Shen into the palace and to the luxurious rooms he had prepared for his guests from the stars.

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Varnalgeran Yuw stared at his friend and captain with a wry twist of disbelief at the corners of his mouth.

"Songan, if we are willing to travel way out there on the edge of the galaxy with you, what the hell makes you think we would mind a few days circling Shen? If this Hinun thinks he can give us back Yoluta we'll stay here a year!" Varn spoke with all the enthusiasm he could muster . . . while he kept his doubts quietly concealed at the back of his mind. There they stirred uneasily.

Songan dwelled on another plane at the moment and Varn wasn't about to fob his friend's flash. This man needed his moments of joy, which had been few and far between since Yoluta's death.

A thousand-year-old android didn't fit Yuw's concept of divine intervention. Nor did the Outie place much faith in a man, android or not, who surrounded himself with look-alike soldiers and walled barriers about his city,

Damn! I need to talk with Val!

She had no visions of bringing a dead lover back to life to muddle her thoughts. He wanted to know more about the Shenese rebellious element that Songan so lightly brushed aside.

Val hadn't returned in the in-grav boat with Songan. She had accepted an invitation from Hinun to tour his palace. Varn didn't care for that either, though he tagged his resentment as jealousy.

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She's a big girl. She can take care of herself along with Hinun and his whole bloody palace if need be!

Songan reached out and squeezed his Mate's shoulder. "Thanks, Varn. I think this just might be it!"

"Right," Varn said with a very wide and very forced grin. "Not that *Fleet Return* is in any shape to be going anywhere. I still haven't found what punched us out of subspace. Damned commercial cassettes! The apes who put them together lack style. They program with brute force, using ten lines of program when one is sufficient. Working through the source code is like piecing together a tridee puzzle."

"You'll handle it," Songan said with a grin. "You're an Outie, aren't you?"

Varn groaned in mock agony, then laughed.

"Why don't you get back planetside and let me work? Mu Tan and I can take care of everything here," he said, waving his friend away.

"That's exactly what I intend to do as soon as I gather a few edutapes and some of the recent news transmissions,

Varn. Hinun's a hungry man. He's got a thousand years of history to catch up with!" Songan was moving to the door. *Android! Dammit, Songan, Hinun is an android, not a man!* Varn wanted to say it, but continued to keep his thoughts to himself.

Songan paused. "Varn . . . are you certain you don't mind me taking Hinote onplanet?"

"Hinote is trying its best, but it just doesn't know enough about SIPACUM's interior yet to be any real help. To be honest, it gets in the way most of the time." Varn accompanied his words with another wave to hasten Songan on his way.

"Good! I can't wait to see Hinun's face when he first gets a glimpse of a Jarp." Songan was chuckling as he left the con room.

"I have never seen our captain so elated," Mu Tan's

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voice came softly from behind Varn. "He is fortunate that his Hinun is willing to help him."

"*Extremely* fortunate," Yuw answered, not bothering to conceal his sarcasm. "Few men are so *willing* to aid strangers."

He reseated himself at SIPACUM and again punched up the source code. The lines of labels and mnemonics scrolled onto the monitor before him. He stared at them without really focusing on their symbolic meanings. *Hee-nun . . . Caretaker Hee-nun. . .*

"Varnalgeran! Our orbit is decaying again!"

"Use the same coordinates as last time to correct trajec-tory," he bade her, without looking up from the alphanu-meric jumble covering the display.

Three trajectory corrections in twenty-four hours stan-dard! Even the fobbin' planet is a bungle. It keeps trying to suck us into its atmosphere.

Songan's silly grin wouldn't betake itself from Varn's mind. His friend was grabbing for nirvana when what *Fleet Return* and its crew needed was a captain whose feet were set firmly on deck.

Lord, lord-/ need to talk to Val and get the scrute on this Hee-nun! I need someone whose brain isn't scrambled by love!

The shimmering folds of pale green silk, sleek and luxurious, caressed the golden warmth of an amazon god-dess stretched all languorously on the imperially spacious bed. Coyly, one rounded hip shifted. Knee slightly bent, toes pointed to tauten her shapely calf and supple thigh, Valustriana See drew a bemazingly long leg atop its twin . . . just enough for a partial shielding of the plump mound of her sex. That languor, the feline sensuality of her movement, was calculated to fix the attention of pale eyes on the treasure she so titillatingly almost-concealed.

It worked, too. Aqua fire ignited in those eyes that greedily devoured her nakedness.

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Slender fingers crept, with the same calculated laziness, to the golden perfection of her breasts. A tear-shaped, milky white opal (afire with flecks of iridescent reds, greens and blues) hung there, adangle on a thin silver chain. It was lost in the deep valley separating those opulent domes of smooth flesh.

The deep olive of her eyes sleepily shifted to the man who stood across the room. Her gaze took in every sem of the muscular, masculine physique that was Hinun's naked android body. Silently she agreed: she was unable to distinguish his artificially created form from that of a "real" human. Choice! The rigid thrust of his slicer, the way it bobbed assertively with each step, appeared quite human. Exceptionally human.

So does that nice little male, male butt, she mused.

The pink tip of her tongue slithered enticingly over lavendered lips. A shivery tingle quivered deliciously through her long, long body. She tried to be unobtrusive about her fingertips, which were bringing her nipples to attention.

Easy, she warned herself. Mustn't appear too eager. After all, he is supposed to be seducing you, li'l Val! Mustn't let him get the idea you're just another shameless hust.

"Beautiful, my lovely Valustriana," Hinun said in a voice deep and resonant. "So smooth."

The Caretaker of Shen left no doubt as to what portion of her anatomy he spoke of. Gently his open palm cupped the full hairless mound of her pubis, and squeezed.

"Ummmm." The throaty hum of pleasure pushed un-expectedly from her at his intimate touch.

"So very, very lovely," Hinun said with a pleased smile. The smile of an experienced man who knew he was pleasing a woman.

His massaging palm opened and gently he spread her thighs. He leaned forward so that his lips brushed the furrowed mound his fingers had caressed so lovingly. The

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touch-the merest titillating touch-elicited another moany whimper from the woman, as did the flicker of his tongue against her sensitive lower lips. Seemingly of their own volition, her long thighs spread wider in invitation-one which his loving mouth accepted.

This morning, when she had accepted Hinun's offer to show her the beauties of his palace and city, she had not envisioned the tour's including his bedchamber. Her pur-pose for remaining onplanet was the reconnoitering of his domain. His immediate willingness to aid Songan had left her questioning the Caretaker's motivation.

She had more than a few doubts about the story he had told last night. A thousand-year-old android! Enough to frag the mind! Could it be true?

Perhaps it had been that wonderfully sensual bath her *attendants* had given her this morning that had so finely attuned her receptive attitude. The bath had been wonder-ful! Not a sonic shower, but actual water! Hot, steaming, stretch-out-and-soak-in-it water! The scented oils her at-tendants had poured into that luxurious bath still clung to her skin like the fragrance of spring blossoms.

"Ahhmmm," she groaned, head lolling from side to side as his fingers gently joined his lips and tongue.

She trembled, letting this sweet attentive man lead her body gently upward. Her pelvis undulated to the rhythm he orchestrated.

Glory! I had almost forgotten how good a man is!

She admitted that it had not been her morning bath that had brought her inner yearnings to the surface. The fact was that she was a healthy big woman with sexual desires that were equally healthy, and large.

To put it simply, Valustriana m'gal-you're horny!

As well she should be. Since meeting Varn and Songan on Thebanis, she had been without a man. That was a long time to abstain from the pleasures of the flesh.

And damn' hard, too, she thought dizzily while her

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body's passion rose toward release under his guidance. What a lover he was! So attentive to a *woman's* needs!

Had she felt she had a choice, things would have been different on the spaceship. The captain's bed would have been a nice place to spend those long and boring "nights" on the Tachyon Trail. Or Varnalgeran Yuw's bed. Theba and the universe knew that man was willing. So was she-had it been her choice.

Musla's hells-by the time we broke out of subspace I'd gladly have trysted with Hinote-or Mu Tan! Or both!

The choice had not been hers. She had been given a job and a charade to play, and she had acted her part. Well!

She drew her knees upward and reached between them to cradle her lover's head, to press his mouth to her intimate lips while the tremors of climax quaked through her long-denied body. When she flashed thus, it was with total abandonment and joy. She cried out with it as the desires she had locked away exploded in a burning nova of pleasure.

Then his warm palms were stroking her, soothing her, easing her onto her stomach. She didn't question. Happily she obeyed the unspoken commands of the gentle hands that molded her.

She did no more than moan when he lift-coaxed her to her knees so that he must be smiling at her high-held cheeks, and below and between them.

He did not stare long. He entered her that way, from behind, in one driving thrust. Since she was well prepared, she wiggled back in more than acceptance of the new pleasures he began, caring little how he entered her-just so he did!

Then he withdrew! Her moan came not from pleasure but from the disappointing vacancy that suffused her over-heated body.

He had not gone. He returned to her, though not as she expected or wanted.

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Having been so gentle he *took*, now, and cruelly, driv-ing into that tight dark crevice between the upturned moons of her backside.

The silk of the sheets gathered in thick rumped knots beneath her clawing hands. She pressed her face into the bed to muffle her whimpers while the Caretaker of Shen sent fiery pain careening through her with each punishing thrust of his hips.

When at last he had taken his brutal pleasures, Hinun pushed her aside. She slumped loosely in the new pain of withdrawal. Her cheeks clamped tight. He rose and left her quivering, alone atop his bed. Used.

The three attendants found the new one as their master had abandoned her after he had used and cast aside her body. There were no tears in the eyes of this woman who had come from the stars. They burned with the fire of hate.

Without the utterance of a single sound, her whimpers held back by biting her lower lip, Valustriana See raised her long form from Hinun's bed. She accepted the shim-mering robe the women held open for her. Enveloped herself in fine yellow silk.

She managed the same stoic silence while they guided her down the marble halls of the palace and into the solitude of her room. The damned wonderful robe was even long enough.

She even denied herself a sigh when she stepped into the pool-like sunken bath. Slowly, teeth in lip, she immersed her throbbing body in the steamy water that had been prepared for her. She lay back to let the heat work its relaxing magic while her mind tried to piece together all that had happened and why.

Then for the first time, she noticed the strangely pale attendant who poured scented oils from a glass vial into the water. Val pushed up on her elbows. Before she could speak, the young woman turned and left the room.

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"She is beautiful, is she not?" This from the dark-haired lovely who knelt to offer Val a sponge.

There was no denying the departed woman's beauty. It would have been startling even without the pale cast of her skin or the yellow-gold of her silken hair.

"Hinun has assigned her to attend you," the servant with the sponge said. "It is a great honor for it is whispered that she is favored by the Great One. Her name is Kaleena."

One honor from Hinun this day is enough! Val's thought was bitter.

"Kaleena," she said, letting the name softly roll from her tongue.

It was not the young woman's pigmentation, or the un-usual color of her hair that had drawn Val's attention. It had

been her eyes. Incredibly a deep aquamarine in hue, Kaleena's eyes burned with the same hate that consumed Valustriana See.

"Tonight I will gather the memories of your Yoluta," Hinun explained as he led Songan into a laboratory situated in the east wing of the palace. "Tomorrow I'll program a memory set for the woman that I have already begun to create from the tissue samples you brought this afternoon."

Songan nodded, his gaze moving about the lab. It was as though he had stepped into a scene from an edutape depicting some ancient hospital. The majority of the equipment that lined the walls was unknown to him. Only the small computer snugly fitted into a far corner looked vaguely familiar. That because of its keyboard.

"This whole wing was the original research center," Hinun said, walking to a table at the center of the room. "At one time the palace housed every man, woman and child on Shen. But as the population grew, Esharista came into being. And then Mienna, our sister city."

Hinun motioned for Songan to lie atop the table.

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When the Harbian complied, Hinun reached beneath the table to free four electrodes. Two of these he placed at Songan's temples, one on the forehead, and the last atop his head.

"Just relax. Sleep if you wish," Hinun said with a reassuring pat to one huge shoulder of his guest. "The process is painless and takes no more than a half-hour. The computer does everything, including sorting the memories related to Yoluta. Ready?"

Songan nodded and Hinun walked across the lab to the computer. His fingers hesitated above the keyboard.

// would be so simple to feast upon this man's unsuspecting mind. One control character and Captain Songan would be no more . . . except inside my brain!

Hinun did not enter that control character. This time. He merely began his promised collection of memories. In time Songan would be his, as would the beautiful and the incredibly-reared amazon who traveled with him. Not to mention that wonderful orange-skinned alien Songan had brought down from his orbiting spacer!

A Jarp!

Even the name pleased Hinun.

And hermaphroditic! Why hadn't I considered that before? I will definitely take a tissue sample from the one called Hinote after I have dined on its mind. Perhaps I shall wear a Jarp's body in my next life!

He smiled as he studied Songan atop the lab table. Patience, patience, patience; it had never been one of his virtues, but he had played his part well.

Except for this afternoon with Valustriana See. For one regretful moment he had forgotten the delicate balance that had to be maintained. It had been a mistake, but not a fatal one. This evening while they dined, she displayed no indication that she had been offended by his rough use of her body.

Who knows? Perhaps she is one of those delicious individuals who thrive on such . . . misuse.

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He would have to wait to discover her secret. There would be no more sessions in his bedchamber until his subtle trap closed around these travelers from the stars. And their ship.

And then they all shall be mine!

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Sixty-five kloms to the east of Esharista, the nighted streets of Mienna were bright with flame. While Songan's memories flowed into the data banks of Hinun's computer, the rebel Tzentis led a thousand of his followers against the might of Hinuri guard within Shen's only other city.

The battle raged long and bloody. Men and women armed with knives, pitchforks, and axes valiantly faced the shortswords and spears of the two thousand armored Hinuri. The defiance of their warcries and the din of their clashing weapons could be heard for kloms around the city.

For two hours the streets of Mienna were transformed into a battleground. Now Mienna's gutters ran scarlet. Now five hundred bodies of the rebels were strewn in those streets, the ghastly light of burning buildings illuminating their death-quieted faces. Three hundred Hinuri had also fallen, a testimony to the determination of those who rose in rebellion against the tyrant who ruled their lives.

In the cloaking darkness of an alley off one of those blood-slicked streets, a lone woman dragged the body of Tzentis toward an opened cellar door. His blood marked her hands, smirched one bare thigh. Although a man paced on each side of the woman with tear-streaked cheeks, neither aided her with the rebel leader. Their eyes shifted in the blackness with each random sound that worked its way into the alley.

"Hinun's damnation, Suleta!" This from one who car-

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ried a spear taken from a fallen Hinuri. "Leave him! We must flee before the guards come!"

"I *won't* leave him. They will lay his body in the streets and let it rot!" she hissed vehemently through clenched teeth. "This is *Tzentis*, Ulath! He was our leader! We can't let them know he's dead. Think of the people. Their spirit

would die if word spread of his death! Everything Tzentis worked for would be lost! I won't let that happen! Do you understand?"

"Then hurry, Suleta! Ulath is right-the guards will be searching here soon," the other man urged.

Suleta cursed them both and dragged the limp body of their leader, her dead lover, into the cellar.

She left him there without prayer or further tears. It was no fitting funeral for such a man, but she had no other choice. The flames that consumed the building would be his pyre. His death would remain a secret known only to her and the oafs who ran with her from the alley toward the edge of the city.

Once within the forest she would regroup those who had followed Tzentis and she would find a new leader from their number. If the men lacked the courage to stand in Tzentis's stead, then Hinun be damned, she would!

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Grateful for the keemo-styled robe of Saipese Red his host had provided him, Songan accompanied Hinun along the arched breezeway. One of several leading out from the palace main, its walls and ceiling were of a pale cream yellow. Their feet rapped on a gleaming floor of white tiles flecked with pink. Songan was trying to control his excitement, the singing of his very soul. He could not. Nor was there reason for him to do.

His eyes stared fixedly at the arched, decorated door only a few meters ahead. Beyond that portal-*my Yoluta!*

"I chose this cottage because it is secluded from the rest of the palace," Hinun said with an understanding smile for his guest. "It is intimately small, with a walled garden behind it. And that garden is abloom with all the flowers Shen has to offer."

Hinun chuckled. "Perhaps I'm a trifle sentimental, even romantic, but this does seem a suitable rendezvous for the reunion of lovers."

"A stall in the stables would have served, my friend," Songan said. His robe hissed and flapped about his long legs. "It is not the place that matters, but Yoluta."

"Oh, to be certain." Hinun hoisted an arm to rest a hand on the other man's shoulder. "But I wished for everything to be as perfect as possible for you. After all, Songan, I owe you my life. It is a debt that I shall never be able to repay."

Songan shook his head emphatically just as they stopped 136

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before the beige-trimmed door of blues: slate and turquoise. He turned a look of intense seriousness on the man he knew as a generous host.

"No, Hinun," Songan said quietly. "It's you who have given me my life. A part of me died with Yoluta. I am alive again now-whole!" And he reached for the door's shining brass handle.

Hinun's hand stayed the larger, darker one. "A moment, Songan. Before you join her-rejoin Yoluta, I must remind you that the Yoluta who awaits within is the woman I reconstructed from your memories. She is not the same woman who was taken from you. There will be differences. Remember that her "memories" are but a program, based on all that Yoluta was to you, my friend." Hinun gazed into the dark eyes searching his face. "In many ways, the woman behind that door is only a child. She will need tenderness and understanding, Captain. Life . . . the life that you and I take for granted, she has yet to experience."

"I am prepared for that." Songan's eyes shifted back to stare at the door of the cottage, just as his thoughts were only of the woman who waited on its other side.

With a squeeze of the massive shoulder, Hinun smiled. "Then join your Yoluta, my friend."

The Caretaker of Shen, whom Songan had not heard called by any other name except Hinun, retained his smile while he watched his visitor from the stars enter the softly-lit room and close the door behind him.

Prepared, are you? How utterly confident, friend Songan! And how foolish! What man is ever truly prepared to greet his own mind?

The chuckle that rose from Hinun's throat was not pretty. He turned from that charming door and raised an arm draped in refulgent folds of purple and gold. His face bland, he gestured down the length of the breezeway.

A score of Hinuri appeared in response to their god's summons. Armed with sword, spear and shield, each has-

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tened to the cottage. They moved with the quiet precision of the cyberunits they resembled, surrounding the small structure and the wall garden adjoining.

You have your Yoluta, friend Songan, mused the De-vourer of Souls. And now I have you.

Hinun's smile widened to a pleased grin while he positively strode back to the palace, robe flapping in a purple spray. Everything proceeded as planned; as he had planned. Three of the Galactics were already his, although not one knew it. *That leaves the two who circle above . . . and their ship!*

His strides lengthened even more as his pulse raced. During the three days he had entertained Songan and the two members of his crew, the Great God had subtly, most carefully tested the strength of the ship orbiting his world. And now the time for mere resting was over.

Now I shall claim my prize!

"Dines . . . on their . . . souls?" Valustriana See's voice faltered in disbelief. *"Howl!"*

It was not that she doubted this strangely fair-skinned Shenit's sincerity or the sheer terror that tautened her lovely face. It was just that what Kaleena said seemed fanciful; totally impossible.

"He devours minds," Kaleena repeated intensely, her eyes bright and staring. "People enter that throne room and when the Hinuri bring them out, they-they are no more. The bodies are the same, but they are no longer within those bodies," she whispered hoarsely. "He-he takes their minds and leaves them . . . leaves them with nothing. *Nothing!*"

Nervously Val worked a hand through the midnight strands of her hair. It appeared that Hinun had neglected to mention one small detail in his recounting of his ever-enduring life. His human creators had laid on him the mandate: gather knowledge. They had forgotten, apparently, to specify how that information was to be obtained.

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Or Hinun has gone worse than fraggy!

That seemed highly probable. In spite of the android's expanded memory capacity, could that artificially grown brain contain the knowledge and experiences of a millen-nium?-could it handle such a teeming plethora of information, so much of which had to be trivial?

Val's head moved from side to side in silent denial. A planetwide computer network might, just might have that capability. Not so one single brain, android or not. Never.

He overloaded and fragged, she mused. Then it was too late. He could not recognize his own mental imbalance. It was easier to view himself as a god-the real creator of Shenf And then to believe it!

Gooseflesh shivered up her spine as she tried to imagine the stuffed, jumbled maze of Hinun's mind. He was no longer capable of the judgments he had been created to make. Hinun simply gathered . . . and went on gathering. It would be pitiful, were it not so ghastly. Memories cluttered his brain like the detritus that once crammed "files" before the advent of computers.

Suddenly the eyes of that tall, tall woman were blazing at those of her smaller attendant. "Hinun drained the minds of the others who came from the stars?"

Kaleena nodded. Her eyes rolled, as if she feared being overheard. "The three who survived the crash of their sky-craft, yes. He kept them within the palace for months, playing with them. Then he-he ate their souls-just as he dined on the souls of my mother and father!"

Ah, Valustriana mused silently. Here then was the key to the hate that simmered all naked in Kaleena's chill blue eyes. The desire for revenge had directed the blond's every move since Hinun had taken an innocent girl from her parents' home and brought her to the palace to be forced into his stable of priestesses. Husts, who lived only to serve their god's lusts.

Willing or unwilling makes no difference, Val saw. They

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dare not refuse or even show reluctance to him they think of as a god-and a monster!

And she's dared my confidence not with any wish of saving me from the monster's throneroom! Oh no. She hopes that we strangers from the stars with our flying machines and weapons that spit blue fire might rid Shen of its "god"-its unholy god!

"And you know where the other spacer crashed, Kaleena?"

"I told you it crashed in the forest near our farm," the blond said, nodding again in affirmation. "When Hinun and his soldiers came in search of it, the Great One also found me and my parents."

"If we could return there, to your farm-could you take me to the wreckage?" This most unwilling whore to Hinun, Val realized, might be the only lead that the monster had not neatly eliminated within the privacy of his throneroom.

"We could be there by the setting of the sun-if we had horses. On foot it's a two-day trek."

Val's eyes rose to stare across the garden to the long, flat-roofed building at the south edge of the palace grounds. There the broad heads of those antique mammals from Homeworld poked above their stalls. Twenty of them. Those animals looked big. She sighed. And difficult to manage, she felt, especially for one accustomed to pushing buttons and flicking toggles.

The boat would get us there in minutes.

But she had to disregard that seed of an idea before it bloomed. Those waiting up on *Lanatia Lady* would know the moment she lifted the in-grav boat off the ground. Until she was certain, she wasn't prepared to show every card in her hand. No, not even to her crewmates.

"There are saddles and bridles there too," Kaleena said, her own gaze following Val's. "I could have them on two horses within a few minutes . . ."

Valustriana wasn't sure what in the name of Theba's Death or Musla's Sixth Hell a "saddle" or a "bridle"

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was, but she was willing to trust Kaleena enough to find out. She had to.

"Shall we be strolling down to the stable, my dear?" she said, and rose.

Kaleena scrambled up and the two women began am-bling casually toward the horses and the three Hinuri who stood on guard.

Songan found her in the garden, a blossom among blossoms.

She stood beside a tree all abloom with a snowy flurry of delicate flowers he could not name. Like a man struck dumb, he stood within the cottage's rear door, and stared.

Yoluta!

His heart and mind chorused that one word of joy. It was she. This was Yoluta-his Yoluta! She lived! O Booda, she

lived!

Tears welled in his eyes to flow without shame down the brown-subcutaneous cheeks. How he had hoped for this moment! How he had struggled to deny himself that hope in fear that it could never be fulfilled. But now . . . now . . .

"Songan!" Her cry was a musical exclamation and her radiant face beamed at sight of her silent admirer. "Songan, I thought you'd never come! Hinun said you would be here within minutes and that seems *hours* ago!"

She rushed to him in a skipping run that sent her long walnut hair astream. Her sheer robe of pastel green clung to her, revealing sweet contours that Songan had thought would exist only in his memories. And then she was in his arms, straining up on tiptoe to her towering Harbian as he bent to gather her to him. Her mouth pressed warmly to his, softly open and yet far from soft in its kiss.

The electric hunger transmitted by her supple young body took him off guard. Her arms and hands did more than just hold him; they sought to devour his flesh and her tongue thrust deep.

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The firm balls of her breasts rolled against him in definite twin pressures and then were seemingly digging at his chest because both he and she were squeezing, straining so hard to each other. Her pelvis snapped strongly to his. It undulated in a demanding way. A groan escaped him and his hands slid down to her buttocks. His fingertips coasted over the smooth rounds for only a moment before he clamped.

"Uh," she gasped, and clung, trying to impale his throat with her tongue.

(An irritating niggling of something he had no desire to examine squirmed darkly at the back of his mind. It was overwhelmed by his body's swift awakening to the willing invitation so provocatively offered by Yoluta-*his* Yoluta! And "offered" was hardly the proper word; she was urging insistently.)

Without an instant's pause in the sweet play of their tongues, Songan lifted a reborn dream in his arms with the ease of picking up a kitten. He carried her into the cottage and to the bed waiting there for reunited lovers. By that time, snuggling in his arms, she was wickedly nibbling at his nipple in the way he loved.

The dyre-wolf lay on its stomach amid sweet soft grass with its chin resting on its outstretched paws. From beneath the leafy shelter of a bitterberry bush, its yellow-rimmed eyes watched the humans who gathered in the forest clearing. The dyre-wolf did not know why it had come here to the woods bordering the human den of Mienna rather than to Esharista in search of the man who had escaped his fangs, and that man's two rescuers. Such a judgment was beyond the beast's primitive brain.

Perhaps it had been the smell of blood on the wind.

Reminders of the recent carnage within Mienna still strewed its streets. Three of five hundred decaying bodies had mysteriously vanished during the previous night. The pack had traveled far, and the easily attainable feast had been irresistible.

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Beyond the dyre-wolf's black snout, mere seams from the thick leaves that concealed his crouching form, twenty men sat in a circle about a single woman. Her confusing scent stood out amid those of her companions. The dyre-wolf blinked and its nostrils twitched. Her scent triggered the hint of a half-memory that elusively flitted about in his brain.

"I want your answer!" the buskinned woman said, in a voice as commanding as her stance. "Two days have passed already since Tzentis was butchered by Hinun's murdering soldiers!"

The watching beast saw the heads of the men turn toward each other. He heard their mumblings. Yet the female commanded his attention, as she did theirs. They, however, were not puzzling over her familiar yet evasive scent.

(Neither tall nor short she was, and both youngish and quite shapely, as humans went. Laces held her shirt together at the top and laces ran down both outer legs of her tanned leggings of hide. Her eyes were strange; otherwise she was one more dark and dark-haired, lean human. The enemy.)

"We'll do it, Suleta," one of the men said, standing to face the woman whose black hair massed down her back. "We'll follow you, even should you lead us into the hell of Hinun's own inner keep."

The ears of the unknown observer went back when the woman called Suleta bared her teeth. Yet among them, the human enemy, that was a grinning smile of relief and delight. From beneath the bitterberry bush, the dyre-wolf watched and listened and strove to recall and connect the puzzling scent that so intrigued him.

"Is there anything wrong, my darling?" Yoluta's voice was a sleepy whisper. She'd gone all soft and languid, in satiation.

Songan's arms tightened about her while he nestled

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against her warmth from behind in spoon fashion. His arms crossed in front and eased upward to cup the perfection of her small breasts. He brushed teasing fingertips over the relaxed buds that crested them. Only minutes ago they had been taut and hard. He smiled. But so had he, where he was now soft and spent.

"Everything is perfect," he murmured, and nuzzled the softness of her neck and wriggled his nose against a strand of hair. "Everything is perfect."

"Mmmmm," she sighed, and wiggled snugly back into the curve of his big naked body. The rounds of her bottom were warm against the penis that had sent itself within her and was now a soft rope.

Her kitten-like purr faded down into the gentle rhythmic breathing of sleep. She was happy; reunited, loved, sated.

Happier than Songan, even while he pressed a light kiss to her bronze-hued neck and hugged her closer against him as if he expected her to vanish in the next instant.

Everything is perfect, Yoluta my darling.

So he thought, seeking to project the thought, to make it so while that dark squirming Something squirmed at the back of his mind.

It is perfect. He assured himself.

Yet the terribly frightening thought was there; that perhaps everything was *too* perfect. It remained to haunt his mind like the strains of a bad melody.

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Varnalgeran Yuw had spent a dull day in the control cabin. Scrolling the source code onto a monitor screen- one line at a time. The task was as much an exercise in mental evasion as it was a wholehearted attempt to dis-cover the elusive bug within the program.

Today, at this very moment, Songan and his android Yoluta were having their first meeting. Varnalgeran Yuw definitely did not want to contemplate that encounter. Although he hoped fervently and worked at positthink that the reunion would be a happy one, a barrage of doubts bombarded his mind.

They met, they loved, they planned. She was killed- murdered. Somehow regaining her had been an obsession with him. *Now she is back . . . or is she? Can she be, as an android created from his memories and filled with the personality of his memories?*

He shook that off and stared at the monitor. The trouble was that he didn't want to think about Valustriana See, either. Ever since she had left the ship she had seemed more distant than just down onplanet. A distance of the mind, at least a universe away. For two days, Hinote had been the contact. Thus Yuw had been denied even the pleasure of vocal contact with his fellow Outie.

You damned old fool! You're trying to make too much out of an Almost that never really happened. Val made no promises, boy. She doesn't owe you anything. What do you know about her anyway?

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Nothing, he answered himself, and the hint of a frown touched his brow.

She had saved his life, she could handle herself in a brawl and on a spacer, and she was beautiful. Also bigger than life; a lot of beautiful! And that was the sum of everything he knew about her, this amazon goddess who had set his heart afire like some schoolboy's, so that he was all astammer and ablush with his first love.

Hardly that, he reminded himself. Why, there was that- *Wait a min! What is it that's hiding inside these two nestled loops'?*

He input a command for SIPACUM to relist the code beginning with the start of the first programming loop. One line at a time, he followed the listing. Dull, dull . . . The first loop began, then the second . . . and here it was! There, buried neatly in the two loops was a single tetradecimal byte. One that had no business being there. Here.

"Son of a bitch!" he blurted, and bit his lower lip. "I've got it!"

"Varn?" Mu Tan's voice rose questioningly from where she sat at con. "What is it?"

"The root of our problems, Mu Tan! Unless I've gone fraggy from looking at this for three days straight! Damn, I don't know why I didn't see it before. It's a conditional branching statement." Elation added bright color to his voice.

"Wonderful-can I . . . do anything?"

Her tone was hardly confident. Positively doubtful, he thought. "Just keep your fingers crossed," he answered, with a wide and confident grin. "Might throw in your arms and legs for good measure."

If she had any. She was tiny and shapeless, in a baggy jumpsuit of medium brown that looked as if it had been a gift from an enemy and would fit him. Probably thought she was being a good crewmember, staying sexless while

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they were cooped up here at such frustrating and deadly serious work.

She's right too, he mused, starting to sweat, fingers jabbing at the terminal's keyboard in a command to list the lines the branch jumped to. The monitor blink-rippled and immediately accessed the required portion of the program. Methodically, Varn read each of the labels, mnemonics, and operands.

His stomach executed a sickening flip-flop and he grunted as if he'd been hit, low.

"Varnalgeran-what is it?" Mu Tan's voice held genu-ine concern at the abrupt pale cast to his bronze skin.

"Mu Tan, open intership comm and beam the boat! I want to talk with Songan. Immediately! If not sooner!" He was making no attempt to hide the edge of panic that purpled his voice.

It was all here and so damnably-damned clear! The earlier loops had been the key. Their purpose was to compare the spacer's programmed destination with its po-sition along a trajectory. Just that. The single conditional branch had been the insidious command that had ruined the pattern the same as a rip down the front of a shirt. When *Fleet Return's* subspace course corresponded to the coordinates necessary to punch the ship into Shen's solar system, the command had taken over. It had branched the program onto a nasty set of subroutines.

The first locked out manual control of the ship and SIPACUM until the tachyon transition was completed. Next, SIPACUM was programmed to give a two-minute warning-*and* to feed false data to its oncon displays. That data lied that *Fleet Return* was making a leap from the Tachyon Trail into some unknown level of subspace. And then came the

last of the added subroutines.

It was by far the most dangerous. It jam-crammed the spacer into "real" space, then self-destructed the LLBP board. That reverse Forty Percent City accounted for the

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ship's wild transition, the crew's unconsciousness, and Mu Tan's broken arm.

"I can't get through to the in-grav boat!" Mu Tan's voice called. "There's nothing but static!" Yuw looked up, brow furrowing. "Static!" "On all frequencies," she affirmed, and flicked open the grille so that he could hear the unrelenting crackle-hiss. "Varnalgeran-I think we're being jammed."

"Theba's black heart!" Varn felt the panic creep higher in his chest. "Keep at it! Give me a few seconds and I'll have this cassette clean and ready to be inslotted the moment we get the rest of the crew back onboard where they belong."

"How-how can we be jammed from a primitive planet?" "We can't, but this time we can. That Hinun has plenty of technology, if he can create androids in no time! The point is-why's he jamming our comm?"

Varn deleted the conditional branch command and the three subroutines from SIPACUM's memory. Jerking out the source-code cassette, he inslotted a blank one. The trouble with a computing and processing unit, he reflected, was that everyone depended on it and treated it as if it were an omniscient and immutable genius. It was not. It was dumb. Any computer was. It would believe anything it was told and do anything it was told, even lie. All someone had to do was work up a lying program.

Now he ordered the genius-dummy to reassemble the program and write the debugged object code to the new cassette. That required one command . . . after three days.

The copy of the source code, the original trajectory program *and* its backup cassette he safely tucked into the pocket on the side of his chair. He'd need them later to show Songan. Without hard evidence, the Harbian would never believe his ship had been sabotaged-and by some-one onboard!

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"V-Varnalgeran . . . I still can't break through." Mu Tan's voice wavered with the same panic Varn felt.

"Coming."

He shoved from SIPACUM and dropped into the Mas-ter's Chair beside the young Saipese, hoping that only her inexperience was keeping them from making contact. The static that popped and wheezed from the grille hadn't lessened. If anything, it was louder. Yuw's fingers moved swiftly, flipping a series of toggles. That accomplished exactly nothing toward diminishing the crackling hiss.

Howl But more importantly his mind divagated to the other problem: *Who! Who could have purposely tampered with the cassette?*

Somebody who had to know about Shen, and have reason to go down onto the "unrediscovered" planet!

He knew the answer, and knew that he had it. Neverthe-less he fought the silent admission. Neither he nor Songan had any reason for making such additions to the program. Songan seemed to be profiting by his visit on Shen-but he certainly hadn't known. *And if he had, there was no reason to get here this way*, Varn added mentally.

What reason could Mu Tan or Hinote have had? Beyond that, both lacked knowledge of NORMAL (Nuance Ori-ented Rational Memory-Analog Language: the standard-ized computer language along the spaceways). *And*, Songan liked it this way, confining computer use to the knowl-edgeable rather than adding one of the CAGSVIC models that "heard" and answered normal human voice-commands. Besides, SIPACUM's machine language had been required to alter the program.

That took care of the known quantities on *Fleet Return*. It also left only one suspect. The unknown. As far as Yuw was concerned, Valustriana See stood tried and convicted until proven innocent.

Which, he thought with mingled outrage and a sense of loss, *ain't going to happen. She did it. She has to have done it.*

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"Mu Tan; scan to see if you can pinpoint a source of this interference." He was trying the full range of frequen-cies again. And obtaining the same results. (*Val*, he thought miserably. *Why?*) He couldn't fit the horrible pieces of the puzzle into their correct niches. What could Valustriana See, spacefarer, want on this planet-and how had she known about it? *It isn't even catalogued as inhabited! Why would anyone want to come here?*

"Varnalgeran! SIPACUM has located source of the jam- ming!" Even in her excitement, Mu Tan's face was twisted in puzzlement as she turned cloudy eyes his way. "It's being beamed from Esharista!" "What?"

Varn's disbelief dissipated when he glanced up to SIPACUM's monitor display. There was no doubt about it. In a sprawling umbra of high resolution dots, the extent of the jamming waves was illustrated. It cperved half the planet. And it originated, just as Mu Tan had said, within Hinun's own city!

A tremor ran through *Fleet Return*, as if an earthquake had impossibly struck in space. Another quaking shock shuddered through the ship before the first had subsided. Materials far stronger than steel or plastic . . . groaned in stress. Alarms wailed. The console imitated that ancient superstition once called "Christmas Tree."

There was one explanation: "Tractor!" Varn snapped, and grasped the arms of his con-chair to keep from being flung to the deck. "Strap in fast!"

While Mu Ta fumbled with the harness attached to the Mate's chair, Varn tugged similar straps tightly about his bulging torso. That done, he depressed a line of green crystal keys. They glowed to bright emerald life. SIPACUM did the rest, transmitting the encoded command to *Fleet Return's* engines rather faster than it could have been spoken.

"The attractor-beam is being beamed from Esharista,"

Mu Tan said in a calm voice belied by the fear in her delicate face. "It's pulling us down at a hundred kloms a *gaarrgggh!*"

An invisible fist of three Gs slammed into her chest, driving words and breath from the diminutive woman. The fist became a palm that pressed her back into the chair with four Gs . . . five . . . six gravities of force!

"Daaamn!"

The word trickled from Varn's lips in a G-force-prolonged growl that extended the single syllable to several. At the same time the rear of the spacer's thrusting engines reverberated through the control cabin in a howling whine. Beneath Yarn's booted feet, the deck trembled as if *Fleet Return* had been grabbed by some unseen and manic giant who was shaking the ship with a determined viciousness.

But it's working! Varn told himself as he read the displays SIPACUM fed to the con. *It's . . .*

The G-pressure atop his chest abruptly lessened. So did the acceleration readout. His leaden arms inched from the chair's arms. The pain of such simple movement under high G was visibly etched into his face. The lessening of that strain now was equally visible as the terrible force slackened--because of the increasing tug of the tractor beam.

"Hold tight! I'm going to slip around and try ramming us straight down the throat of the beam!" he snapped, his throat no longer constricted by acceleration; *Fleet Return's* forward thrust had been completely overcome.

This time pink glo-buttons came to life under the determined punch of his fingers. Maneuvering rockets hissed portside of the spacer's snout. The ship swung gently down so that it pointed directly at the planet "below."

"Here we go!" he shouted, and stabbed at the con.

His call prepared Mu Tan for the fist, this time. It didn't help.

A frightening, horrible weight crushed her chest. Her lungs felt as if both had been compressed into wafer-thin

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membranes that refused to suck sustenance from the air. In the chair beside her, her Outreach companion struggled against the punishing gravitic force to keep his hands at the con.

Varn's insane scheme was to slam *Fleet Return* toward Shen's atmosphere, then abruptly snap the spacer about at ninety degrees. His hope was that the combined force of engines and tractor would sling the ship out of the beam into the security of deep space. It was time. Fingers with joints forced to move seven times their normal meaty burden stretched toward the row of green buttons.

Using both hands, he slammed down on the line.

Fleet Return jerked violently.

Metal and incredibly strong composite materials screamed under the stress of instantaneously revectoring energy. Varn could almost feel the deck buckling beneath him and the hull collapsing in on the con-cabin. He winced, squeezed up his face . . .

Neither occurred. The spacer's revamped structure held beneath the impossible strain . . . and shifted outward away from the planet!

For an instant. Then, for the first time, the tractor's enormous power nullified that of *Fleet Return's* screaming engines. The ship hung dead in space for a heartbeat . . . then slipped back on a downward fall.

Teeth gritted, a defeated Varnalgeran Yuw ran his guiding touch across the console, killing the buttons of green-glowing crystal. The spaceship's engines died a moment later with a last shudder of defeat.

The spacer's First Mate sank helplessly back to watch the displays flash the unavoidable message of failure, his first time in the captain's chair.

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Valustriana See's gaze traced the wide trench of toppled trees and gouged earth for two hundred meters to where it abruptly ended in a gnarled heap of twisted metal.

"Flain!" she muttered as she gently nudged heels to her mount's flanks to begin the last leg of her search. "How did anyone survive that!"

Kaleena, who rode at her side, shook her head. She had seen the ship come screaming out of the heavens all aglow as though it were some gigantic fireball. Its impact had sent her trembling to her knees, praying to a god that never heard. Her amazement had not been that two men and a woman survived the crash, but that humans actually rode in such vessels!

"When we found them, they were sitting by that tree." Kaleena pointed to a lofty giant to the right of the wreck. "They said they thought they could repair the ship, if they could find the right materials."

"Not much chance of that on Shen," Val said with a doubtful purse of her lips.

But if the survivors thought they could get it offplanet again, there might be some hope!

The wreck looked worse from a distance, Val admitted as the two horses approached the downed spacer. There was something unnatural about seeing a ship designed to slice across the yawning light-years of space belly down in the soil like a metallic monster that could never rise again.

Dents and creases showed ugly along the hull, but Val

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saw only one ragged rip torn in its seamless hull. That, with enough patches, could be repaired.

Barely discernible near its tapered nose remained the gray ash-like ghost of the ship's identification. Once the stencilled numbers and letters had proudly proclaimed in glossy black that the vessel was QRX-2497-ZA, Trans-Galactic Watch scout ship. A small craft even by galaxy center standards, but large enough to carry a crew of five.

Three men and two women-and all now dead!

Val reined her horse to a halt beside the belly-landed spacer and swung from the saddle. She reached out to touch the hull. It was as deadly cold as the five who had once ridden within.

"Are you going in?" Kaleena asked in a tone that urged Val to hasten.

"Right," Val said and handed the Shenese her reins.

On the opposite side of the spacer, she found an open hatch and entered. Her strides swung without hesitation, with the certainty of one who had trod the tunnels of such a vessel more than once in her life.

"It's smaller than I expected."

Val turned on the balls of her feet, hand on the plasma pistol strapped to her waist. Kaleena's blue eyes widened to twice the roundness of a Jarp's. Her lips formed a startled circle of surprised fear.

"Sorry," Val said, her hand dropping from the pistol's butt. "I didn't realize you had followed me."

"I didn't get to see inside the ship before," Kaleena said with the release of an uneasy breath. "It's so small and . . . ugly inside!"

Val turned from the blond Shenit and continued down the tunnel with a smile of amusement on her lips.

This hust who measures distance by how far she can walk in a day is criticizing a ship that has traveled among the stars! The sooner I get the hell off this time-forgotten rock the better!

Taking the leftward branch of a "Y" junction, she

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found the door to the con-cabin. The hatch was tightly sealed. *Think positive.* She reached out and thumbed the lock.

The hatch opened with a hiss. Her smile flashed; this meant there was still power in this grounded star-bird! Still wearing that smile, stepped into the control cabin.

The cabin was in better condition than she had imagined. Only a chair, torn from its swivel base, hinted that spacer QRX-2497-ZA had slammed into the surface of this mis-placed imperial colony.

If there's enough power left, I just might be in luck!

The possibility lifted a weight from her chest (which was only partially covered by the cloth-of-gold bandeau provided by her anally rapacious "host"). *Another ship could be here in a day-two at the most!* Then she could hand Shen over to someone else. Administration of lost colonies wasn't part of her job description.

Whatever in all the hells my jobdescrip is, she thought without humor as she slid into a chair at the con. She twitched at its cold touch on buttocks left mostly bare by the Shensilk briefs, also a "present" from that charmer Hinun.

Her bare knees found the intership comm and opened it. Static blared from the grille sufficient to make her wince. At least the comm-system hadn't gone down since the ship's last distress call! Her luck remained with her.

So did the static. She worked her way through the various restricted frequencies. The same hiss and crackle filled the open frequencies of the spaceways.

"Plain!" Val slammed a fist into the arm of the chair. "It's *Hinun*. It has to be! The swine has jamming equip-ment tucked away in his palace! *It has to be that! It has to be!*"

So what now, lady? You're an Outie! Come up with something! Use that superior intellect!

All Valustriana See could do was glare at the grille. Mockingly, it emitted its never-ceasing hiss.

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The telepresences on *Fleet Return* opened to reveal a cottony mist shrouding the earthbound spacer. Droplets of moisture speckled the one-hundred-eighty-degree lens that had never been designed to function in the dense atmosphere of a planet.

"We appear to be in one piece," Varnalgeran Yuw growled in frustration. "SIPACUM confirms our functional status."

"Tractor force decreasing!" Mu Tan called out, and flipped a toggle.

A rain-distorted telepresence image blipped to be re-placed by a computer-generated line graph. Dot by phosphor dot, the linear representation revealed a minute decrease in the invisible force holding the ship.

"Tractor decrease is directly proportional to the decrease in our altitude," Mu Tan reported, and opened a window at the bottom of Varn's monitor. It provided a readout of SIPACUM's calculations every second.

Varn watched the flurry of figures for several moments. The glove of clutching energy surrounding *Fleet Return* was gradually-too bloody gradually-slipping away. Who-ever operated the beam was cautiously bringing the spacer toward the ground, toward Hinun's city of Esharista. Varn gave profane voice to his helplessness.

Booda's sacred tears! What we need is one good neutron rocket to shove down the throat of the tractor! That would give the scum something to worry about!

Fleet Return's Defense Systemry did not include any such device. Even if it had, the Outie's hands would have been tied. While he could not care less for the fate of Esharista and its inhabitants, Songan, Hinote, and the program-sabotaging bitch Valustriana See were within the city.

Prisoners of that recycled-DNA walking imitation of a man, for all I know!

Varn's gaze shifted to the dot-after-dot plotting SIPACUM

so graphically drew on the monitor. The tractor's force crept downward with each meter the spacer descended.

"Whatever that tank-born bastard wants with *Fleet Re-turn*, he does not intend to flatten us against the ground," Yuw muttered. "Touchdown will be as tender as a caress from a thousand-stells-a-night hust!"

He looked at Mu Tan, who was methodically monitor-ing the displays. Despite her inexperience, she displayed no outward sign of stress.

With a shake of his head, Yuw turned back to the con. Songan and he had misjudged this little woman! That delicate exterior was deceptive. Mu Tan was strung with stress-resistant plasteel. She had more than the potential of a good spacefarer; she *was* a good spacefarer.

"It's almost like they don't want to crash *Fleet Re-turn*," she said without turning from the con.

The nebulous *they* brought a mirthless chuckle to Varn's throat. *They* was a thousand-year-old android . . . possibly assisted by a long-legged, back-stabbing amazon. *From Outreach! Lord lord-even from Outreach! What a flalnin' disgrace!*

"Hinun's bringing us down like a mother placing an infant in a floater-crib. The bastard wants to keep this ship in one . . ." Varn's sentences trailed off.

Oh, sweet mother! That's it! He wants Fleet Return/ He wants the ship!

"Mu Tan! Full fields!" He ordered the spacer's defen-sive shields actuated. "I don't know what kind of monitor-ing system that motherless bastard's got tucked away in his precious walled city . . . but if he's scanning us, we're going to give him something to think about!"

His fingers depressed the con keys with cool determina-tion. *Fleet Return's* DS came alive, with its total firepower focused on the tractor's origin point.

"We can't risk a shot-even a little ultrasonic. But the grat-copulating bug doesn't know that," Varn explained while he powered the laser-sights used for homing the

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blast of the spacer's weaponry. "If Hinun's scanning us, we're going to make him think we're about to blow him and his wonderful walled city straight to Theba's cesspool!"

A wicked grin spread over the Outie's face. His fingers crept back to dimmed green buttons on the con.

"If that isn't enough, we're going to cram this bucket right down the sisterslicer's gullet!"

His fingers stabbed downward. The crystal glo-buttons flared a bright green.

In immediate response, *Fleet Return's* engines growled in an explosive burst of thunder.

The chest-crushing fist of G-force slammed the two into their chairs as the trapped spacer nose-dived toward the city and the madman who sought to imprison it.

"Traacctor ffoorrece ddiimmiinniishhiinnngg aatt aann iinnccrreeaassiinnngg . . ." Mu Tan's words were stretched by the squeezing pressure that sought to smash her rib cage against her spine.

Varn was ahead of her. His fingers encoded the next command into SIPACUM with what seemed the speed of an Outreacher water slug. In a maneuver that imitated the one he had tried in space, the ship's engines howled and rocketed the spacer at a vectored ninety degrees.

Such an angle was impossible for human or machine to survive had it been achieved. It was not achieved. The tractor's opposing force provided enough resistance to re-duce the angle to ten degrees. That was enough!

Fleet Return, engines screaming on full thrust, broke free of the energy beam that dragged it down toward the planet's surface. On a northeasterly heading, the unleashed ship hurled itself away from Esharista.

For five lung-deflating seconds Yuw allowed the en-gines to continue their unrestrained burn before he cut back the thrusters. The clenching fist about his fingers relaxed.

"Scans indicate the tractor's completely dissipated," Mu Tan managed to gasp between gulps of air.

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Varn had forgotten the tractor. His attention was riveted to the forest that filled the telepresence screens. *Fleet Return* had swung from its head-on rush toward Esharista. Now it plummeted for the dark green of Shen's endlessly stretching forest.

Had the spacer been the in-grav boat, he would simply have brought the craft's nose up and set it soaring back to the freedom of space. *Fleet Return* was not an atmospheric craft. Its blunt snout crept upward sem after heavy sem under the steady blast of maneuvering rockets. Like a man trying to scale a mountain on a 9-G planet.

Varn had leveled the craft when it hit the first of the treetops. From there to the ground was a drop of fifteen meters and a klom of limb-breaking, trunk-snapping hori-zontal plunge through the forest before *Fleet Return* came to a groaning rest.

Inside, neither Varn nor Mu Tan spoke. They merely stared at each other, disbelieving that they had survived the torturous planetfall.

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Hinun the Great God of Shen was livid. That darkness of face deepened with each sweep of the antiquated scan.

Nothing!

The ship was gone!

The two Galactics onboard the vessel had taken him by surprise with their final maneuver. Had he left on the tractor (which had once been used to snare drone supply ships from orbit and gently bring them to Shen's surface), the obvious maniacs would have brought the spacer down- head-on into the palace.

Now there was no hint of the ship on the scan screen. Not even an echoing ghost blip!

It's landed, dammit! Down in the forest near Mienna!

Which meant he had to find it before the damned rebel Tzentis and his bloody followers did.

Hinun buttoned off the scan and pushed a hand through his hair. He had no doubt that Tzentis was one of the other two entities who walked Shen with memories identical to his own.

If the ship and its occupants fall into his hands, my mental brother will hold the key to the jeweled throne . . .

For the first time in a thousand years of his monotonous existence, Hinun knew fright. Not of death, but of losing. He did not relish the thought or the sensation.

To complicate matters, Valustriana See had proven as treacherous as she was beautiful. She and the pale-skinned slut who so deliciously served him on her knees had stolen

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two horses from his stable and escaped from the palace. A double insult flaunted in the face of his authority!

He had underestimated the long-legged bitch from the planet Outreach. Three Hinuri lay dead, throats slit with their own swords. They were adequate testimony to Valustriana's unquestionable ability to fend for herself.

The dead guards were no consideration to the Devourer of Souls. His tanks could replace them a hundredfold in a matter of days. Valustriana was the nagging thorn that jabbed at his side. The woman was a random factor injected into the game he played. Random factors had no place in the design of Shen.

Ah, Valustriana, you will regret the stupidity of your actions before you are finally brought to the jeweled throne. As will be the golden-haired Kaleena! Both will service my lusty legions of Hinuri on your backs and your hands and knees for hours and days'. Then and only then shall I give you peace and union with Hinun!

"Gan!" Hinun turned from the monitoring equipment.

Four Hinuri by the door stepped forward and each dropped to one knee before the angered god.

"You," Hinun called in a voice ugly with rage, "take twenty mounted guards south. Bring me the two sluts- alive! And you, lead a guard of fifty fully armed men toward Mienna. Find the spaceship and capture its two occupants. Ten Hinuri should be sufficient to return the two Galactics to the palace. The remaining forty are to protect the vessel until Hinun comes to claim it!"

Without question two of the Hinuri rose and hastened away to comply with the desires of their enraged deity. Hinun stared at the remaining two as though pondering a task for them.

He did not. The frustrations of this day were madden-ing. The Great God considered the diversions of the palace that might ease his tension and discarded them. The priestesses had nothing to offer but their bodies, and

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Hinun needed more than mere physical recreation. Hinun *hungered*.

He had denied himself the true pleasures of his guests since the in-grav boat had landed. Now he would feast! As he had been commanded by the Creators-as he had done for more than a thousand years-he would gather knowl-edge and store it in the consummately superior brain they had given him.

His rage quieted and a smile of anticipation trembled on his lips. For Hinun the gathering of knowledge and experi-ence was all. It was his existence.

"Gan," Hinun spoke to the guard nearest him, "bring the *Jarp* to the throne room."

Valustriana See and the escaped priestess of Hinun the Mind-Eater heard the thundering roar of rockets as they screamed overhead. It brought them running from the wreck of the TGW ship to search the overcast sky.

Neither Shenese nor Outie saw anything, although Val did not doubt that the rockets belonged to the spacer *Fleet Return* . . . the same ship she had called *Lanatia Lady* to maintain her disguise while onboard. However, she had no inkling of why the ship had entered Shen's atmosphere.

"It appears that things are happening in Esharista, Kaleena." Val glanced at the blond. "I've found every-thing I need here. It's time to get back. If there's anything to get back to! The spacer will have Esharista in ruins within seconds . . . and that bloody bastard Hinun with it!"

Kaleena looked at her companion and shook her head. She raised an arm and pointed to the north.

"Esharista lies that way, Valustriana," Kaleena said and moved her arm toward the east. "The thunder ship traveled in that direction-toward Mienna."

"What? To Mienna?"

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Blast! She's right! Why would Varn bring the ship down on Mienna? Songan and Hinote are in Esharista.

"Kaleena, get the horses! We're going to take a little trip to Mienna and see just what the vug's happening on this bassackwards planet!" Val waved the Shenese toward their mounts, standing tethered to a fat old tree with a bole the color of wet ash.

Val ran back into the spacer. Whatever was up, she wasn't going to face it with one plasma pistol when there were more weapons still onboard the wreck. While Kaleena knew nothing of Galactic weapons, she didn't have to, to operate a pistol or a stopper. All she had to do was point and squeeze.

Even if her aim isn't worth a jinkle, she can still do damage!

Inside the con-cabin, Val took two stoppers and a plasma gun from a locker. She discarded the latter. The telltale cell atop its power pack glowed yellow, indicating it held a half charge. A brightly lit green telltale shone atop the next plasma weapon.

Val strapped one of the stoppers to her left hip. Its second setting was modified to render a victim unconscious. She smiled. TGW was learning. For a decade they had fought the modification that was so common among spacefarers who traveled beyond the dense cluster of stars at galaxy center.

The remaining stopper and plasmer she slung over a shoulder, and knelt to pull a belt of sonibombs from the bottom of the locker. These she strapped over a shoulder and across her chest in a bandolier.

The egg-sized sonibombs were small, but potent. They were also just delightfully easy to use. All one had to do was squeeze and toss. The bombs began to whine like a grating begging for supper-for exactly one microsecond. The whine rapidly climbed to a shriek that rendered hu-mans unconscious within a matter of seconds.

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Plays hell with any sonic-activated devices that might be neatly tucked out of sight, too, she mused with a humor-less chuckle.

If Hinun had the capability of implanting artificial memories in androids, she was sure the fragged-out bastard probably had a few surprises waiting for anyone who attempted to go near his precious, centuries-outdated equipment. The odds were that someone just might have to go after that equipment.

That someone might be me.

Her gaze moved about the con-cabin in search of something she might have overlooked on first inspection. She discovered nothing. She glowered at the useless comm that sat silently taunting her.

Silent!

When she ran from the ship, the grille had crackled with static. Now there was nothing!

She moved to the intership comm and quickly tested the open frequencies and then the restricted one. All were clear!

"This is Agent Prime Valustriana See," she began . . .

Somewhere out along the spaceways the restricted frequencies had been monitored every second since *Fleet Return* had left Barbro-waiting for her transmission. Val smiled. All she had to do now was wait and Shen would be someone else's problem!

Sure. That was just deceiving herself, and Valustriana knew it.

She shoved from the con and swung back toward the door. Waiting was something she couldn't do, not while *Fleet Return* was onplanet. If that tin god ever got his hands on a spacer there would be hell to pay, and she would be the one to pay it!

The last thing in the universe you want to do, Valustriana m' girl, is to spend the rest of your life chasing a loony android across the galaxy!

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She carefully thumbed the con-cabin locked behind her and strode down the tunnel toward the scout's hatch. Assuring that Hinun and his scrambled godhead complex remained on Shen was her prime objective until the backup teams arrived.

If I can help Songan and the others . . .

She edged the thought away. If Captain Songan of Harb and crew could be helped, that would be icing on the cake. If not-they were expendable.

Fifty kloms to the northeast of the torn scout ship, another spacer lay bellied on the surface of Shen. Inside, Varnalgeran Yuw and his Saipese crewmate sat at the con, treb-checking the systems of their fallen vessel. SIPACUM gave its stamp of approval to all.

"Everything is functional! Even the premlix-buggering comm," Varn said with a sigh of relief and a wide cavalier grin. "Now give the in-grav boat a try."

Mu Tan did. Nothing. She tried again, and a third time and a fourth. And a fifth.

Varn shook his head after her tenth attempt at raising their companions in Esharista. Slapping both palms to the arms of his chair in frustration, he stood and gazed blankly about the con room.

"We're not going to raise them, Mu Tan," he said, spelling out the situation for himself as much as for his young crewmate. "We were jammed and sucked down to this Musla-forsaken rock for a reason. Odds are that the same reason now has our friends locked away within Hinun's palace."

"Or dead," Mu Tan added softly.

Varn totally ignored the comment, refusing even to glance in her direction. He wouldn't, *couldn't*, consider that possibility.

"We've got two avenues open to us," he said, continuing to voice his thoughts. "One: we lift off and fly *Fleet*

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Return right up to Hinun's doorstep. Two: we grab weapons and supplies and walk up that doorstep."

Mu Tan's dark eyes stared as he turned to her. She shrugged in answer to his questioning expression, but he continued to stare as though demanding a vocal answer.

"I suggest that your second avenue is the one we must travel, Varnalgeran," she said in an apologetic tone. "If

Hinun desires to possess *Fleet Return*, then we would be delivering the ship into his hands."

Varn smiled and nodded. "My exact conclusion, though I'd say *could* be, because my ego is male. You understand now—a fifty-five-klom stroll through Shen's forest isn't my idea of how one should pass the time with a lovely lady! Grab enough dehy-paks to last a week. I'll get stoppers and meet you at the hatch in three mins."

Mu Tan rose and headed for the galley while Varn hastened downlevel to a suiting room adjacent to the spac-er's boat bay. On the walls alongside the bulky armorlike spacesuits hung a modest assortment of sidearms. For a moment, the Outie considered plasma guns. He discarded the idea in favor of the reliable weapon of the spaceways- stoppers. Fifty-five kloms *was* a long stroll and plasmers with their awkward power packs were *heavy!*

Besides, swords and spears will never be a match for stoppers set on Fry!

Mu Tan waited for him at the hatch. She held two makeshift backpacks made from jumpsuits (arms and legs knotted to form straps). Slipping into one, she passed the other to Varn as he thumbed open the lock and stepped outside.

"We'll also need this, Varnalgeran," she said, rummag-ing in her pocket to produce a flat metal case. "It's a homing device locked onto the in-grav boat."

Varn grinned, winked his appreciation while he accepted the device, and flipped its lid with a thumbnail. The mini-display within gave a digital coordinate reading and

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provided a single blinking red arrow that pointed the way for those unable to interpret the numeric display.

"This little gem says we head that way," he said, turning toward the west and Esharista. "We can make five kloms before it gets too dark to go stumbling around in this forest. Ready?"

Mu Tan stepped to his side and gestured for him to lead the way, which he did.

To have called the Shen forest a jungle would have been only a small exaggeration. Trees whose boles bellied out twice the girth of man thrust up from dark, rich soil to spread leafy boughs that stretched twenty meters above Varn's and Mu Tan's heads.

Amid the intertwining limbs of these green-cloaked giants, birds with plumage as varied as the colors of a rainbow took to wing at the approach of the two offworlders. Their screaming cries of territorial invasion were echoed by several saucer-eyed, brown-furred, ring-tailed (cream-tan and charcoal gray), monkey-sized creatures that scampered excitedly along the aerial trails.

Closer to the ground the flora and fauna were equally abundant. Mu Tan's awed "ooohhs" as her eyes were treated to the myriad of blossoms, vines, and bushes were interspersed with Varn's unrestrained curses; he called upon every deity in the galaxy to provide him with a machete to hack his way through the dense underbrush.

He wasn't particular, but he wasn't stupid either. The old razor-sharp, steel-bladed sword-knife would have done just as well as a sonic vibblade.

Or a good pulsar beamer to burn a klom-wide path through this debris. Maybe a plasma torch . . . Varn mentally occupied himself with a million deaths visited upon the plant life Hinun had so successfully nurtured.

They came to a clearing about a klom from where *Fleet Return* had so ungracefully made its touchdown. The clear-ing was in fact a harrowed field with neatly defined rows

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of tiny green sprouts—one of Varn's predicted Shenese farms.

Pausing on the edge of the field, he searched for any sign of a human dwelling. When he found none, he care-fully picked a path between the young plants and started toward the opposite end of the long strip.

The roar, a bird-like scream mingled with the deep-throat growl of a great cat, came from behind them!

Pivoting, the Outie freed his stopper, thumbed the set-ting to Three-kill-and was aiming toward the forest before Mu Tan even turned. Her own weapon popped from its sheath as the crashing of underbrush rose above the fading cry.

"What do you . . ."she began, and was hushed by the finger Yuw placed to his lips.

Motioning with a tilt of his head toward the west of the field, he began backstepping with stopper leveled toward the snapping of branch and bush. Mu Tan imitated his lead without question.

The second scream-roar echoed from the forest on their right. The third to the left. From directly behind them came that fourth and final defiant cry.

As if on cue the owner of the first roaring voice pushed from the forest on four legs doing its best to look like an escapee from a Grade-Z holo-horror film.

"Booda! What is it?" Mu Tan's awe did not stem from the creature's beauty.

"Hell' if I know. But it brought three playmates with it," Varn answered, casting glances about them.

None of the ugly *things* moved, but stood cocking their huge triangular heads from side to side to peer at the two humans with extremely small black eyes inset on each side of those triangles.

More than just ugly, the creatures were *big*. They stood a meter and a half at the shoulders. Thick, squatty legs that ended in long nasty recurved claws supported a ground-dragging torso three times as long as the monsters' height.

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Add three more meters of long, flat tapering tail and a one meter head, large. Overall: hyper-large.

As terrifying as the creatures' size was the natural armor they sported. Scales like those of a snake that had geneti-cally mutated into some prehistoric gargantuan covered every inch of their bodies from monstrous head to tail-tip.

Yuw did not want to speculate as to what function was served by the spiked horns that jutted sharply from their brows. Nor did he wish to guess whether teeth were contained within the beak-like mouths.

All he wanted was clear running room and an hour's head start.

"Set your gun to Fry," he whispered. "Take a couple of deep breaths and then on the count of three turn and blast the bugga behind us! The moment it goes down, run like hell for the trees. Got it?"

Dubiously the delicate Saipese nodded. She sucked in two steady breaths, and adjusted the setting on her stopper. Neither tremble nor shake did Varn Yuw notice from her.

"One . . . two . . . three!"

They whirled together. They fired together.

Stoppers hummed and nearly invisible beams of sound lanced across the field to the chosen target.

The horned demon's head rose and a scream-roar tore from a mouth Varn now saw was lined with nasty pointed teeth six cms in length. But the hulking monstrosity didn't tumble to its knees dead-or even to play dead.

"Shit! It's that damned scaled hide!" Varn's hand tight-ened about the stopper's grip as though hoping to milk extra power from the weapon.

The giant reptile might as well have been armored in a spacesuit for all the good the stoppers did. Set on Three, the sonic guns couldn't kill a person instantly, but could eventually cook him within the carapace of a spacesuit. When weapons are drawn, it was the quick kill that counted.

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A quick kill was exactly what Varn Yuw prayed for from gods who had no meaning for him. As with all the prayers he had uttered in a long life, they went unanswered.

The ugly reptile roared again. Then it charged, stubby legs pumping with unbelievable piston-like speed.

A heartbeat later its three companions answered the bellowing cry and joined the charge.

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Yoluta moved among the flowers of Hinun's arranged palace hideaway. From beside a fountain that sent one stream half a meter into the air from its center, Songan of Harb watched in silent contemplation.

Would that it were the woman's beauty he admired, or perhaps the grace with which she almost floated through the blossoms. This stirred bittersweet memories that were precious to the tattooed giant, for those belonged to his Yoluta. And they were shared by the stranger who walked before him.

Stranger . . . no! This is the Yoluta of my memories, but only of my memories.

In that, she was incomplete.

What man truly knows another? Or the woman he loves?

Personal perceptions of an individual were not that per-son. Even those who had spent lives together had never entered the *minds* of their mates. Often they saw in each other only what was needed or desired. Yet without that unrecognized portion of the personality, the sometimes covetously guarded portion of an individual, a man or woman would be incomplete, a partial human.

A memory!

The Yoluta who shared the garden with Songan was that. A memory. She was no less and could not be more. She wasn't Yoluta, nor could she ever be.

Her voice was Yoluta's, but something was askew in the syntax of her sentences. Her smile belonged to Yoluta

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. . . yet it lacked that certain tilt of his lover's head. Her body and the willingness to give duplicated Yoluta's, but the rhythm of their lovemaking was ever so slightly out of tempo. She was what *he* knew of Yoluta. What Yoluta knew of Yoluta was not here at all. And that was what had made Yoluta unique; what had made her Yoluta.

This Yoluta had provided something Songan had been unable to discover on his own-an inner peace. Now he accepted that Yoluta, his Yoluta, was dead, gone from his side forever and he, the living, would continue to go on living and leave the dead to memories.

The conclusions were things he had told himself a thou-sand times since Yoluta's murder. Only now did he grasp the meaning of those simple words.

Had Hinun been capable of giving him a duplicate Yoluta, memories totally intact, the reunion in this gentle garden would have ended the same. A duplicate would not have been Songan's intended wife; she would have been a duplicate of the woman he loved, a fact Songan realized he would never have been able to forget.

A man always remembers when he stares at the mask of the dead. It's an image that can't be erased until he too joins the dead.

And so it was that Songan sat and contemplated. Not his own future, for what would be would be, but the future of this beautiful artificially created woman who was *almost* Yoluta! The mistake had been his and not hers. She should suffer no pain for his blind ignorance.

For my . . . greed.

She lived and he had no wish to see her denied that life. Nor did he desire that the love Hinun had programmed into her brain, the love of Songan of Harb, should continue. It was a love he could never return.

If it is within Hinun's power, she must be given new memories.

Songan could not avoid the guilt that came of his decision. His gut twisted. Never in his life had he shunned

responsibility. He had asked for Yoluta-this Yoluta-to be created and now he must flee her. Yet he saw no other way to correct the horrible mistake he had made. He had to go to Hinun and ask for one more favor.

Quietly, like a great cat rising, he pushed from the ground, slipped into the cottage, and gently opened the door.

Two Hinuri who stood outside pivoted when he stepped across the threshold. Two identical pairs of eyes glared at him in challenge.

"I wish to talk with Hinun," Songan said uneasily.

Neither guard answered. Nor did they permit him to pass.

Songan shrugged and took another step forward. His arms swung out to push his way between the two Hinuri. Both men backstepped. Metal hissed on leather. Steel flashed upward.

The Harbian halted. The honed points of two shortwords pressed menacingly against his stomach successfully pre-vented further forward motion. One guard spoke one word.

"Back."

The Hinuri made certain the command was understood by adding a threatening jab of a sword tip.

Songan didn't argue. Raising his hands, he stepped back into the cottage and closed the door behind him.

What the hell was that all about?

The uncertainty of a trapped animal suffused the giant, a sensation he had not felt since he had been the property of Murrah an Rahmyne. He pivoted and ran to the garden, ignoring Yoluta's surprised call. He stopped at the face of one of the walls.

In one fluid spring, he hurled himself upward. His broad hands firmly caught and held the top of the wall. Without so much as a betraying exhalation of strain, he pulled himself up so that his head poked over the barrier.

Outside, in neatly arranged formation, Hinuri stood guard.

Songan pushed away from the wall and dropped to the

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ground. He had no need to peer over the other two walls that so pleasantly locked him in the garden. Even without seeing, he knew that those too were guarded by Hinun's personal soldiers. The garden was a scented, beautiful prison.

At last he knew: he was a prisoner of Shen's Caretaker!

Hinote whistled and *t'loo-wheetled* incessantly between its "human" questions that were translated by the helmet it wore. It was happy, and though these three Hinuri weren't in the least responsive to its chatter, they were the only ones onplanet who had ignored the orange native of Jarpi.

Dumb jackoes! Treeewtee! Can't see the beauty of it! Macho brotherslicers would rather fondle their tee-ninsy, shiny little swords than a colorful Jarp tit! T'lloorooo-tee!

Hinun's "Gans" were the only ones within the palace who did not admire *it* ("it" being one satisfied and sassy Jarp who carried the human name Hinote). The days in the palace had been dec-level soar for the one-of-a-kind Jarp on the planet. Hinote was a novelty, a wonderment, a miracle visitor come to Shen from the stars. Hinote was become a V.I.J.

Shamefully it savored every delicious second of the Very Important Jarp treatment!

Shame was a human word. The language of Jarpi con-tained no equivalent. Hinote was not ashamed of the atten-tion it had received in the palace nor in its delight in being the recipient of that attention.

I bring knowledge and new experience to these poor buggie bugs who have been lost for so very long. I wid-ened their horizons!

Actually what Hinote had done since Songan had brought it to Shen was attempt to broaden the sexual repertoire of every man and woman who had shown interest in its unheard of (on Shen) genital arrangement. It had found very few who refused its open invitation.

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Except these Gannie Cans who must have shriveled slicers adangle between their cute little pleated skirts! Or maybe the most handsome Hinun forgot to give these cyberjackoes cubes when he drew them from the vats that mothered them!

It was not with Hinote's escorts that its anticipation lay. The Jarp had given up on the Hinuri its first day on Shen. What set its orange body to tingling with excitement was Hinun himself. The Caretaker of Shen had shown more than casual curiosity in his nonhuman visitor, but had never displayed anything above an intellectual interest. Until now.

Hinote's stern and stoic-looking escorts had brought an invitation that it was to join Hinun in his private chambers. The Jarp accompanied them without question, smugly sat-ified that the Caretaker could no longer resist the delecta-ble sexual variety it offered, all in one body.

Surely this man-android-is worldly and without the bungles of many humans. In a thousand years he has certainly sampled the delights of male and female. Only one of such cultivated tastes can truly appreciate a Jarp!

To show its own appreciation of Hinun's invitation, Hinote had borrowed several titillating items from the women of the palace. Twenty strands of gemstones now hung in increasingly wide circles from its neck. The glitter and sparkle of their colorful array swayed over its chest in teasing partial concealment of the unhaltered and almost hard cones of its breasts.

The only other clothing it wore was a g-string. Two beaded cloth triangles did nothing to hide the feminine flare of its hip or the tempting expanse of orange buttocks. The foremost triangle tightly emphasized a very masculine

inguinal bulge.

Hinote admitted that its attire more than just hinted at its being female. That was deliberate; a measure it had taken just in case its judgment of Hinun might be wrong. Too

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many human males harbored an irrational prejudice against soaring with a Jarp because of its penis, which was very erect when either male or female equipment was stimulated.

This damned helmet is rather ugly.

Hinote's fingers rose to touch the apparatus atop its head that translated sharp-tongued Jarp "music" into Erts. Ugly it might be, but a necessity when with humans. They did seem to enjoy talking!

Not even the tall steel door dampened Hinote's ecstasies. When the door opened to reveal the vast, pink-marbled throne room with Hinuri lined walls, Hinote's red eyebrows arched in uneasy doubt.

"Ah, Hinote, I'm delighted that you could *join* me," Hinun called from across the chamber. "I know my followers have kept you occupied and you must be tired, but we have spent so little time *together*. I hope to remedy that this eve."

Followers? The one word echoed in Hinote's mind as it stepped into the room.

The steel door hissed closed behind it with a resounding clank. It sounded disturbingly final.

"Bring the creature here." Hinun motioned from his jeweled throne. "And remove those ridiculous baubles from its lovely orange body."

Ridiculous . . .

Hinote's thought was never finished.

The guards at its sides snared its arms, while the one behind answered Hinun's command. The Hinuri reached up and wrenched the strands from its neck. The android goon ignored the piteous *t'loo* as the beaded gems showed to the floor and scattered like sparkling hailstones across the pink marble floor.

By the time the guard jerked the g-string from about the Jarp's waist, Hinote had wrenched its right arm free and slammed a six-fingered fist into the face of the guard to its left.

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Strong and loyal the Hinuri may have been, their muscular bodies enhanced by genetic manipulation, but they were still human in design if not lineage. Hinote was a Jarp and only *humanoid*. It loomed seems taller than its guards and was both agile and strong. Strong enough to manage three of Hinun's guards!

That fact the Jarp demonstrated by connecting a well-thrown punch to the chin of the Gan who had so rudely destroyed its seductive attire. The man went down like a towering tree of Shen's forest before one of their primitive saws.

Next came the turn of the guard on Hinote's right. He screamed and clutched madly at his groin when an orange knee proved that the Hinuri did come equipped with humanly vulnerable testicles.

Hinote easily dispatched its three escorts and whirled in a triumphant half-crouch . . . to face ten more. They rushed forward to drive it to its knees with unyielding spear shafts and the flat sides of unsheathed swords. A translator helmet careened and spun across the floor, jarred from Jarp temples by the brutal torrent of blows.

Hinun watched the thorough crushing of the alien's outburst of defiance. The Jarp pleased him. Life and strength abode in that peculiar dual-sexed body! He would definitely take specimens before having Hinote destroyed.

A guard corps created from such amazing creatures would be spectacular!

"Bring the creature here," Hinun ordered again, his finger depressing a ruby in the arm of his throne.

Four guards dragged the semi-conscious Jarp to the stainless steel table that rose before Hinun's throne. The Devourer of Souls saw the unnatural bend of Hinote's legs but paid them no heed. So both the Jarp's legs had been broken during the onslaught of sword and spear. Hinote would never again need them for walking.

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"T'loo-whEEtl!" Hinote's sharp-pointed tongue spat vehemently as it was lifted and strapped atop the table.

It tried to see the face of its tormentor beyond the tears of swollen eyes, but could discern only a blurred blob of purple. Hinun's lordly robe.

"T'loo-whEEtl trileel teeWEEtlee," Hinote shrilled as loud as its split lips would allow. In Jarp, the sounds were a graphic description of how the bastard seated before it could bugger himself five different ways, at one time.

The anticipation that had been Hinote's but seconds ago was now Hinun's.

With excited eyes he watched the transparent bubble seal over his still struggling victim. How the Jarp's unrelenting spirit made his heart race! Already he savored the mind that would be his within seconds.

The pulsing excitement! Delicious! It's marvelous! How long have I existed without it?

To sit there for the night, perhaps for another day as well, exploring the possibilities that must exist within the totally alien brain of his victim! That would have been sheer ecstasy. The sense of wonder the Mind-Eater discovered in such speculation had been denied him for centuries. In a world one had created there was only tedium and monotony.

But see, it suffers. Its eyes were so wide and round. Now they are but puffy slits and surely painful. And those legs! See the splintered bone that gouges outward. It must be in agony. To allow it to endure a second more than absolutely necessary would be cruel.

And I am not a cruel god.

Hinun leaned back and edged down the helmet-like crown attached to the throne atop his head. Greedily, his fingers

depressed the emerald that was set between ruby and opal.

The Jarp's memories rushed inward, deluging an android mind whose sole purpose for existing was to gather knowl-
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edge. Hinun sighed in unabated pleasure, immersing him-self in the alien sensations that were now his. On his face was an expression transcending that of sexual bliss.

At the Mind-Eater's feet Hinote's body ceased its struggle. One last *treellll* weakly shrilled from bloodied lips.

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The arrow, flaming tail trailing behind it like a comet streaking through space, arched across the evening sky above the heads of the two Galactics. It shot straight and true into the cavernous mouth that gaped wide in a chal-lenging roar-scream.

Before that oversized bird beak could snap closed, two other flaming arrows lofted to drive into the reptile's maw. The defiant roar transformed into a high-pitched shriek of pain and panic and the recurved claws of its stubby legs dug into the harrowed field, bringing the charging creature to an abrupt halt.

That great triangular head swung viciously from side to side in the monster's attempt to dislodge the arrow shafts from its tender mouth.

"Wha-" Yarn Yuw stared in disbelief-double disbelief.

Flights of flaming arrows streamed from the forest on all sides to crisscross in pyrotechnic spectacle. Their effect on the three remaining prehistoric nightmares equalled the results on the first. All four of the spike-horned reptiles shook their heads to free arrows that had been shafted into their open mouths, or stared stupidly at the flaming blossoms that had abruptly bloomed from the ground before them.

Ssswwiiisshhh!

Another swarm of fiery arrows arched over the field to seek their armored targets.

"What's happening?" Mu Tan asked in bewilderment. 180

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Varn didn't answer, but grabbed a hand and started to drag her toward the shelter of the Shenese forest. He took one step and stopped, his mouth agape.

Riders-on horseback!--reined from the shadow-darkened forest and rode directly toward them! Five riders!

Then they were there, lathered mounts with heaving sides surrounding the two spacefarers.

"Quickly! Mount behind me! The fire will not stay the Nitis for long!"

It was a woman's voice that shouted and a woman's hand that reached down to aid Varnalgeran Yuw. He scrambled up atop a furry beast he had seen but twice before in his life. Likewise Mu Tan was yank-hauled up behind the saddle of one of the other riders.

"Are you an accomplished horseman?" Yuw's savior shouted back to him.

"Dear lady," he began, to his second female savior in a few months, "this is as close to one of these nasty-looking creatures as I-

"Then wrap your arms about my waist and hang on!" she said, before he could finish.

Varn's arms curled about a singularly slender waist and he did exactly as ordered. Even then he almost lost his seat as the woman's spurred heels dug into her mount's flanks, and the horse leaped forward.

Beneath the cover of another volley of flaming missiles, the five riders reined westward. Deftly they swung clear of the angry Nitis that blocked their route, and plunged into the forest. One arm clenching the slim feminine waist and his other hand atop a white eleven-gallon Wayne, Varn pressed against his rescuer and ducked to avoid losing his head to the low branches.

"This might . . . ouch . . . seem a rude . . . oh . . . question to ask . . . damn! . . . of one who . . . argghh . . . arrived at such an opportune . . . damn . . . time . . . uhhh," Varn managed to ask while his ill-prepared backside bounced and jarred unmercifully, setting bone

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and teeth arattle. "But . . . oh shit . . . who the . . . ooww . . . are you?"

The woman's head half turned back to him. "Time enough for questions later. We have ridden long and hard to find you before Hinun's soldiers did. Now we don't intend to lose you to them!"

With a shrug, Varn crushed his feathered and beaded hat closer to his head, clenched his teeth, and endured the brutal punishment his buttocks suffered.

After all, a bruised pride is far superior to lying half-digested in the belly of a Nitis!

They were rebels and they had fled Mienna to escape the Hinuri and reorganize after an ill-fated attempt to wrest the city from Hinun's power. They brought Varnalgeran Yuw and Mu Tan to a small farmhouse that was little more than a hut surrounded by a minor city of tents and make-shift lean-tos.

"There are a thousand of us hidden here in the forest. Five such camps as this one," the one who called herself Suleta said, staring at Varn over a dwindling campfire. "In Mienna we have rallied two thousand to our cause. In Esharista, in the shadow of Hinun's palace, we have five thousand. A fifth of the population pledged to our cause!"

Varn had listened to Suleta for two hours, had felt the pleading eyes of her followers as they gathered in a tight ring

about the small fire. The rebel had told of the face that Hinun had so carefully shielded from Songan. Hinun the Mind-Eater-the Devourer of Souls!

The horribly ugly pieces had fallen one after another nightmarishly into place while the Outie had listened. He had no doubt that Hinun now held his friends-*and Val*-captive within his palace. Waiting to have their minds drained and erased . . . forever.

He shoved away the dark possibility that the insane tyrant who had held this planet under his thumb for a thousand years had already feasted on the memories of

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Fleet Return's captain and crew. He could not, would not accept that until Hinun's palace was leveled and their bodies found.

"And we have this," Suleta said tossing the Outie a small jar. "Open it but keep its contents from the flames!"

Using a steel-bladed knife passed to him by a rebel, he pried a wooden stopper from the mouth of the jar. An effluvium of sulphur, saltpeter, and charcoal invaded his nostrils.

"Black powder-explosives!" Varn correctly identified the contents and passed the jar to Mu Tan.

"Within Esharista there are thousands of those-with wicks-stored in hiding until we are ready," Suleta said, her aqua eyes aflame with more than reflected firelight. "Also within Esharista are a hundred men who have organized our forces-prepared them for the day they will rise against the bloody God who has crushed us beneath his heel!"

"But it's not enough," Varn said, his gaze locking to Suleta's.

"With all of this we might be able to defeat Hinun . . . or we might be no more than a meal for his dogs. We have no way of knowing what magic the Mind-Eater has locked within his palace." Suleta shrugged as though attempting to convey that the outcome was of little concern. "If we die, others will eventually rise against Hinun. Should they fall, there will be others and others after them. Hinun can't reign forever."

"He's done dam' well for a thousand years!"

"But with your aid . . . with your ship we could defeat Hinun!" Suleta pressed on, ignoring the Outie's sarcasm. "Its mere presence in the sky would send those in Esharista who rallied for Hinun running like frightened hares!"

It would send me running if all I had was a sword and a spear to defend myself, Varn silently agreed.

"I ask that you, and your ship, join with those who would drag the Devourer of Souls from his unholy throne,"

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Suleta said, and pushed to her feet. She waved an arm to the two hundred men and women crowded about the fire.

Mu Tan leaned close to her First Mate to whisper, "We would still be taking *Fleet Return* to Hinun's doorstep. But there would be more than two callers at his door."

A wry smile moved across the Outie's lips. In all honesty, whether or not Hinun was toppled from his gory throne did not concern him. Freeing a hard-headed Harbian and an oversexed Jarp-and even a treacherous woman from his native Outreach-was all that he wanted.

"You have our help, Suleta," he said simply, with an affirmative nod to the rebel leader.

Suleta beamed and a cheer rose high and lingering from her two hundred followers. Arms reached out and gratefully hugged the two Galactics while other hands pounded their shoulders and backs.

Suleta's arms rose to silence the reveling mass. As the roar dimmed to a hushed rumble, she turned back to Varn and Mu Tan.

"Would that we had barrels of wine to celebrate the joy that flows from our breasts! We do not. But we can offer you shelter for the night and food to warm your bellies until we all dine within Hinun's palace."

Mu Tan's mild voice rose. "And perhaps a bath?"

Suleta grinned and nodded. "There's a stream nearby. It runs cool and clear. Come, I will show you."

The rebel leader pointed to a bearded man who clutched a stolen Hinuri spear. "Metiz, show our friend to his tent and see that he receives a meal that is suitable for one of a . . . healthy girth so unusual for a man from the stars!"

As Suleta led Mu Tan into Shen's night to find the promised stream and bath, Varn rose, hands testing his "healthy girth," to follow Metiz.

"Theba's icy heart!"

The words chattered between Varn's rattling teeth when his head broke the surface of the moonlit pool. A bath had

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seemed a lovely idea for relieving the humid warmth of the spring night. It hadn't been. The clear water felt as if it flowed directly from Shen's icecap. The shivering Outie expected to see mountains of ice floating beside him.

"Better to have smelled like a sweaty grat than to turn my blood to ice!" he muttered, rubbing his hands over his arms in a useless attempt to generate friction.

In long strokes, he swam to the side of the pool and scrambled to its grassy banks. The night breeze kissed his nakedness like an arctic blast while he tenderfooted his way across hidden pebbles in search of the jumpsuit he had carefully laid atop a bush.

The bush was exactly where he had left it. The jumpsuit was not.

"I had Metiz take it," a feminine voice said. "It needed to be washed. Horse sweat isn't the most pleasant of odors, friend Varnalgeran."

Varn spun about, searching the night's shadows. He found the owner of the disembodied voice leaning against a tree. She stepped forward with an open blanket held before her.

"Suleta!" Varn spun back around in surprise.

The rebel leader laughed softly as she stepped behind him and placed the blanket over his shoulders.

"Surely a man who had sailed among the stars isn't embarrassed by the eyes of a mere woman," she teased while he wrapped his shivering body in the offered warmth. "You are a handsome man, Varnalgeran Yuw. A substantial man. And I think you are deceptive. I will have to keep my eye on you."

"Keep an eye on me? That's exactly what I thought you were doing! Cheap thrills must be hard to come by way out here in the middle of nowhere!" Varn turned back to the auburn-haired rebel leader. "And how could I be deceptive? You've seen all I have to offer!"

Pointing to the tents, Suleta walked beside him into the camp. She smiled coyly at the Outie and laughed again.

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"I have seen you naked, starman, and you are not as overweight as you first appeared," she said.

He arched a questioning eyebrow.

"Your clothes," she said. "You wear them baggy. They make you look half again your size, Varnalgeran Yuw."

He drew a deep breath, tilted his head, and smiled. This backwoods lady had spied something that neither the crew of Dorjan's *Misfit* nor *Fleet Return* had ever noticed. Of course his crewmates had never seen him buckass naked.

And the wild colors add a certain touch to the illusion I maintain!

"I think that I should be keeping an eye on you" Varn chuckled, as Suleta stopped at the center of camp.

"If you wish," she said turning to a tent on her left and holding open its flap. "Shall I go in first and light the lamp?"

She didn't wait for an answer, but ducked inside. Before he could open the tent's entrance, the yellow glow of an oil lamp illuminated the interior of Suleta's rebel command headquarters. Still bundled in his blanket, he followed her inside.

Her aqua-irised eyes gleamed up at him with a hunger that could not be mistaken. She patted the pile of furs and blankets that was her bed.

Accepting her unspoken invitation, Varn crossed the tent's floor and knelt before this most attractive-no, beautiful!-Shenese woman.

"You're beautiful . . ." he began, and was silenced by the touch of a cold fingertip to his lips.

She was! Yuw gazed at her with the realization that this was truly the first time he had seen her. He had held her, or at least held on to her for what seemed hours as they rode through the forest. He had watched and listened while Suleta told of Hinun and his horrors. But he had never

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truly seen this woman as a woman, which she most definitely was.

She set about proving that. Reaching down to grasp the bottom of her laced-neck, leather blouse, she pulled it up over her head and tossed it across the small tent. She wore no bra or halter to confine the jiggling dance of two plump breasts. He stared at just about the most perfect nipples he had ever seen, precariously perched atop each fleshy fruit, and fancied that they thickened beneath his admiring gaze.

Her eyes flared with turquoise fire while she watched him watching her roll to her side atop the furs. With enticing, deliberate languor, unlaced the tight buckskin breeches that snugly hugged her hips. Very womanly, those hips, he noted with delight.

She shifted again, this time onto her back. With that same taunting, teasing, tantalizing languor, she wiggled from the leather pants and kicked them away over her head with one leg . . . a leg that remained purposely posed in the air with toes pointed to the top of the tent. Just long enough to allow his caressing gaze to run appreciatively downward over the shapely firmness of her calf and the suppleness of her thigh. Then that so-enticing leg bent at the knee and lowered itself to the softness of the furs. The deliberate slow-motion study in the erotic served its purpose; it definitely held his undivided attention.

Not even the softest utterance passing her lips, she raised a finger and beckoned him to her. Her other knee rose. Only when he knelt between her parted thighs did the auburn-haired lovely speak.

"Among my people this is called the Saddle of Love," she said in a voice throaty with desire.

Running a hand languidly over the flat, flawless plane of her stomach and through the almost red down bushed in its neat triangle, she taunted the erect proof of the "starman's" own desire with the tips of her fingers. ,

"Mount me, my starman," she urged. "Ride me as though I were a mare and you a stud! Ride me!"

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Not much on foreplay or just-lovin', he mused, but was not minded to argue.

With no further urging, he slid into the Saddle of Love, and into the sighing woman. And there he remained until Shen's yellow sun broke above the towering trees surrounding the rebel camp.

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The dyre-wolf sat in the morning shadows of the forest, his gray form discernible only to those searching specifically for the predator. No one in the rebels' camp was, and none noticed the beast. Their attention focused on Suleta. She was perched high on the driver's seat of a one-horse cart heavily laden with ripening vegetables. The wolf's ears perked forward to amplify the words Suleta spoke to the plump one who had come in the second ship from the sky.

"Three days, Varnalgeran, an hour after the midday repast." Suleta leaned down to tip up the Outie's big hat and kiss his forehead. "While those in Esharista are lazy with bloated stomachs, your ship will blot out the sun! Then my forces shall rise to storm the cursed palace."

With a silent nod, Varn Yuw stepped back from the cart as she picked up the reins. He tugged his hat low to his face.

He mustered every iota of spirit he could dredge from within a body that suffered from a night of overindulgence and lack of sleep to assure this courageous woman. She who would lead the people of Shen against their merciless god.

"In three days, Mu Tan and I will bring *Lanatia Lady* screaming across Esharista and drop it down right in Hinun's lap!"

Suleta nodded solemnly. Then her face broke into a wide grin for the man who had so ably demonstrated his

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ability to carry out an assigned task last night. Blowing him a kiss, she grasped the reins and clucked. The cart's one-horse team bore her away westward, toward the forest and Esharista.

"She is daring, Varnalgeran. And brave." Mu Tan was at his side, a hand resting on his shoulder.

Varn watched the cart creak and groan its way into the dense forest. Along with the vegetables (piled high to conceal a hundred pots packed with black powder), Suleta carried the Outreacher's sincerest hope that she would be alive after three days to share a lifetime of amorous nights with a man worthy of her superior self. A man of her own people.

"We also must begin our journey to Esharista." That came from Ulath, one of Suleta's lieutenants, the one with the droopy mustache. "Suleta has assigned five men to accompany you to your ship when it is near time for the attack."

Varn nodded to the lanky Shenese. This cell of two hundred rebels would join with the other four groups hidden in the forest. Their task would be to surround Esharista and attack the wall when *Fleet Return* roared down on the city. The forest warriors were but a diversion to divide Hinun's forces. Suleta and those inside the city would spearhead the rebellion.

And the five left with the two Galactics?

Varn did not deceive himself—they were guards to as-sure that *Fleet Return* lifted off on schedule. Suleta might have sealed her bargain with the offworlder in a long night of passion, but she was no fool . . .

On its shaggy haunches the dyre-wolf sat and watched the motley band of men and women gather their weapons and break camp. Bundles of skin and cloth tossed over their shoulders, they stalked onto the forest, leaving six men and one woman behind. Two of these had come in the second sky ship.

It was not with these that the massive predator con-

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cerned himself, or even the troop of would-be freedom fighters that marched on Esharista. The woman called Suleta held the beast's attention.

Turning its back to the farm and the seven who re-mained behind, the wolf sank back into the forest and trotted after the cart and the compelling scent of the woman.

Suleta had left her Galactic allies with five "guides" to aid them in returning to *Fleet Return*. She had not left horses. That situation brought a muttered curse from the lips of Varn Yuw with each step he took, and had done so since he was roused from a peaceful sleep three hours before.

His rump and thighs were just recovering from the stiffness left by his one and only horseback ride. Yet the pain he had suffered in that wild flight through the forest was nothing compared to the agony he now endured.

The Outie's high-heeled, pointed-toe boots had crossed light-year atop light-year on the deck of a spacer. Yet they were not designed for walking-real klom after klom hik-ing. Equihyde they might be, but the marvelous breathing synthetic leather wasn't frictionless. Now painfully swollen blisters gnawed at Varn's heels with his every step.

His lips were just verging on profaning Musla's moth-er's intimate knowledge of a Bleaker-lizard when the rebel "guide" before him raised an arm. He dropped it with insistence, and squatted. He turned back to those following him with a finger pressed to his lips. Or to his bushy mustache, anyhow.

"Your ship is there." He pointed straight ahead. "Hinun's guards are there, too."

In a crouched walk hampered by his "healthy girth," Varn moved up beside the fellow and peered beyond the bushes that concealed their position. His brow furrowed at sight of the obstacle that separated them from the spacer.

"Mu Tan, take a look," he whispered, waving her up beside him.

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She crawled forward and poked her head around the bushes. The golden hue of her face was several shades lighter when she looked at her crewmate.

"There are so many of them!"

"Forty or fifty," the Shenese said, and signaled his companions to the bushes. "We can't reach the ship."

"Be not hasty, my friend." With lips pursed reflective-ly, Varn looked back at the Hinuri who stood beside *Fleet Return*.

The bastards are wearing helmets and breastplates . . . and those damned shields won't make things any easier. Yet their faces, legs, and arms are exposed. That should be enough bare skin to do the trick. After all, that armor is

hardly a spacesuit!

Varn snapped his stopper from its holster and turned back to Mu Tan. He held the long rod out for her to see his thumb move the setting to Two-Zap.

The woman's weapon sprang from its holster at the touch of her palm. She flipped the beam setting to the second notch.

Gesturing for the five Shenese to remain put, Varn crept around the bushes with Mu Tan hugging his heels. *Fleet Return* lay unmajestically on its belly ten meters ahead, just beyond the boles of two towering trees. Varn crept in behind the first and Mu Tan the second.

Backs pressed flat to rough bark, stoppers at their chests, they rose.

The Outie drew one deep steadying breath and nodded.

Without hesitation, Mu Tan swung to the right, leveled her stopper and squeezed. The hum of the cylindrical gun was chorused by the nasty little song of Yuw's weapon.

They worked the beams from opposite ends to the center of the Hinuri who stood in perfect formation like assembly line produced automatons. Helmets, shields, and breast-plates offered no protection against the almost invisible shafts of sound.

Like marionettes with severed strings, Hinun's guards

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crumpled. They toppled to the ground where they lay zapped into unconsciousness. Swords remained in leather sheaths and spears dropped to the earth unhurled.

Varn looked at Mu Tan, grinned broadly, and winked. He waved their five Shenese companions forward and headed for the spacer.

"They still live!" one of the men growled as he stepped over a fallen Hinuri. "Thisun breathes!"

The man's companions halted in mid-stride. Their glar-ing gazes turned to the unconscious soldiers. In the next breath, all five had drawn hunting knives and dropped to their knees beside the fallen Hinuri. The flash of honed steel left no doubt as to how those blades were to be used. Breastplates and helmets left android throats vulnerably exposed.

"Freeze!" Varn shouted.

The men did. The barrels of two stoppers met their uncomprehending gazes.

"They (are Hinuri. They have killed our families and friends!" a gaunt man protested. "They deserve death!"

"Without Hinun, they'll be nothing more than morons- bodies without a brain," Varn answered, his stopper coldly leveled at the man. "It's that brain we're after today, not petty blood-letting!"

None of the five lowered his blade.

"I suggest that you stand, or I will be forced to leave you sleeping with these machines in human form," Mu Tan said, her voice as determined as her crewmate's. "I also suggest that the Hinuri will wake before you."

Whether it was the surprising strength of her words, or the fire in her dark eyes, or the steady barrel of her stopper that convinced the Shenese, Varn didn't know. Whatever it was, the men stood and sheathed their blades.

"Good, now let's *move* it!" Varn nodded toward the locked hatch of the spacer. "Suleta is waiting for us, remember?"

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He bolstered his weapon, took one step to the ship, and halted, every muscle in his body rigid.

The cause was a husky feminine voice that called, 'Hold it where you are, Varnalgeran! Move a sem closer and I'll broil that Outie hide of yours!'

That voice could belong to only one woman in the universe-Valustriana See!

Varn's head turned ever so cautiously toward *Fleet Re-turn's* nose. There, bare legs wide in a defiant stance, was his fellow Outreacher. She wasn't wearing enough to stuff a pocket. The nasty looking muzzle of a plasma beamer stared back at him; it was leveled at his "healthy girth." At Val's side, plasma gun in hand, was another nigh-naked woman with the whitest skin Varn had seen this side of the planet Aglaya. Nicely attired in no more than a few bright, sparkling baubles to hide warheads and stash, she brushed a strand of vehemently blond hair from her fore-head and glared.

"The same thing goes for you, Little One." Val twitched the muzzle of her pistol at Mu Tan. "Move a muscle toward the ship and you'll be a smoking puddle of grease!" The diminutive Saipese didn't test the threat. She simply froze.

"Get their stoppers, Kaleena."

The young blond did as ordered. Stripping the two crewmembers of their weapons, she returned to Val's side. "Little One, over there with your five friends." Val's gun muzzle motioned Mu Tan to the Shenese. Mu Tan complied with helpless resignation.

"Kaleena, keep 'em covered," Val ordered. "If any of them so much as looks at you funny-burn 'em all! Understand?"

Kaleena nodded and turned her gun toward Mu Tan and the Shenese men. The ice contained in those blue eyes sent a shiver up Varn's spine.

"Varn, inside!" Val commanded, her weapon's deadly stare never leaving the Outie's stomach.

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With the same helpless resignation Mu Tan had shown, Yuw stepped to the hatch and thumbed open the lock. Val

assisted him through the hatchway with a no-nonsense jab in the small of his back with the barrel of her pistol.

That was unnecessary. Varn Yuw knew his own speed and agility. Neither was to be slighted, but he also recognized that the same attributes were shared by the woman rudely jamming the gun in his back. As fast as he might be, Val's finger on that trigger would be faster.

The hatch closed behind them. Val ordered him to the opposite side of the small chamber.

"You looked surprised to see me out there, Varnalgeran," Val said. Her smile conveyed neither warmth nor humor.

"I thought I was on my way to drag you, Songan, and Hinote out of Hinun's palace before the son of a bitch decided to have your brains for dinner," Varn said, tight-lipped.

Val arched an eyebrow. "Then you know about the decidedly nasty tastes of that android swine?"

He nodded and told her of Suleta and her rebels. "We intend to use the ship to aid them. Ready to help?"

Rubbing her neck with her free hand, Val bit at her upper lip as though considering the possibilities presented by the rebel attack. She said nothing.

Yuw took a breath, considered his position-which at the moment held little or no promise-and asked, "What the hell is this all about, Val? I can't understand why anyone would sabotage a flight cassette and strand us on this ball of crap! Who-*what*-are you, Valustriana See?"

"Don't play naive!" That cold smile never left her lips. "You've been running free for a decade, but you damned well know *what* I am! And I sure as hell know what you are!"

He nodded. "I suspected it when I found the bug in the source code." Cotton clogged his mouth and throat, mak-

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ing it difficult to voice the worst of his fears. "Tee Gee Oh . . ."

"TGO Agent Prime Valustriana See, myrzah!" Val said, and slipped her pistol into the holster strapped at her waist. "Don't act like some bungling juvie! It could have been a lot worse for your precious *Fleet Return* . . ."

Ice ran through Varn's veins at the thought of what might have been. The glorious amazon had virtually unlimited, unrestrained authority. Authority to take whatever actions she deemed necessary to complete her assignment. Concern for property or the lives of others ran a very poor second. He sighed and accepted the inevitable.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Whatever I require of you."

He nodded. Her reply was exactly what he had expected; there was no other when dealing with TGO.

"Three months ago a TGW scout ship was sent to Shen to investigate rumors of possible human colonization here," Val told him. "The ship was under command of an extremely capable Vice-Captain Alsaya. A very close personal friend . . ."

Val stammered. The hardness of her eyes softened. "Dammit, Varn, Alsaya was really something! With the blackest skin I've ever seen and the most piquant face . . .! She wasn't just born for the spaceways; she was born *of* the spaceways! She . . ."

She stopped abruptly. Varn saw embarrassment in the lovely face that stared at him. For an Agent Prime-for any member of that hyper-secret organization known as Transgalactic Order-there was supposedly no room for personal attachments . . . or feelings.

"The scout ship was attacked," Val said, frost returning to her husky voice. "My mission is . . ."

Mu Tan stood staring first at *Fleet Return's* locked hatch, then at the startling pale woman and her deadly pistol.

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What is going on in there? And Val? Why is she doing this?

Her unspoken questions would have to wait. The hatch hissed open and Varn and Val stepped out. To Mu Tan's surprise Valustriana no longer aimed her weapon at her fellow Outie.

"You men have exactly three seconds to get your butts lost in that forest," Val said, pointing at the Shenese. "If they're still here by the time I count three, Kaleena, melt them! One . . . two . . ."

Suleta's "guides," eyes round as the saucer eyes of a Jarp, ran. None of the three glanced back as they tore through the underbrush in a mad scramble to escape the promised death.

"Some rebels! I hope this Suleta of yours has more backbone, Varn." Val chuckled, turned to Kaleena again, and nodded to the unconscious Hinuri. "Burn these bugs! I don't want any of Hinun's playmates running around loose!"

"Varnalgeran!" Mu Tan's lovely face was masked in horror.

Yuw reached out and grabbed one of her small arms. He jerked her toward the spacer's open hatch.

"Keep your mouth shut and do exactly as she orders," he said through clenched teeth. "And . . . if we're damned lucky . . . we just might get out of this alive!"

Mu Tan's head jerked around as she strained to see over her shoulder. "She's going to butcher those men! It's murder! They're not even conscious . . . *uh!*"

The back of Varn's hand viciously smacked into her cheek with a sharp crack! Dazed, her head snapped forward. Her eyes rolled up to Yuw, tears running down her cheeks.

"I told you to keep your mouth shut! I meant it," he barked in an angry voice she had never heard before. "Now get your butt inside-we got a jump to make!"

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Varn's hand rose threateningly when Mu Tan tried to glance back at the unconscious Hinuri again. Her gaze turned away before he could strike.

The crackling, electric hiss of a plasma bolt sounded behind them. And another. Another. Then there was only the sizzle of burning flesh.

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Hinun lounged in a massive throne of gold. Embedded in its gleaming surface were gemstones of every shape, size, and description imaginable to Songan of Harb.

In that one piece of furniture designed to support the *godly* backside of this lunatic was enough wealth to provide a lifetime of luxury for a hundred individuals on any of the Galactic-inhabited worlds. Here were the riches that filled the dreams of the poor! Riches for which the wealthy would kill to possess.

Yet there was no beauty, no elegance. The throne was just a block of gold with a seat crudely chiseled out of the basic form. (*Just . . . gold.*) The jewels that pebbled its surface appeared to have been cast there by a child or an artisan gone mad. There was no design, no symmetry. Only a random scattering of the gems as though someone had picked up handfuls of jewels and merely tossed them at the seat and they had stuck to the gold.

Idly toying with the largest spectmond Songan had ever seen, the mad god sat there amid all that splendor. Gazing down at the android replica of Yoluta as she recounted her love for the Most High God of Shen, the sacrifices she would make for his glory, the unholy union of minds she would gladly give herself to if Hinun required that they should so be joined.

"This is true love, friend Songan." The Mind-Eater's aquamarine eyes shifted to the captive surrounded by ten of his Hinuri. "It is the unselfish love of human for God!"

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Total unquestioning servility. To only a minute lesser degree, it was the love I instilled within her enticing breast for you."

"The love of a dog for a master! It isn't human love!" Songan strained as he shouted into the face of the obscenity. "No man wishes that of his woman!"

The hands locked to the Harbian's arms tightened. The swords of the Hinuri rose menacingly. One word from the insane tyrant seated across the pillared room of pink marble and those stubby little swords would be buried to their hilts in Songan's chest.

Hinun would not give that word. He had other designs for his visitor from the stars—a purpose he had spent the last ten minutes explaining in detail. Songan would meet the same end the Devourer of Souls now intended to demonstrate . . . using the android Yoluta.

"Perhaps you are correct," Hinun said with an amused chuckle. "But there are those who equate love with obedience, my friend. Have you not heard lovers proclaim to each other 'If you truly love me, you will do this for me!' Is this not the 'real' love you puny creatures truly crave?"

Songan did not answer. He had not been brought here to argue the philosophy of love with this demon in human form. The Hinuri had dragged him into the throneroom so that Hinun the Mind-Eater might dine on his brain, his memories.

Before that, the Devourer of Souls would torment him by forcing him to observe the death—the second death—of the "woman he loved.

To be certain it is not the same suffering he would experience were this his Yoluta, Hinun reflected. Yet the dying of such a fair creature, one who wears the body of the woman he was to have wed, will not leave him unaffected. The union of this bitch to my . . . mind will create one new experience within Songan's mind that will eventually be mine to savor!

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"Yoluta, my child, it is time that we are joined as one." Hinun waved a hand to the stainless table stretched before the throne. "Please climb atop our wedding bed."

With an innocent smile for her deity, the android climbed onto the table. She lay there without protest while two Hinuri strapped her arms and legs to its cold surface.

"Your friend, the Jarp Hinote, did not come to me so passively," Hinun said as he glanced up to Songan. "I now know how vehemently it cursed its fate . . . and me."

Hinun's lips pursed and he whistled in a grotesque mockery of Hinote's language. He laughed at the feeble attempt to reproduce the melodic syntax of Jarp speech.

"Alas, no human tongue was meant to chirp and tweet as does a Jarp. A loss to humankind, for it is truly a language structured on beauty." Hinun shrugged.

Hinote! The Harbian's stomach lurched and hate railed within him. The bastard has killed Hinote!

Val? Has he sucked her mind dry too?

"And such strong-willed creatures! You humans have done Jarps an injustice. Hinote's memories reveal that you often view them as silly, inferior creatures. You are wrong, friend Songan!" Hinun continued to babble while a plastic bubble rose to seal Yoluta atop the table. "The Jarp is an admirably strong-willed creature. Its identity is deeper rooted than any human mind I have taken in union."

Another mutated chorus of off-key whistles escaped Hinun's lips. They were followed by an insane laugh that

echoed off the marble walls of the vast chamber.

"How delicious the Jarp is! It refuses to remain within the snug niches of my mind! Even now its personality surges forward to reach you, Captain Songan!" Hinun pressed a hand to his forehead. "It begs you to kill me! To give it revenge!"

Again the sick and sickening laughter reverberated through the chamber-to die as abruptly as it had begun. Hinun
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pushed to the edge of the throne. His eyes narrowed to slits as he glared at Songan.

"It is truly magnificent! The Jarp is not human, Cap-tain. Its memories, its personality are alien. Its logic as distorted to our human minds as our sight when we peer through imperfect glass. To experience all that was contained in that one brain would quite have overwhelmed one who was less than a *God!*"

Songan stared at Hinun. The "god" seemed to shrink against the massive block structure of the throne. His fingers massaged his temples.

The swine has overloaded his memory capacity! Hinote's mind was too much for him! He's fragging, losing himself in the experiences of an alien mind!

Abruptly Hinun sat straight and stiff. For an instant his face went as rigid as the stone that formed his nightmarish pink throne room. Then an amused smile moved over his lips.

"Ah, but I must not bore you with all this talk of the Jarp. Soon enough you will share all that was Hinote with me." Hinun's gaze returned to the woman bound spread-eagle beneath the plastic bubble. "She is truly beautiful, Captain. A perfect appetizer before the main course."

The Mind-Eater reached above him and pulled a crown down over his brow. Like preying creatures, his fingers stalked the arm of the throne, finding that multifaceted emerald inset between ruby and opal. He depressed it.

Willingly Yoluta had placed herself atop the table and without question she had offered herself to the demon in human disguise. Yet in that instant when electronic im-pulses robbed her of her memories and transferred them into the skull of her merciless god, she saw the horror, the total oblivion to which she had consigned her soul.

A scream of the terror of realization tore from her lips. Her body arched high and jerked spasmodically as though high voltage charges had been fed into her supple muscles.

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'Nooooooo!' His horror at the scene roared from Songan's chest and throat.

The giant lunged against the arms and hands holding him. Honed tips of swords pricked at his stomach and chest, preventing him from moving more than a sem to-ward the throne and the monster who preyed there.

Yoluta's body went liquid, limply pooling atop the table.

Songan stared, still telling himself there was hope. The android chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. That was the only sign of life. Her eyes remained closed in a perfect imitation of a death mask. No muscle moved or even twitched.

The Harbian's lips twisted to loose a low moaning growl of mourning mingled with volcanic hate. Every bioengi-neered muscle within his towering body tautened to the strength of carbon filament. For the first time since he had fled the arenas of his homeworld, he lusted for blood. To feel his hands about a human neck as they crushed throat and spine!

Songan contained himself, held his rage in a fiery ball at his core. Hate, strength, rage, bloodlust were not enough for victory. More than a hundred men and women who had nurtured those attributes had died in the games of Harb when they faced the tattooed killer from Murrah an Rahmyne's stable of gladiators.

Nor was survival the key. The desire to live often brought hesitance when reckless abandon was needed to conquer a foe.

All this Songan knew and would use to defeat the monster seated before him. Hinun would be denied the mind of *Fleet Return's* captain.

Even if I have to throw myself onto the Hinuri's shortwords to deprive the motherless bastard of his un-holy meal!

The shortwords were a last resort. Better to die trying to encircle Hinun's neck with life-stealing fingers.

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"Ah, Songan, how fully you satisfied young Yoluta." Hinun pushed the crown from his black curls and sighed sarcastically. "She would have served your every desire."

There! Songan, senses hyper-alert, detected a slight slack-ening in the arms and hands grasping him. *And the sword tips dip ever so slightly.*

His eerie aquamarine eyes mirrors of contempt, Hinun stared down on the limp but living body of the android woman he had termed no more than an appetizer for his insatiable hunger. The Devourer of Souls gestured to the two guards who stood by the table.

"Take it away. Use it as you may, then destroy it," Hinun ordered. Serene of brow, he watched the Hinuri drag Yoluta's body from the slab of stainless steel.

There it is again! Once more Songan noticed the slight slacking of the hands and arms that held him prisoner. As before, the tips of the keen-bladed swords drooped ever so slightly.

The instant when the Hinuri's attention drifted corre-sponded to the sound of Hinun's voice.

When the great toad croaks, his worshippers listen! They're required to heed every uttered syllable! Probably "pro-grammed" into them . . .

Songan's lips didn't move, but within his breast he smiled-the grin of Death personified.

Hinun had programmed these human cybersoldiers well. Too well! To respond to Hinun's every wish they had to give their undivided attention to each word that slithered from his slimy lips.

To others that momentary distraction, even if noticed, would have meant nothing. For one who had been suckled

on the ways of killing his fellow humans, it was a key that could open wide the door of victory.

Now if I can keep the fraghead talking!

Songan turned within himself, focusing on the rhythm of his breathing. He inhaled through mouth, drawing deep-

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ly, and exhaled through his nostrils. Years of *Tao Chi* discipline deceptively relaxed the tension that had gripped his body. Now, he waited. A great black cat prepared to pounce and rend the flesh of his prey.

"Bring him to me," Hinun commanded. "Hinun hungers!"

Although they tugged him forward, Songan again sensed their diverted attention. Still he contained himself, waiting until he stood at the foot of the jeweled throne before he made that one bid to rid the universe of the mad android that should have died a thousand years ago.

"Great One!" The massive door at the rear of the throne room hissed open to admit a lone Hinuri, spear raised above his head. "The city . . . the palace is under attack!"

The guard trotted before the throne and genuflected, head low. "A ship from the stars hovers over Esharista!" he told the floor. "Our walls are breeched! The Hinuri battle before the very steps of the *palace!*"

Songan stared, unable to comprehend the android's reaction.

"This is *brilliant!*" Hinun, unable to contain his excitement, looked all bright-eyed to Songan. "My brother comes to claim my throne! He has moved so *swiftly!* And he threatens me with the very ship I covet!"

"Brother?" Songan mouthed that single word.

Hinun laughed in mad merriment and pushed from his throne of gold. "A game, dear Captain, that I play with myself. For my brother and I are one and the same. He is me; and I am he! Today *Gods* battle to sit on this throne! And you . . . you Songan of Harb, will be the victory feast!"

Hinun's purplescent robe rippled as he scurried from the throne to the nearest of the marble columns. He pressed a palm to its polished surface. A door hidden in what appeared to be the marble's seamless surface slid open.

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An elevator! Songan drew a breath to the bottom of his lungs.

The Mind-Eater stepped into his concealed retreat and turned to the Hinuri who clutched their captive.

"Bind him to the table and join me on the roof. There we shall watch the celebration of death! For today I introduce war to Shen!"

With Hinun's first uttered sound, Songan's arms swung outward, no longer resisting the straining grasp of the Hinuri. As the *Tao* directed, he flowed into the strength of his enemies, making their power his own. His arms twisted, slipping from those powerful fingers as though his flesh were coated in permalube.

Free, those massive arms dipped below the shortswords leveled at his chest, then flew upward while he lunged forward into the dazed Hinuri. The sword tips were swept high to stab into empty air as Songan's sweeping arms redirected the force of their attack.

Likewise, Songan's plunge into the Hinuri saved his back by no more than a sem from the skewering steel that was thrust at his spine by the guards behind him.

The daring defense was not without its price. Razored cuts flowed crimson from the Harbian's forearms where his flesh had contacted the honed edges of the shortswords. The bloody ribbons were far from fatal, but they burned. Songan hardly noticed. The giant had suffered far greater injury and claimed victory in the arena of his homeworld.

His target was no longer the Mind-Eater (who vanished behind the closing door of his concealed elevator) but the kneeling Hinuri at the foot of the throne. And that guard's spear.

One hammer-like fist, red with its own blood, swung upward to drive into the Hinuri's nose. Bone crunched and slid upward. The shock tore into the android brain. The guard never gained his feet. He collapsed before the throne he worshipped. And lay very still and very dead.

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Songan's left hand whipped out to snap up the spear as it flew from dying fingers. Ten strides the Harbian ran, maneuvering to the center of the immense room. Reaching his goal, he halted abruptly and turned to face the twelve armored Hinuri, shields held before them, who advanced with shorts words drawn for the kill. Their faces were grim, fixed; his betrayed no emotion.

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Fiery blossoms of blazing red and orange erupted on the wall surrounding Hinun's city of Esharista. Shattered mud brick showered upward into the sky in a dirty fountain.

From out of the forest surrounding the city stormed a thousand yelling, howling rebels. They hurled another volley of earthenware pots against the city's outer walls. Each pot was stuffed with black powder sprouting a sizzling fuse. The crude bombs ripped explosively into the wall, opening wide gaping avenues along which hurtled shrapnel in the form of crockery shards. Suleta's forest forces followed closely, still yelling and howling to disconcert the enemy.

"Hinuri!" Varnalgeran Yuw called out as *Fleet Re-turn's* scanning telepresences homed on a line of Hinun's armored fighters. They were running through Esharista's narrow streets to meet the attacking rebels.

At SIPACUM, Yuw rerouted the tridee image of the soldiers, along with a high resolution sighting grid, to the

control console. There Valustriana See sat, in the captain's chair.

"Bring up DS ultrasonics-full level!" Val command-ed. In the Mate's seat Mu Tan nodded, while the TGO agent's own fingers manipulated the sights.

Vam watched the ragged red cross hairs on the sighting grid shift into perfect alignment with the graphic image of Hinun's android soldiers. A flick of a single toggle and the laser sighting device was locked onto its target.

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Oncon, Val thumbed a pulsing crystal of violet. "This should stop those spear-toting swine in their tracks!"

The tridee accurately recorded the carnage: tight, intense ultrasonic beams sliced downward from spacer *Fleet Re-turn's* belly. Pushed to full level, the inaudible beam did more than Zap. It killed instantly.

The Hinuri trapped in the wash reeled, hands clasped to helmeted heads in a feeble attempt to fend off the micro vibrations. Tuned for the human nervous system, they dissolved the neural synapses of their brains. Those almost-men fell. Five hundred fell beneath the unseen ultrasonic sweep, their dead bodies jerking and twitching in dusty streets.

"One circle over Esharista." Val gently banked a big craft never meant to fly within the dense atmosphere of a planet with the ease of a glider pilot maneuvering her craft. "Then we take the palace!"

Once on Homeworld, occupying a majority of one of that planet's largest continents, flourished a forgotten gov-ernmental subdivision of humankind called China. Here the martial arts were revered, studied, and developed to a perfection that endured the centuries. Indeed those skills traveled with Galactics to the stars in the form of such disciplines as *Tao Chi*.

Among the weapons prized by those ancient practitioners were staff, knife, sword, and spear. The first was simply called a stick, mother of all weapons. The knife, a name applied to blades either single- or double-edged and less than sixty sems in length, was a common weapon. The sword with its razor edges was given the name Queen for the grace and finesse required in its use.

For the spear the ancients reserved the title King. While merely a knife attached to the end of a stick, the deadly combination produced a weapon that merged the virtues of all the others.

This was the weapon that Songan of Harb had chosen to

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face the twelve attackers within Hinun's throne chamber.

It was a weapon he had mastered by age ten. The same weapon that he swirled about and around himself with such blurring speed that it resembled the rotor blade on a hovervan.

Shortswords thrust forward, slashed inward, lashed down-ward again and again as the Hinuri circled the offworld giant in a ring of flashing steel.

Thrust, slash, jab were to no avail. The shaft of that twirling spear within the hands of a master was *King!* Each blow was met and redirected from its intended victim with such ease that the Harbian appeared to be toying with the twelve armored men.

Songan was not.

The spear was more than a spinning stick. At one end was a deadly sliver of steel that dipped, thrust, jabbed, and slashed with uncanny accuracy.

Over the edge of a shield it flashed to strike its single fang into an eye and the brain behind. In a silvery dance it dipped to sever an Achilles tendon. Slashing, it laid open a jugular vein. It arched up to slice its keen edge into the pit of an extended arm, cutting the arteries that pulsed there.

Hands, legs, arms, face, feet, and neck-any exposed flesh was vulnerable to that singing, spinning spear tip. Time and again Songan found unguarded openings and used them to his advantage.

When at last the deceptively simple weapon ceased its tornado-whirl of motion, twelve Hinuri lay dead or dying in a bloody circle about the Harbian. He paid them no heed, but ran to the pillar in which Hinun had escaped. Slapping his red-stained palm to its surface, he grinned when the hidden door opened to admit him to the hidden elevator within.

The floor shuddered beneath his feet when the device began to rise. Still grinning, Songan glanced up. The grin faded. A churning cloud of yellow-green mist hissed from the elevator's ceiling and drifted down toward his head.

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The air crackled with ionized energy. A lone crimson pulse shot from the nose of *Fleet Return*.

Vam Yuw clenched his teeth as he glared at the display, watching that single discharge of the pulsar beamer flash downward on target. An eerie red veil of screaming energy danced over the hull of the in-grav boat. For an instant. In the next an actinic glare filled the monitor as the ship exploded-disintegrated. Its molecular structure was shred-ded by the P-beam.

When that blinding explosion faded, a charred crater in the palace garden and the blackened bodies of both Hinuri and rebel strewn on the ground were all that remained.

"That should give the monster something to occupy his warped mind!" Val grinned as she swiveled to Yuw. "Program encoded into SIPACUM?"

Vam nodded. At Valustriana's order he had locked the navigation system in to two commands. One: *land*-straight down, gently kissing what remained of the garden below. Two: *liftoff* and hover a hundred meters straight up. By

depressing either of two keys, the inexperienced Mu Tan could now completely control the ship.

"The ultrasonics are set at fifty per cent," Val said as she shoved from her seat and turned to the Saipese. "The second you drop us I want this bucket back in the air. Zap anyone who comes within ten meters of the palace! Man, woman, child, rebel or Hinuri. There's enough chaos down there now without adding more warm bodies-so *cool* 'em! Got that litt'un?"

Mu Tan nodded, her expression one of silent relief. At fifty per cent the spacer's ultrasonics were no more than a spray-beam stopper set at Two for unconsciousness.

"Kaleena, Varn: get below. It's time to clean up this shit-ball of a planet."

Valustriana See, Agent Prime, TGO, waved Outie and Shenese from the control cabin.

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Hinun stood on the roof of the palace, his head tilted back. He squinted to stare at the mammoth ship that hung above. How gigantic it was—a behemoth at least three times the size of the scout ship that had brought Midnight Flower to his planet.

So near . . . yet so far!

It hovered there over the garden as though taunting him with all the stars and life-filled planets that could be his . . . if only the ship were at his command. It was a situation the Great God now doubted would ever be his to savor.

He had seen its invisible beams cut down legion upon legion of his Hinuri. From his lofty vantage point, he could glower down on the rabble that swarmed through *his* city's streets to *his* palace. Soon the mass of men and women would join those who now fought *his* guards below. At the very gates to his sanctuary.

If worse came to worst and the tide of rebellion swept him away, it would be but a minor defeat. This shell he wore would die, but his memories would be passed to the others who struggled to claim the jeweled throne.

Surely one of my brothers is prepared to claim this wonderful ship as his own! Whether in this body or his, the stars will eventually be mine!

Hinun saw the needle-like protuberance slide from the nose of the spacer, saw that flash of red. Why he threw himself face down on the floor, he did not know. A thousand years of existence had sharpened his survival instincts beyond those of a mere human.

The blinding light of the P-beam and the explosion that followed left the Mind-Eater unharmed instead of charring his body as it did those of the Hinuri and rebels below.

Hinun's overstuffed mind quaked.

The Power! / have underestimated these offworlders and their might!

He was able to smile. *The fault just might be a mutual one. There is still time to secure that gargantuan spacer . . . for myself!*

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Hinun rose, turning toward the elevator. He stopped, his face darkening. The hum of motors came from within. The image of the darkling giant he had left facing his Hinuri flashed into his mind.

While no man on Shen could stand against his personal guards, Songan was not of Shen. Hinun would not under-estimate the Galactics again.

Pivoting, the Great God of Shen ran toward a dropshaft that opened at the other side of the roof. Robes afurl about him, he jumped into the circular tube and gently floated down into darkness.

Valustriana snapped one of the sonic bombs from the belt strapped across her chest. She squeezed it and hurled it up the stretching flight of stairs and into the palace. The whine rose, echoing and rebounding off the marble walls. It was a nasty sound: a sound guaranteed to render uncon-scious any human or android.

The guarantee wasn't enough. The big Outie lifted her plasma pistol and fired into the open doors. A second blast of sizzling blue energy shot into the palace as Kaleena followed Val's lead.

"The research wing first! Save the equipment if possi-ble!" Val shouted as she waved Varn and Kaleena up the stairs after her. "If not, melt it . . . and anyone who gets in the way!"

On the opposite side of the palace, half way up another grand flight of marble stairs, Suleta and fifty of her Shenese rebels fought their way toward a pair of steel doors that lay open to emit a never-ending stream of armored Hinuri.

She heard the explosion, felt the earth quake when the P-beam reduced the in-grav boat to random molecules. For an instant she wondered how the overweight Outie and his meek crewmate fared . . . but then her attention was diverted by a guard who rushed forward intent on skewer-ing her on the tip of a thrusting spear!

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Deftly Suleta sidestepped the jab, then swung high with the shortsword she carried. The blade sang as it slipped above the Hinuri's shield and sank into the softness of an exposed neck.

Suleta wrenched the sword away. The android soldier tumbled forward with blood fountaining from his severed jugular.

The killing whine of the sonic bomb screamed from within the palace, followed by two exploding balls of plasma energy. The Hinuri no longer streamed from the gaping doors.

Suleta yelled a cry of triumph and encouragement to her followers.

Sword slashing and fending, she rushed toward those open portals.

TGO-The Gray Organization!

Mu Tan now thoroughly understood Varnalgeran's visible fear and the painful slap he had given her. Even a slave on Saiping had heard of the galaxy-wide peace-keeping force and the rumored cruelties it perpetrated in the name of "order."

She also recognized the severity of her position and of *Fleet Return's* other crew members.

If Booda is truly a benevolent deity he will give me strength to do what must be done!

With a silent prayer on her lips, the diminutive golden woman homed the ultrasonics on the battle that swept up the front stairs of the palace, and opened fire.

Crouched on the floor of the elevator, Songan stared up at the yellow-green cloud that settled sem by sem closer to the compact ball of his body. His nostrils tingled with the biting odor of the gas. Cyanide-ancient and simple but effective. Had he breathed. Songan did not!

When he had first noticed the gas billowing from the ceiling, he had dropped to the floor and sucked in one

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chest-expanding breath. He held it while the elevator crept slowly upward in pursuit of the escaping god of Shen.

The gas and the snail's pace of the elevator had undoubtedly been planned for just such an occasion. The trap would have snared any Shenese. It would have caught the Harbian, too, had it not been for chance-fate that balanced on one glance upward.

Beneath his feet, Songan felt the rumbling vibrations of the ancient elevator motor dwindle. The door before him slid open.

Rolling, the master of *Fleet Return* somersaulted out of the death chamber. Pale chartreuse wisped after him. He came up with spear leveled before him to fend attack. There were no Hinuri to greet his spear's tip. Nor was Hinun waiting. The Great God's purple robes could barely be seen as they fluttered down the open mouth of a dropshaft.

Spear tightly clutched in his right hand, Songan darted after the mad tyrant.

Varnalgeran Yuw's arm shot out to swing the muzzle of Val's plasma gun upward before she could broil the auburn-haired woman who came running through the palace doorway.

"Suleta!" he called to the leather-clad Shenese, and waved her to his side.

Blooded sword in hand, she trotted across the immense rotunda to the Outie. Her leathers were splotched with blood that was not hers.

"Hinun? Has the Mind-Eater been slain?"

Varn shrugged and Val raised an uncertain eyebrow while she stared down at the Shenese woman.

"Rather small, Varn, for a man with obvious large tastes!" the amazon said, before she pivoted and strode toward the research wing of the palace.

The intricately worked tapestry that concealed the door to the wing, as well as the door, evaporated when Val triggered another plasma bolt.

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Hinun's sandaled feet echoed down the empty halls of the palace's first floor while he ran toward the monitor room of his Creators. While this wing had always been his private domain, it seemed suddenly vacant and abandoned as the alien ruins that had been discovered a year before his creation on Camentalia. No man, woman, or Hinuri stood within the doorways on either side of the long hall.

For the second time in his long procession of lives, the Great God felt panic and fear. A moan of terror rumbled up from his throat-to leave his lips in a high-pitched whistle!

Damn! The Jarp!

Memories, alien experiences that refused to be filed neatly away within Hinun's human frame of reference surged within his mind. For an instant they deluged him in a churning tide that sought to drown all the humanity his Creators had programmed within the expanded capacity of his brain.

As he had done for the days and nights since feasting on the orange-skinned Hinote, he exerted himself and forced the alien flood back before it swamped him in the exotic flavor of Jarp experience.

He had been greedy and foolish. The Jarp should have been the last of the offworlders to be joined to his mind. A few days had not been enough to categorize and store the distorted logic and perception that had dwelled in Hinote's brain. Now there wasn't time to give those alien images and sensations the time needed to prepare separate memory space to contain them.

Now there is only time enough to get to the monitor room!

Sizzling blue light exploded the steel door at the end of the corridor down which Hinun ran.

If that time remains to me!

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Varnalgeran Yuw was the first to see Songan, standing halfway down the corridor, signaling with a spear like some primitive warrior out of sub-ancient history. Before Varn could call out, the Harbian waved him to silence, then gestured the four forward.

With caution Varn, Val, Kaleena, and Suleta crept toward the captain of *Fleet Return*. He held out an open palm to halt them two meters from him. Songan pointed to an open door just before him and silently mouthed one word.

"Hinun!"

He then held up three fingers.

Varn glanced at his three companions. They nodded. The Outie gave his friend a tilt of his head to accept the count of three for their rush into the room.

One of Songan's fingers folded.

Sweat beaded Mu Tan's delicate brow. Helplessly she stared at the con. She was unable to do anything but that-stare!

Alarms blared within the con-cabin. Console lights and glo-buttons pulsed and blinked insanely. Telits tried desperately to tell her what she could not understand. Just above her head a monitor flashed red as SIPACUM spelled out in bold letters the imminent catastrophe facing the ship and its sole occupant. An invisible fist had reached up from the palace and snared the spacer-a tractor!

That fist now threatened to jerk *Fleet Return* from the Shenese sky.

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Songan skidded to a halt a stride within the room. He stared straight ahead into the grinning face of Hinun and the barrel of a plasma beamer-his own! The same weapon he had stupidly left within the palace when this android "god" had taken him to Yoluta.

"One step and I bring your spacer down atop the palace!" Hinun's left hand tensed about a lever set into the panel to his left.

"Tractor! Songan, he can do it!" Varn warned. "The bastard almost got us with it four days ago!"

From the corner of an eye, Songan saw Val's hand rise ever so slightly. The amazon apparently was willing to risk the chance that her trigger finger was quicker than Hinun's hand.

Songan was. *Fleet Return* was his ship!

His hand snaked out, fingers locking about Val's wrists and squeezing. Before bone gave way beneath unbelievable strength, her fingers opened. The gun dropped from her hand-to dangle like a pendulum from the line attached to the power-pak on her thigh.

Icy olivine eyes shifted to Songan. There was no mistaking the hate he saw afire there.

"A wise move, Captain," Hinun said, his grin widening with confidence. "Now I suggest that all of you lay your weapons down! Immediately! I have no intention of allowing you to take Hinun!"

Songan neither spoke nor moved. His dark gaze glared 218

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at the swine who held the fate of his ship in his left palm.

"I'm not jesting! You-all of you-will die when I yank the ship from the sky!" Hinun's voice rose, his face reddening with each word. "But Hinun will *live*! In the mind of my brother, I will live!"

"Brother?" Varn glanced at Songan for some clue to the meaning of that strangeness.

Songan only waved him to silence. "Do as the bastard says! Holster your guns and drop them on the floor!"

Hinun's eerie eyes gleamed with sensed victory as Songan bent to place his spear on the floor. "Again you display wisdom, Captain."

The insane god of Shen chuckled. In spite of his destroyed Hinuri and the power these offworlders had at their finger-tips, he had won! The jeweled throne would remain his! The spacer would give him the stars!

Out there lay more knowledge and more . . . billions of minds all aswirl with memories!

Hinun laughed, unable to contain the joy of the moment. Upward the laughter pushed from his chest and came from his mouth . . . in a series of meaningless *t'EEwt's* and *tr'illee'sl*

Songan's hand did not hesitate. Whether or not the personality of his computerician could exist in the mind of Hinun was a metaphysical question that the Harbian had no time to consider. He did know that he had witnessed the Mind-Eater's momentary loss of self-control in the throneroom. This time he was in a position to take advantage of another such lapse. It was something he personally owed Hinote!

In one fluid motion, Songan hurled the spear toward the obscenity that called itself a god.

While the Mind-Eater desperately fought to contain the alien images that cluttered his mind, the spear tip struck squarely at his solar plexus and shafted upward to embed itself deeply.

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Bewildered by the pain that burned into his body like a fiery brand, Hinun stumbled away from the console and the tractor control. Wildly his hands clawed at the long haft protruding from beneath his rib cage.

His aqua eyes stared at Songan, filled with incomprehension. Then there was nowhere for his swaying retreat to take him. The rear wall of the room pressed unyieldingly against his back. The Great God of Shen, Hinun the Mind-Eater, the Devourer of Souls, slid downward. Star-ing up at the man who had impaled him like a pig spitted for the roasting pit.

"Varn, the tractor!" Songan shouted as he darted across the room to the dying android.

The Outie moved with equal speed to remove the elec-tromagnetic hand that threatened to smash *Fleet Return* into the palace.

"You win . . . Captain." An amused smile moved over Hinun's lips accompanied by thick flow of blood.

"And you lose! Even now my memories are enriching the mind of my bro-"

Hinun hesitated. His gaze rose to the faces of those who had brought him to this most ignominious end. His smile stretched with wicked languor. Recognition ignited those cold blue eyes.

"You . . . you . . . my *sister!*" Hinun's right hand dropped from the spear shaft and shakily rose to indicate two women-Kaleena and Suleta. "My brilliance! My *sisss* . . ."

The word trailed away, and his hand fell lifelessly into his lap. The king had died-long live the *queen!*

"Varn! Val! Cover them!" Songan called, as he scooped up the pistol Hinun had dropped. He swung it on the two Shenese women.

"Ever so slowly now, drop your weapons to the floor," Songan said coolly. Warily he eyed Kaleena-whom he knew from the palace-and the auburn-haired woman he had never seen before. "Varn, who is she?"

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"Suleta. She led the attack on the palace." Yuw identi-fied his forest lover without hesitation. "Songan, dammit, what's going on?"

"One of these lovely ladies is Hinun!" Songan said, and explained the insidious secret Shen's god had revealed within his throneroom.

"Melt them both to grease puddles," Val suggested in a tone that left no doubt she wanted to do just that. "If one of them is Hinun, there's one very sure way to be certain he . . . she . . . *it* doesn't get away!"

Songan shook his head, surprised by the big woman's cold-blooded solution to the problem.

Under Songan's direction, Suleta and Kaleena stepped back from their weapons.

Suleta and Kaleena-one who would be a god! The problem was, which one?

As certain as Hinun had chosen a young and handsome male body, Songan knew the monster would select a young and beautiful female body to shelter his millennium-old mind. Both these women were beautiful. Even their eyes were the same cold blue of the dead god's irises.

"My girth . . ." Varn mumbled as though speaking to himself. He lifted a hand to his belly, then stared at Suleta. "You noted that my 'healthy girth' was unusual for a spacefarer, Suleta. My lovely seductress, there was no way for you to have known that my *girth* was anything out of the ordinary along the spaceways unless . . ."

"Scum!" Suleta screamed and dived for the plasma pistol on the floor.

Her fingers never touched its permamold butt. Varn squeezed his own gun. The hissing bolt of blue energy caught her in mid-air.

For the second time in a matter of minutes, Hinun the Mind-Eater died.

Neither offworlder nor Shenese spoke. All of them stared mutely down at the indefinable lump of charred flesh that
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had been the body-one of the bodies-of the Great God of Shen.

Varnalgeran Yuw tightly squeezed his eyes closed to hold back the moisture that misted his vision. He had killed the Mind-Eater, but the memory of one wonderful night and the glorious woman who had shared it filled his mind.

Hand over her mouth, Kaleena was the first to move. Attempting to hold back the increasing intensity of the nausea that swept through her stomach, she turned and ran from the room. Songan and Varn hurried after the blond. Both were quite willing to leave the smoldering corpse behind.

They were at the door when Valustriana See ordered them to halt and throw down their weapons.

One look at the determined clench of her jaw and the muzzle of her plasma pistol convinced both of the serious-ness of her order. They complied and submissively walked outside, down the hall, across the rotunda into the opposite wing of the palace. There she locked them se-curely within the sleeping chamber Hinun had provided during her brief stay in the palace.

Fifteen minutes later, Mu Tan joined her crewmates in the bedchamber transformed into prison cell.

Songan's attempts to scrute the situation brought but three letters from his First Mate-TGO. The Outie then sat on the floor hugging legs to chest. Resting his chin upon his knees, he stared at the wall from under the brim of his Wayne.

"TGO!" Songan snarled. "Damn your hide, Varn-is that all you can say?"

Pos. For Varnalgeran Yuw, that was all he was *allowed* to say. And even that might have been too much!

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Songan's gaze traveled about the blackened remnants of Hinun's garden as he stood under guard beside the hull of *Fleet Return*. The seven days locked within a luxurious although confining prison cell had brought a slew of changes to the palace. Most noticeable were the gray and maroon uniforms of TGW officers-as numerous now as Hinun's Hinuri had once been.

Perhaps even more numerous. An incredible seven TGW destriers orbited this "unknown" planet.

Songan wondered. Were the Shenese any better off than when his spacer had jam-crammed from the Tachyon Trail into real space less than two weeks ago?

Or has one tyrant been toppled only to make way for another-the Great God Burok! A Devourer of Souls and Destroyer of Minds in a far subtler fashion than Hinun ever considered!

Mu Tan nudged his arm, bringing him from his less-than-satisfying soliloquy. She nodded toward them:

Varnal-geran Yuw and Valustriana See. The mismatched pair approached from Emergency Field HQ: TGW, once the palace of Hinun. Kaleena followed a step behind them. She wore rather more than beads.

Songan could not suppress the shiver elicited by sight of Valustriana crisply attired in the gray and maroon of TGW. Never mind how marvelous her legs looked in those stripe-seamed tights. Songan-a master of disguise.-wondered if this were another disguise for the big woman. TransGalactic

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Watch was the lesser, uniformed branch of TGO. She was elite; TGO Prime.

Neither of the Duties smiled, or spoke or glanced at each other. A rift divided them, Songan realized, forever. It was too wide a chasm for either thief or policer to bridge. The rift was called TransGalactic Order. The Gray Organization.

"*Captain* Songan," she said with crisp formality, "my superiors have left the decision as to what to do with you, your ship and crew to me. Against my better judgment, I'm giving you exactly one hour to punch your ship back onto the Tachyon Trail. One hour, Captain." Ostentatiously she set the timer on her chron. "After that, the destriers will shoot to kill. To destroy, Songan."

Without waiting for any reply she signaled the guard to open *Fleet Return's* hatch. Eyebrows up in a strange sort of whimsical expression, she looked back at Songan.

"There are two conditions you must agree to before this ship may lift off. One: You take this and do with it as you will." She shoved a sealtite box into his arms. "It's a data file I found in Hinun's computer. The only copy, Songan. It has something to do with the lives of two escaped slaves from planet Harb. I am the only person who has seen the readout."

Damn! Hinun took more than my memories of Yoluta that night in the lab!

A sensation of dread chilled his spine. Dread of what could have been. Val knew everything about Dorjan-the thief some called the Demon Cat-and Songan's part in that successful life of crime. Yet she was handing over to him the only solid evidence she had. It didn't make sense. Was TGO not all ice?

"Secondly," the tall woman said, "you take Kaleena with you. You're two hands short and can use the help anyhow. Besides, Shen will be no place for this girl for several years . . . until someone decides just what to do with this shit-ball." She glanced at Kaleena, waved her

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onboard the spacer. Her stare returned coldly to Songan. "One hour, Captain."

With that Agent Prime Valustriana See, Yarn's "ama-zon goddess," pivoted and with her back to *Fleet Return* and its crew, walked back toward the TGW Emergency Field Headquarters.

Varnalgeran Yuw tugged his friend toward the hatch. "Move it, you overgrown gorilla! She damned well meant that about the hour!"

Songan avoided glancing at his girthy friend. He could only describe Yuw's tone as an imitation of the cavalier flippancy he associated with the Outie. Plenty had hap-pened on Shen-and some aspect of it had shaken Varn's confidence right down to his high-heeled boots.

Whatever the cause, Songan would not ask. *Maybe some day I'll find out*, he mused as he walked through his ship and entered the control cabin. *But I wouldn't make a big bet on it. In his own way, Varnalgeran Yuw is as stubborn and tight-lipped as . . . Songan of Harb.*

He weighed the box in his hands. Varn was as much an enigma as his fellow Outreacher Valustriana. Almost smiling, Songan stretched forth an arm and dropped the data file into the converter. Instantly box and contents poofed into recyclable atoms.

"I don't know what possessed that TGO bitch to give me that, but I thank her," he said as he took his seat at the con.

"You're wrong, Songan," Varn said in a low voice, without looking up from SIPACUM. "She's a lady-a *grand lady!* She gave us our freedom, no strings attached. Standard TGO procedure says we should have been *tagged*. Freedom-in exchange for a promise of service rendered when and where TGO requires such service . . . without question."

Songan stared at his friend. How could Varn possibly know what standard TGO procedures "said"?

He didn't ask. Songan did not want to know. "Mu Tan,

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find Kaleena a place to hang on! We have exactly fifty-five minutes to get our butts onto the Tachyon Trail!"

Varn asked, "Inslot the cassette for Hawking?"

"Neg. Back to Barbro. Hawking holds nothing further for any member of this crew." Songan did not turn from con. He had just told Varn that he'd buried his dead on this forgotten imperial colony, and he was sure Varn had understood.

"Fleet Return is headed for galaxy center, Varn-where the action is! The Demon Cat has been napping. I think it's time we woke him and claimed a share of the riches waiting for us!"

Abruptly Songan chuckled. His fingers danced across the console to bring *his* ship to life. The spacer trembled, seemed to sigh, and rose from the ground. Then it sprang upward toward the space ways.

His laughter was chorused by an overweight Outie in an eleven-gallon hat, and by two very attractive women. They were not positive of the reason for the mirth from Captain and First Mate, but they liked it. Mu Tan and Kaleena were relieved simply to be leaving Shen behind them- along with memories of an insane god.

Epilogue

The dyre-wolf lay curled in the shadow of the palace to escape the midday sun when the spaceship's engines thundered to life. His pointed ears perked for an instant, then lay flat against his skull.

The ship was gone. It didn't matter. Seven ships-larger ones-now circled the dyre-wolf's world. In time, perhaps others. He could wait.

The door to the palace opened and the wolf scampered to its feet. Tail wagging, it romped playfully to and about the two uniformed women who descended the stairs.

"Here you go, Sperse!" The one with the tightly coiled hair tossed him a wad of tasteless soyameat.

The wolf gobbled it down as if it were fresh-slain doe, tail brushing the air. It yipped for more, then settled for a scratch behind the ears.

"Feels good huh, Sperse ole boy? Like to have your ears scratched, don't you boy?" She knelt beside him to slap a palm to one big shaggy shoulder.

Appreciatively the dyre-wolf licked at her strange-smelling face, carefully controlling the urge to sink his fangs into the sweet softness of her flesh. The carnage that had reigned on Shen for the past weeks had given the massive beast a decided taste for human flesh.

"Grabbles! Where'd you find a grat *this* size?" the other woman in gray and maroon asked, squatting beside her companion. Interesting pheromonal scent about her!

"Believe it or not, he just followed me home four days *227*

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ago and has followed me ever since," the tight-curved one said. She rose. "C'mon Sperse, let's go home. It's been a long day!"

Long too for me, my lovely, the wolf thought as it trotted after the two officers. *But I have learned patience and I can wait!*

And wait he would. His brother and sister had failed in their bid for the jeweled throne. The computer-transmitted memories that had flooded his head at the moment of their deaths had revealed their shortcomings. He would not repeat their mistakes. All he need do was wait, and win the confidence of these smugly superior Galactics. Then he would creep into the palace they usurped, and enter his secret chamber buried so deeply beneath the ground, and there reclaim a more convenient form. The human form.

Hinun will sit upon the jeweled throne again-someday! Until then, I will learn from these weak humans!

"I really can't get over how big he is!"

The one with the tight curls laughed. "Wait until you hear him bark! Sometimes it sounds as if the clever boy's trying to whistle!"