

Take one fifty-year-old man with a brain of a twelve-year-old who was dying of myasthenia gravis. Take the body of one Jarp whose head had been crushed. Add . . . some other things. Mix that together and put what was left into the tank for awhile. Play with various combinations of arms, legs, mouths and "mouths", tentacles, genitals, and pseudopods until a suitable combination is achieved. Feed in memories and "memories"-some true, some false. Take it out of the tank. Voila! SPACEWAYS #1 OF ALIEN BONDAGE #2 CORUNDUM'S WOMAN #3 ESCAPE FROM MACHO #4 SATANA ENSLAVED #5 MASTER OF MISFIT #6 PURRFECT PLUNDER #7 THE MANHUNTRESS #8 UNDER TWIN SUNS #9 IN QUEST OF QALARA #10 THE YOKE OF SHEN #11 THE ICEWORLD CONNECTION BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK The poem Scarlet Hills copyright (c) 1982 by Ann Morris; used by permission of author. SPACEWAYS #11: THE ICEWORLD CONNECTION A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with the author PRINTING HISTORY Berkley edition / May 1983 All rights reserved. Copyright (c) 1983 by John Cleve. Cover illustration by Ken Barr. This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission. For information address: Berkley Publishing Corporation. 200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York, 10016. ISBN: 0-425-06067-5 A BERKLEY BOOK (r) TM 757,375 The name "BERKLEY" and the stylized "B" with design are trademarks belonging to Berkley Publishing Corporation. PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA For Jay and Vol, comers through 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 I believe fervently in our species and have no patience with the current fashion of running down the human being. On the contrary, we are a spectacular, splendid manifestation of life. We matter. We are the newest, youngest, brightest thing around. -Lewis Thomas, The Medusa and the Snail One problem with the Galactics-these "human beings"-is that they think they are the brightest thing in the universe, and that they somehow matter.' -Carnadyne of Ice world, Memoirs 1 Penejac's eyes missed nothing as he walked boldly along the stark plasteel corridor of the enemy ship. He made no attempt to hide or skulk. The bright lights and the crowded ship-tunnels had become familiar to him. A big man and strong, he was a welcome addition to the crew of these . . . slime. His scarred face was set deep in thought. His image was that of icy calm, a man with a job to do. A man who was doing it well. That was what Penejac showed. Inside were the dark tendrils of nervousness and apprehension, all too familiar. Maybe even a little fear. Penejac fought it, kept it under firm control. His training had seen to that. Still, he was keyed. This is it. Today's the day. Now's the time. A crewmate passing him in the tunnel reached out to clap him on the shoulder. "Hello, Sparky." Penejac nodded and kept walking. The man was a technician whom he knew and disliked. The fobber had fits of unpredictable violence. Penejac did not-although he was more than capable of violence. He was deep cover this time, posing as an engineer on the pirate spacer. It had taken months to get this far. Months of lying and deceit among these swine. Months of working side by side with men he couldn't stand. It was the ancient cliché: a dirty job-but-someone-had-to-do-it. He had drawn the short straw. Too much hijacking and too much drug traffic. It formed a pattern, after a while. It had to be stopped. 2 Almost desperately, Tri-System Police had sent him undercover. They had no idea that he had an even deeper cover. The hijacker-ships' crews were drawn from the dregs of a multitude of

planets. The one thing they had in common was a willingness to ride the outlaw trail, to prey on human weakness. They dealt in the newly developed permutation of tetrazombase. Para-TZ was the most insidious drug humankind had ever developed. A microgram of para-TZ induced uncontrollable ecstasy. Taken to excess-as it invariably was by those under its irresistible spell-it brought on paralysis and a very ugly death. The thought of D'oonna made Penejac's jaw tighten. He could still remember the long black hair that cascaded down her back, her friendly smile of greeting. She was the only halfway decent person he had met on the ship. She had become almost a friend. Perhaps she would have been, under different circumstances. Or more than a friend. Instead, she had died. She had died horribly. D'oonna's life had been twisted by bad luck and bad companions. Fate had broken her back over the years and led her to link herself with the pirates. After that it was all downhill. She had seen something in Penejac- maybe a spark of goodness in the man they knew as Sparky-even while he posed as one of them. A smuggler. He had seen that decency in her, too. It was well submerged and even camouflaged, but it was there. He had tried to pull it out. He had failed. She had taken the easy way out, which was eventually the hard way. In a fruitless attempt to sidestep the pain in her life, D'oonna had turned to para-TZ. He could still see her swollen face, twisted in agony, her once beautiful features lost in the black rages of unbearable suffering. She had died in his arms, wanting only more of the drug that was killing her. Penejac knew the agonies that had rocked her fever- 3 ish mind in her last few minutes. It hurt him and the hurt went in and in. So did his knowledge that similar ugly scenes were being played out all along the spaceways. Across the galaxy, a hundred thousand addicts a day were dying just such miserable deaths. The only freedom from their suffering was that eventual, inevitable death. D'oonna had made it personal. Now Penejac hated the smugglers with a genuine personal passion. He despised the drug and what it did to innocent people. Now at last it was time to act-to bring down the roof on this slimy crew. Now he loved his job! The ship was one of an incredible covey of four pirate craft. Big ships, all heavily armed and stuffed with para-TZ. Extracted from broadleaf harvested on a windswept planet, the pure drug in the cargo holds was the result of almost a year's worth of crop-tending and harvesting. There's enough of the junk onboard these four ships to poison a dozen planetary systems, he mused, tight of lip. Soon the ships would scatter and distribute their deadly cargo throughout the galaxy. Now was the time to hit them, before they went their separate ways. The loss would be devastating. Penejac turned the tunnel and entered the engineering room. Yasunari was on duty, soft-shod feet up on a desk, face buried in a sex-flimsy with a lurid cover. Yasunari looked up from his sleazine, frowned. "What're you doing here, Sparky? This ain't your shift." He lowered his feet to the floor, frowning at the other man in obvious suspicion. "Chief asked me to check out a couple of circuits. Seems to be a loose connection or ... something." Penejac rolled his eyes. "I don't know. I hope that's all it is! Want to call him?" Penejac hoped the Terasak wouldn't call to check on him. That would only cause trouble. Premature trouble, and probably Yasunari's premature death. But Yasunari was flipping his fingers. 4 "Neg, neg. Try to be quick about it, will you?" And he went back to his flimsy. He was well aware that the chief had an outrageous temper and definitely didn't like being disturbed. Penejac had counted on this man's not bothering the chief, and it looked as if he had counted right. "I just do what I'm told," Penejac said, managing a little whine. "Good attitude," Yasunari said. "Ya'll live longer 'at way, Sparky." He hoisted his feet back atop the desk. Penejac went to the side of the main console and pried off the gray plasteel hatch. The blinding mosaic of mite-sized chips inside, bright red and gold, pale green to black, were the heart of the ship. They charted its course, monitored its life-support systemry, kept its log and cooked its meals. They even flushed the toilets and initiated the recycling process. Destroy that iridescent orange one and the drive would die; touch that pair of bright blue and metallic silver and half the comm-system would cease to

function. Penejac pulled his test equipment from his belt and poked about for a while, looking busy. Yasunari wouldn't know the difference. Penejac muttered an occasional curse. The point was that all Yasunari ever did was push buttons. He had no knowledge at all of the inner workings of the machinery he used. Penejac had been doing most of the trouble-shooting and repair work since he'd come onboard. The crew had been glad to have someone around to do the real work, the dirty work. No one on the ship did any more than it absolutely had to. Penejac tested a few circuits. They tested out fine, of course. When he was satisfied that Yasunari wasn't looking, he carefully bridged two chips and slid a printed board out of the way to reveal a hidden microswitch. He worked slowly, with precision. One slip now could ruin the whole plan. The chips were self-monitoring. Alarms 5 would begin to sequence the moment his tampering was discovered. First the red trouble light for the attention of the repair crew . . . and at last the all-ship klaxon that even Yasunari couldn't miss. He'd move then, as if he'd been goosed! Penejac was most careful not to damage the ship. Not yet, he thought, and his lips were gone all tight again. He flicked the microswitch with the tip of his probe. It had taken him a week to find the proper place to wire the switch where it wouldn't set off the alarm and he could be reasonably sure it wouldn't be discovered in a casual check or even search. It had taken him three weeks to install the thing without being seen. He slipped the printed board back into place and removed his temporary bridge between the two chips. Grunting, he worked the heavy panel back into place. So, Penejac, he told himself. You have five minutes. Five short mins! "Find anything?" Yasunari muttered. He didn't look up. "Not much," Penejac told him, ready to kill to avoid a lengthy, time-consuming conversation. "Just a loose connection." "Uh. Hey, you're due back in six hours. Wouldn't hurt if you was to be a few mins early. I could use some extra sack time." "I'll see what I can do," Penejac said over his shoulder, redshifting the chamber. Just over four and a half mins left. He swallowed. He strove to look casual as he headed along the beige-walled tunnel to the crew's quarters. The switch he had thrown had already alerted the T-SP ships he hoped were lying just outside normal detection range. They would wait five minutes after receiving the signal. Then they'd attack, in something like fleet strength. At precisely the same moment a time-delay would flip in the microswitch-which would scramble nearly all the electronic equipment onboard this ship. Although this was but one of four pirate spacers, it was the flagship. 6 The resulting confusion would surely give T-SP an edge. With luck, he could be off the ship before the attack, but he was walking a mighty thin line and knew it. Nobody and nothing would wait for him to get clear. Oh, they'd try to hold off hitting this big ship until he was off. But if it went down to the limit, undercover agent Penevac was expendable. He walked to his bunk and opened the locker, shielding its door with his back. He bent, pried out the false bottom. He took out an object carefully wrapped in cloth. A minicommsender dropped into his hand. He'd felt naked for the last few months without it, out of touch. Yet he had not dared use it until now. Palming it to the proper frequency, he hit the call switch. The unit worked by bone conduction so that he could hear it by pressing it anywhere against his body. A person standing a meter away wouldn't hear a thing. He closed his hand around the transmitter/receiver and an almost forgotten voice spoke at once. "Good work, Pen. Signal coming through fine. Estimate initial contact in about two mins. Good luck." Just as he started to reply to T-SP control, a strong hand grabbed him by the arm. He was twisted roughly around to face Flasher, the DS man who had the bunk next to his. "What you got, Sparky? I seen you sneak something." "Hey, it's mine. Come on now, Flash." Flasher was tall and heavy, a (relatively) human bear who busted heads first and asked questions later. Good man to have as a friend, and all Penejac could do was try to bluff. The connection with T-SP had slipped away. No doubt they were as busy as he was! Less than two minutes left. And Flasher wasn't buying the bluff. He shoved "Sparky" back against the row of yellow lockers. Penejac grunted and pretended to go limp. Flasher grinned. As the huge gunner bent

over him, Penejac recoiled like a tight spring. He hit the larger man under the chin 7 with both fists in a blow that lifted him off his feet to send him sprawling on his own bunk. Penejac headed for the door, at speed. "He's got a flainin' minicomm!" Flasher shouted, however mushily. "Sparky's a sisterslicin' spy! Stop 'im!" Two others had been watching the brief fight, from their bunks. Fights were hardly uncommon among the criminals manning the hijacker-ships, and the outlaws genuinely worked at keeping their noses out of each other's business-unless they were as big as Flasher. This was different. A spy! An enemy, right here shipping with them! Take the bastard and get a bonus sure! Both men pounced off their beds and one got a hand on Penejac before he made it out the door. Here came Flasher and the other one right behind him. With his mouth leaking blood, Flasher was mad. Penejac twisted, jerked up a knee and shoved his accoster back into the other two. They reeled, tangled, and went down in a twisted clump. The T-SP man yanked a bunk up to tip it over on them, and took time to tangle the sheets among flailing arms and legs. Then he ran. Halfway down the tunnel, alarms commenced to ring. A siren sounded its ugly wailing warble while buzzers blatted at half-second intervals. Red lights flashed on and off all up and down the ship's beige corridor. "Hot alert! Hot alert!" a voice shouted from every loudspeaker. "We are under attack. This is not repeat Not A Drill! All hands to battle stations. Arm defense systemry!" Suddenly the tunnels were filled with running men. Some were headed for their combat stations; others were looking in blind panic for a place to hide-as if any safe place existed in space combat! Everyone was yelling at once. Wonderful, Penejac thought, because the mass confusion was excellent cover. He was also running horribly short on time. 8 "We're coming in," his clenched minicomm told him. "Do the best you can, man!" That was it. End transmission. Penejac swallowed hard and ran as hard as he could. He knocked some others this way and that, and was knocked. That was all right, now. Emergencies changed manners and priorities about personal space. He turned into the bright yellow tunnel leading to the escape pods. Here they waited, primed and ready for emergency exits. He tripped over a body as he entered that tunnel, and it saved his life. A crackling burst of raw energy split the air where he had been an instant before. Pulsar beamer! It hit him then: in an attack, a lot of these smugglers and pirates (and would-be pirates) discovered that they were cowards. They'd be trying for the same method of escape he planned. Now he realized that. Two perfectly normal-looking crewmembers stood with their backs to the pods. They had what ship's rules forbade anyone else to possess: energy paks strapped to their legs and belts, and pulsar beamers in their hands. Why not stoppers Penejac couldn't imagine. With those weapons they didn't need an order to shoot to kill; pulsar pistols wouldn't do much else. On the other hand, the pair wasn't firing indiscriminately. Pulsar plasma wouldn't do the ship any good either, and no one expected to lose, surely. The tunnel was a mixture of confusion and nasty little explosions. Smugglers fought smugglers in their desperate efforts to get out of the way of the two guards' kill-bursts. Penejac's stumble was doubly lucky: he rolled, making himself loose and limp. The guards had too much to do to pay much attention to one man, presumably dead. Penejac wallow-crawled over/around a couple of bodies, hardly noticing that unpleasantness in his apprehension unto fear, and worked his way behind a suit-up bench. He rose carefully into a crouch, waiting for others to supply him with the opportunity to make a 9 break past the ruthless guards. Oh, for a weapon! The trouble with the bosses of this smuggling operation was that they trusted no one. Except the two guards. . . . As he watched they coolly slaughtered two more of their fellow crewmembers. The swift, efficient ugliness of that afforded him no chance to try for a dash past them. Then T-SP helped. The whole ship lurched under a sickening jolt. A muffled whunk was quickly followed by an ear-shattering roar. A hit from policer ships of Tri-System Accord, and mighty close by. Now time was running out a lot faster, and Penejac's luck was right with it. His eyes narrowed. That explosion, he saw, had proved too much for one of the guards. The bastard turned his weapon

on his comrade and shot him at point-blank range. Presumably the man died instantly, but right now Penejac wasn't giving many damns about anybody but Penejac. He was sickened by the treacherous display, and yet now he saw his own chance. He leaped for the nearest pod. He almost made it, too. The renegade guard saw him at the last moment and squeezed off a quick bolt at the same time as he pounced into another pod to flee his own ship. Penejac jumped back, twisting away-and felt his leg buckle under him. Something cracked and ice and fire seemed to lance simultaneously into his leg. He fell. His knee was a mass of searing pain. He heard the subdued explosion of bolts and ejector charge, and knew the guard had made it free of the ship. Penejac did not wish him well. Dizzy, crazed and shivering with pain, he pulled himself across the floor toward the open pod door. It seemed impossibly far away. He was aware of voices yelling, but he couldn't make out the words. His body was in pain and he wasn't sure that he was capable of thought. Yet something like instinct thrust him on. He had to get to the pod. It was life, and it was 10 his only chance at life. If only the damned pod were a few kilometers closer. . . . It was a meter and a half and then a meter. Through the jagged redness his knee sent up into his brain, he dragged himself to it. Never . . . give . . . up. . . . Eternity was passing, and he'd never never. . . . He was there! He dragged himself up by the frame of the hatch. His left leg useless, he balanced himself on his right. He didn't dare just lurch inside the escape craft; agony might well black him out. "Penejac," came the hurriedly transmitted thought, and he thought he recognized Randy's voice. "Wherever you are, take cover. We've got to hit that ship now! We're in trouble and it's making an escape." The communication was cut off as suddenly as it had begun. Penejac was extremely alone and profoundly on his own. He blinked sweat out of his eyes and jerked his head to hear sweat patter on a unipolymer plasteel surface. A figure loomed in front of him. Man. Brown coverall. Enemy] Out of reflex, he drew back a fist-and stopped the action. It couldn't be! It was: "Ekmit!" Penejac cried out, in disbelief. He had known Ekmit half his life, maybe longer. A top-notch TGW captain, Ekmit had widespread respect. Five years ago he had got into a hot one-too hot. He had gone Forty Percent City-avoided certain death by dodging into the uncertainty of "subspace" with no scanning and no warning. In other words, Ekmit had jam-crammed, and had become a statistic: one of the forty-point-two-two-six-nine percent who did not come out of tachyon conversion; whose fate was unknown; who was never seen again. Five years ago! No one had seen Ekmit since, certainly. Now here he was-how? Why? Save the questions for later, Penejac told himself, even as he was speaking: "Ekmit! Help me, man-let's get out of here! This ship's about to be Poofed all over the-" 11 Ekmit's eyes remained cold, dead, even though his mouth twisted into a sardonic grin. He slid a knife out of his pak-belt and lunged at Penejac. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Penejac saw the double irony of being attacked by a friend with a knife. An old friend, and a ridiculously primitive weapon; not even a vibeknife. And it didn't matter anything could kill, and dead was dead. No matter who did the killing, or what he used. Penejac dodged a thrust, coming down hard on Ekmit's extended arm. The exertion cost Penejac his balance. He fell and came down a lot harder on the other man's arm. The sharp crack of a breaking bone was followed by the clatter of the knife. It spun off into the recesses of the pod. On the pod's floor the two men wallowed in a cramped, intense battle. A battle of cripples-broken arm against broken leg. Yet Ekmit's eyes continued to hold that dead look while Penejac had fury on his side. He broke his old friend's other arm. Penejac rolled him into a corner and reached up to slap the red EJECT button. Then he tried to relax. . . . The door closed. Penejac was slammed hard against the bulkhead when the pod blasted away from the big ship. It spun crazily, end over end, as Penejac fought his way to the controls. There was the sound of pain in his gasping breathing, but he tried to keep voice out of it. He succeeded, mostly. Abruptly the pod filled with a horripilating sound. Laughter. Maniacal laughter. Sweating, leg shrieking silently, Penejac snapped a look back at the other man. Ekmit was standing by the emergency hatch, a

horrible sight with both arms hanging worse than unnaturally at his sides. He was as bloody as the T-SP man. His eyes had all the humanity and feeling of a pair of marbles. And he was laughing. "Oh no-hold on a sec!" Penejac yelled, struggling to stabilize the spinning pod. "I'm saving us both, Ek!" 12 Ekmit only laughed. Actually jerking his body away and then back, he made one broken arm swing like a ghastly pendulum. It thudded against the striker plate to fire the explosive bolts that would blow away the hatch. "No!" shouted Penejac, and it was the last word he spoke. Just before the bolts blew, a new gleam, a manic light came into the eyes of Ekmit. He seemed to flicker around the edges like a bad hologram. Then he disappeared. Penejac had no time to consider that. An instant later the hatch blew out into cold airlessness and Penejac followed amid a briefly whistling wind. Vacuum swiftly swallowed that gush of air the pod had held, and Penejac. 2 Rantanagar Ehm opened his eyes slowly. Everything was white. Bright lights shone in his eyes and, seemingly off in the distance, a pump whined with a regular rhythm. "He's regaining consciousness, Kirema-daktari." A dim voice, soft, far away. A face, half covered by a surgical shield, loomed over him. "You're going to be all right, Randy," she told him. "I won't lie to you, though. You took a bad one. We're on our way to surgery now. Try to relax." The face looked away for a second. "Nurse, a little more sedative, please." The soft clank of instruments being prepared. Whispery voices he couldn't quite hear. Randy felt a small pressure on his left arm and heard the hiss of an exodermic syringe. He had many questions to ask, but his mouth felt as if it were filled with cotton. Was he still in deep space or someplace else? He'd lost track of time. How had the battle gone? Something had gone wrong. What? "Ratran Yao said to tell you he was pleased with the overall operation. I understand there were complications." The doctor's voice was soothing, as were her hands. She moved Randy a little and made him more comfortable. "Try to rest," she said. It was hard not to rest, with the medication running through his blood. Randy felt drowsy. His eyes closed. 14 Ratran Yao. Smugglers. Para-TZ. Penejac. It came back to him now, slowly, through a fog. Normally TGO would not have had the slightest interest in smugglers, but this had been different. The new permutation of tetrazombase had caught TGO's attention, but only marginally. Drugs were drugs. They came and went. Like power structures, they had their day and disappeared. If this drug killed a few more people than expected, that was of little concern to TGO. Yet this time it was different. This time there was something about the whole operation that didn't feel right. TGO got curious. Ratran Yao sent down the word. The Gray Organization often does good by doing bad. Just get the job done. Too many people were involved, too much associated smuggling and hijacking accompanied the spread of the drug. More to the point, the hijacked cargo just seemed to disappear. The few items that had been recovered had been scattered all over the galaxy. They had been passed from hand to hand until their origin was obscure and worse. Impossible to trace. This was clearly a big one and TransGalactic Order had made it its business to find out who was behind it. Not since Artisune Muzuni had an illegal operation had such a major feel about it. First Penejac went out, deep cover. First to infiltrate the policer force of the Tri-System Accord and then to get himself onboard a smuggler ship. He succeeded, but he didn't learn much. On the other hand he did have time to bait the trap. Yao had set the whole thing up without ever making an appearance. Randy wasn't surprised. Ratran Yao always had a lot of things going on at the same time; that was the nature of TGO and of his near-the-top job. Randy Ehm had been in only on the tail end of the project and at that only because Valustriana See had gone on special detached duty with TGO's uniformed 15 arm way the hell out . . . somewhere. She had been slated for this one, not her fellow Outreacher, Rantanagar Ehm. He was supposed to be on vacation. Tightening his lips against bitterness, he had gone the undercover route, sniffing for leads on three planets and the satellite of another. That had accomplished little and he'd actually been pleased to be riding along with T-SP on what was to have been a rout of the smugglers. It hadn't worked out that way. The operation had been

only a partial success and Randy wasn't sure who was to blame. They had attacked with an armada of ten ships and lost seven, while destroying only two of the smugglers' four craft. Worse, they had no prisoners. The other two big spacers had escaped. How? They'd had the whole area locked up tight. Nothing could get out without at least tripping drone-scanners. Something did get out: two ships. Big ones. Randy could not remember how the fight had ended. The T-SP ship he was on was hit. That much he was sure of. The rest was a cluttered semi-memory of mass confusion. Too much yelling and too many people dying. Noise, noise, a flash of pain- Then he had awakened here. Wherever "here" is, he thought muzzily. Penejac! Damn. They'd lost Penejac. (Again-why?) Randy remembered the time the two of them had been thrown out of the Loophole Bar on Tera-no no, Thebanis. Now that had been a night. They'd decked two spacefarers, a cyberbouncer, and two human ones before getting the toss. Rantanagar Ehm sighed, or thought he did. There'd be no more nights like that one. Not with Penejac Co3034lb. "This is going to be a tough one," Kirema-daktari said. She sounded a million kloms away. 16 Randy realized he wasn't supposed to have heard that. It didn't matter. As tired as he was, he didn't care. He was not able to care. He was actually snoring when they rolled him into surgery. 3 Rantanagar Ehm lay in his hospital bed and stared out at the trees. Or rather at trees, not out at them. It wasn't a real window. They weren't real trees. Everything was illusion. (Nice of them, though, to think of a grove of bluebark, which grew only on his native Outreach.) His recovery had been slow. A long, foot-dragging process. Only part of that had been due to the extent of his injuries. His spirit had taken an even greater beating, and didn't care to knit. The hospital was part of an underground TGO installation, of course. Exactly where, Randy wasn't sure. Number Two, probably, but he really didn't care. Probably deep inside some dead planet. He could have pumped Nurse Appli for its location, and he hadn't bothered. It wasn't worth the trouble. (He wasn't all that fond of talking with Appli, either, and the male nurse, Brenit, was about as talkative as a windowsill.) He was nowhere near Outreach, and that was all that mattered. The holographic projection of the trees against the fake window failed to cheer him. As a matter of fact, it was depressing. He wished he were sitting in the Lode-stone sipping a Musla's Heaven. Or just a beer. He missed Forty Klom Hill-wonderful name for a planetary capital, he'd always thought. Just a nice bar, some good music, strong drink, good friends. A wriggly hust-lord, even a little fight! Something to pass the time, to make it more bearable. Oh, Theba's Holy Curse-I've earned it! 18 Flainin' drug-runners! Never was any business of mine. Nothing therefor me. Nothin' but trouble. The door opened and Kirema-daktari came in. Randy Ehm groaned. Here came more tests. More foolishness. She never left him alone. He was getting tired of it. As a matter of fact, he was tired of almost everything. Appli came in behind the physician. Under other circumstances Randy might have been attracted to her. Now, here, she was part of the problem. Part of the background, part of the depression that engulfed him. She was attractive enough. Fine copper skin, deep brown eyes, and a sensual mouth. Short walnut hair and a rounded body that strained against her scrabbles. Randy shook his head and sighed. Another time, another place. It could have been different. Interesting, even. She had nice legs and explosive-looking warheads. Her hands were deft and competent. And cool. She even knew how to smile. Unsmiling, Appli picked up the scanner and took some quick readings while the doctor walked to the head of Randy's bed. "No change," Appli said. "Stable. All stable." Kirema leaned over him and flashed a light in his eyes. She pressed a small sensor to his forehead, read it with an unchanging expression. Quick and efficient. So was a cybercleaner-and just as personable. Kirema-daktari was a tall and lanky woman, with deep-set onyxes of eyes and thin fingers. She was constantly in motion, a very busy person of apparent-age forty. Her rumply uniforms-light slate gray, always; about as exciting as soyameat stew-hid the rest of her. Probably a blessing, Rantanagar Ehm had thought unworthily. "Ready to get up and run around the block, Rantanagar Ehm?" He looked blank and sighed. "How

are you feeling today?" (She reminded him of his mother. Neither had been able to leave him alone. 19 One had wanted him to be a daktari, for the gods' sake. This one insisted that he was fine, fine.) "Same as yesterday," he said. "Just like the day before." "You have a visitor." "Uh? Who?" She shrugged. "Said she's your sister, but I don't know. Not much family resemblance." She turned to Appli. "I guess he's presentable. Send her in." (Appli was gazing at him, eyes large, head on one side.) What sister? I don't have a sister. Appli stepped into the hall and Randy wondered if she or Kirema had a stopper. At least a nice hypo full of sleepy-by or worse. Sister? Then Appli came back with his visitor. "Uh," he gasped. He was looking at the ugliest woman he'd ever seen. She was a wreck, a short ugly wreck. Her face was covered with warty growths and her eyes seemed a little off center under bushy eyebrows that seemed in the process of turning her whole forehead into a hedge. Her mouth was slack and lifeless. This brown hair, combed with a rake, fell to her stooped shoulders. His "sister's" clothes looked as if she'd picked them out of a sludgepile on Bleak. In a slum. Randy was speechless. Who was this hag? She was so ugly he hated to look at her. Sister? Noflainin' way! She makes the term "sisterslicer" a worse insult than ... he couldn't think of anything horrible enough. "I'm sure you two have a lot to talk over," Kirema-daktari said, and she took Appli's arm. "Firm, Daktari. Let's give these two some privacy." And damned if Nurse Appli didn't wink at Randy as they left. Now she winked! He sat up hurriedly and pushed himself back against the instadjust pillow. (What he wanted to do was get up and run. Right through that un-window, for instance.) Left alone with this-creature! Theba's shinbones! 20 "Backing away, brother dear. Is that any way to greet your baby sister?" She came lurch-hobbling toward the bed. Randy decided that he'd never never let her touch him. He'd touch her first-hard. He didn't know whether to scream, try to run, or throw something at the apparition. "No," he said, pushing himself back as far as he could. "No. Don't do it." "Do what?" she asked, opening her mouth in a twisted grin that revealed a full set of teeth. Unfortunately they were the color of mold. "Just keep your distance! Who the vug are you?" The crone laughed--and vanished. In her place appeared a man of medium height with a face neither handsome nor un-. He was grinning satirically and his eyes shone like discs of black plass. Randy stared. He was in bad shape; he'd been fooled by a holoprojecting aurasuit worn by one of the galaxy's great disguise artists. "Ratran Yao!" "Sh. Call me Hacema. Got that?" "But why . . . yukh! That was an ugly projection!" "Urn." Ratran Yao was pulling over a chair. "I'm fond of it myself. You can practically smell her." "Her! It! I was afraid she was going to rape me." "No such luck," the other man said, showing the excellent musculature on his wiry frame in the skintight aurasuit of charcoal gray. "She was just a way to get in here without being identified. I want to talk with you, Rando. The fewer people who know, the happier I'll be." "Supposed to be someplace else, Rat?" "Oh, I am someplace else. And look--I meant it about the name." Randy nodded. "Sorry. So talk . . . Hacema." The name was the ancient word for "beautiful." Most people thought Rat had no sense of humor. Wrong. Rat had 21 a sick sense of humor. Just as sardonic, as out of phase, as his "smiles"--which never were, quite. Meanwhile the shock was gone and Rantanagar could feel the familiar depression settling back in. His new companion--a numbness, a deadness in the heart and that area of the mind supposedly reserved for giving damns. "I'm talking. How long are you planning on staying in bed?" Randy returned the stare. "As long as it takes." "Takes to do what? Tryst with Kirema? Rot, maybe? She says you're doing fine." . "What does she know," Randy muttered. "It's not her body." "She knows plenty, Rando, and it's not your body she's worried about. Come to think, I never thought much of your body myself.'" That was gratshit, Randy knew; his and his superior's bodies were almost identical. The bodies of a pair of shortstops. Neither had ever played baseball, but both had fought, sneaked, killed, and been killed--or nearly. "Well, I'm worried about my body!" "Wonderful--so you let it waste away in bed. Come on, Ehm. Don't give me that disabled veteran cess. You're too young for that, man. Too

tough. They patched you up good as new. Better-some of those new parts are better looking than the originals. Too bad they didn't do a head transplant. You might have come out handsome." Randy couldn't hold back the smile. Damn it, he had intended to take a hard line with this man of many names. But Ratran Yao knew him too well. Yao knew everybody, eventually, him and those staring black spots of eyes-and "eventually" usually was mighty fast. Now the banter made it hard to be gruff. It also made it hard to say what he felt he had to tell this high-ranking TGO man. He did have to, though, sooner or later. Ratran Yao saw it coming and sidestepped. He was 22 good at that. "He could read people like a book" was just a cliché-and in Rat's case it was also true. "Remember Janja?" Randy frowned. "Jan-oh, the nutty pale blond fraggo who was chasing Jonuta's tail all over the spaceways?" Yao nodded. "She got him." "What?" "Pos, and firmed. Poofed him in her own planet-or just above it. Aglaya. Jonuta is ... atoms. Part of Aglaya by now, probably. Or its atmosphere." "I can't believe it! Captain Cautious! That one was charmed!" "So's 'Janjaglaya.' That little woman was too much for him. She ought to be. After all-I trained her." "Harrrd work, I'm sure. Why'd you send her after Jonuta, R-Hacema? When did he become the business of more than traffic-cop local policers?" "You mean like the Tri-System Accord's?-we're busily blackmailing a dozen people to come up with a new fleet for T-SP. Anyhow ... I felt I had to. Should. She was carrying a massive grudge against him. Vengeance. He killed her first lover, back on that iron-age planet. She wouldn't have been worth a vug until she'd settled that score. Now she has. It was her first mission." "Off to a mighty impressive start!" Randy tried to intone drily. "No doubt she will develop into a fine agent and draw wonderful assignments like my last one. Great." "Neg. She got chewed out. We had a man with Jonuta, to keep us posted as to where to find him. He was also in the lander with Cap'n Cautious when Janja blew it away." "Who?" Oh lord, lord, another good man gone. Who this time? "You didn't know him, Randy." Yao leaned back and opened the front of the snug aurasuit. "You had a pretty good start too, I remember." 23 Randy grinned in spite of himself. "I couldn't believe that Jarp!" "The woman was pretty good, too. At least that's what I heard." "True." Randy smiled. The whole experience of his first assignment had been a pleasant surprise. "On the other hand," he said, wiping the smile, "it was hardly all fun and games." "Oh, really?" Yao's face didn't change. He shrugged. "You bribed the man just as you were supposed to do, and now we own him. And as to the swine you took out on that same mission-no one ever thought of connecting it with us. Rando, you did a good clean job." The bedridden Outie nodded. No bystanders. No mess. Quick. A little reward afterward, the same night he made the massive illegal campaign contribution to the woman who was now planetary Councillor. He had known that Jarps were horny hermaphrodites and heard that they were sexually insatiable, but it was the first time he'd experienced it. Unforgettable. As to the now-planetary Councillor who was firmly, secretly in TGO's pocket-she'd aimed hard to please, too. And succeeded. Pos; it had been a good start to his career. It was the missions that followed that had worn him thin. And then this one. "I didn't do so badly with you either, did I?" Yao almost smiled. Almost. "I don't waste my time with Bleakers, after all." "Maybe you're wasting your time now," Randy said dully, slipping down in the bed and back into his depression. "Shit," Ratran Yao said succinctly. "You took some lumps-most of us have. They were almost as bad as this time, and you came back for more. Agent Rantanagar Ehm Reporting Sah! You always came back for me, looking ready to take on an army of pirates-or horny Jarps. Sure, you fobbed off now and then, but you . . . never . . . gave . . . up, Rando." 24 Randy nodded blankly and stared past eyes he did not want to meet. "So why are you giving up now, Randy?" "Who says I'm giving up? I'm recuperating." "Uh-huh. I know you, Randy. You can't fob me, jacko-I trained you. I can see it in your eyes. This time it got to you." He leaned forward and raised his voice. "What happened? What's wrong, Randy? This isn't like you at all." Randy sighed. He was silent for a long moment. He had tried to keep his doubts and worse-than-doubts

locked inside, dammit, but this double-damned ever-competent devil Yao had seen right in and through him. Maybe it was time to say it; get it out. Say it and hear himself say it and maybe it would ease up this gnawing away at his mind and spirit. "I think I'm through, Rat." Ratran Yao sat back and looked long and hard at the man he had trained. "Just like that?" he asked. "All of a sudden you want . . . what? A nice farm on Rahman's outback? A puter repair shop on Outreach?" "I don't know what I want. I'm not sure it wouldn't be nice to spend the rest of my life dead drunk in the darkest dirtiest bar I could find in Forty Klom Hill. Or better still, Outreach's 'outback'-Negisina, maybe." "Uh-huh. An alky Outie vegetable. You may have trouble believing this, but when I trained you, I really expected better from you." "I'm . . . discouraged. Depressed. None of this makes much sense to me anymore. There's too much . . . ambiguity in everything around me. Half the TGO operations I've been in on had so little immediately visible purpose." That had the sound of social science jargon even to the man who said it, and he added, "I can't see any pattern, R-Hacema." "Forget the 'Hacema.' And you're not supposed to see patterns. As to 'immediate visible purpose,' " Ratran 25 said, deliberately wallowing the phrase around in his mouth to emphasize its sententiousness, "that's the point. Our job is to maintain order among a bunch of habited planets and billions and bil-yuns of people who aren't linked by anything approaching a central government or direction-other than the Planetary Accords. You can thank your Outreachers Theba for those! They enable us to function. 'Maintaining order' means seeing to it that there are no wars. We do that, Randy. We do that very damned well. History is through with 'Great Conquerors'-all the mass murderers we've read about from Alexandras of Makedon and Kyrus of Persia and Julius Caesar right up through such 'Great Military Men' as Rommel and Patton and Dipali Thakur-and two men who were ruining Franji and starting to take the failing demagogue's usual way out-blame someone else and start a war. Oh-and a nut you never heard about. Sitting up on one of Corsi's moons, busily working away at what would be a 'safe' atomic weapons system." "Damn!" "Uh-huh." All the while he had spoken Ratran had been staring at the other man with eyes hard and piercing enough to cut steel if not plasteel. That stare did not abate now. "I got that one, while you were nosing around on Eagle and Gem and Kauffman's, and I am damned proud of it." He stood and walked jerkily to the door, swung back. Staring, staring. Piercing. "I am also proud of yoif, and of Penejac, and convinced that this smuggling business is something even bigger than that." Rantanagar Ehm stared, interested. He couldn't help it. He was both human and TGO. He was interested. And of course that was when Ratran showed him a satirical little twisty smile that told the Outie he was not going to hear more about that-not right now. Maybe not unless. . . . Randy bit down and tried again. "So where does that 26 leave me? You're proud and we failed and Penejac's dead. You say 'something bigger' and here's Chamba-natan Ehm's little boy Rantanagar, in hospital and in the dark. I'm tired of not knowing what's going on. I'm tired of doing things without knowing why they're being done. I'm tired of getting knocked around for no reason." "Lovely. I think I heard that you're tired. So someone says placidate this person or get this person on this planet into our pocket, and you ask why, and we bring you in and sit you down in front of a screen for a few weeks to try to get you to know as much as the computer and I know, and the answer is because centuries of experience tell us that person is dangerous to galactic, small g, and thus to Galactic, capital G, society! Then what do you do-suggest we sit down and talk it over with her/him/it and see if it won't get into another line of work and be a goo-ood demagogue or would-be general or whatever it is?" Ratran Yao suddenly shot out an arm with an extended finger that looked ready to bore through Rantanagar's eye. "And you know what, Jacko? You do not want to know as much as I do! I am on my third liver now, and use so many reds every night I get a big discount!" "Damn you, Rat!" "Right!" "So I do not want to be promoted either, then-you just convinced me of that. Meanwhile-why? Why did Penejac have to die? He-' "He didn't." "I know that!" Rantanagar practically yelled, and his eyes flashed.

"Why did he get Poofed, then? He could have been pulled out before we hit. He was my friend!" "No, he could not have been 'pulled out' before we hit, Rando. Musla's medulla, that would have blown everything!" He paused and said very quietly, staring, "You know that, Rantanagar Ehm, Agent Two-star." "You just said he didn't have to-" 27 "That's right," Ratran told him, with as tight a face as Randy had ever seen on the man. "He did something wrong. Or something happened that we don't know about and couldn't foresee. That's why these 'smugglers' have become top priority. Because we think they are more than smugglers." ' 'Of course they are-with that para-TZ they're mass-murderers the same as any general!" The Outie paused, frowned. "Wait a min. You mean more than that, don't you? God, Rat! What can be more than that? Listen! I was undercover. In danger every min of every day- however long it was, on whatever planet I was on, with my chron and my intestines doin' flipflops. Nothing vague about being undercover that way-it stinks and it hurts." He saw the other man's blandly raised eyebrows, ground his teeth, and nodded. "Pos. I know it. You've been undercover too. You know what I mean. To be effective you have to immerse yourself in the role. You have to slip into their way of thinking, and that usually means swine. For months I lived like scum and it'll take more than a sonic to get that off my skin. Maybe Penejac cracked on that ship-he saw what I saw! Hundreds of people on p-TZ and dying and they didn't have to die. I could have stopped them. It's a horrible death, Rat! All I'd have had to do was step out of my role. I didn't, because I am Tee-dammit-Gee-Oh!" Having lurched erect in bed, he sank back against the pillow, which instantly accommodated itself to make him all comfy. He hated that. He was beginning to feel that he had no right to be comfortable. "So what happened," he said dully, winding down. "Penejac's dead and a bunch of T-SP people are dead and I'm wearing spare parts. And half the smugglers got away. Great plan, General!" Ratran Yao paced back to his chair, leaned on its back, stared. Eyes like black drills. "Firm, Randy Ehm. Got me that time, gunner! Firm. 28 And I hurt. You're lucky to be a cog in a wheel-I'm at the hub and know more, and I hurt. Because I'm responsible." Randy looked down from those eyes and those words. He believed them. Yet he stretched an arm back for more self-indulgent comfort: "I'm so far down I can't see even the cogs anymore." "You're right about one thing, Ehm. It's going to take more than a soni shower to get the stink off your skin. Smells like pore little boy's self-pity. It's going around-want to smell?" The finger stabbed out again. "Meanwhile, we accomplished plenty and there's plenty to be accomplished, and people are still dying, dying, hooking themselves and dying! And, Rantanagar Ehm, future farmer or whatever the cess you think you want to be that's nice and dull and wasteful of you . . . and now we've got a lead, a real one and a good one, and we are going to get the bastards! All I need is one decent agent to-scratch that, one superb caring person who gives damns, and we'll get the rotten cesspool swine!" Damn you, damn you! Rantanagar sat up. To hell with the pillow. Any hell. Any god's and any planet's hell or hells with the sisterslicin' pillow! "What lead?" Ratran Yao's face took on an austere expression and he straightened. "You do not wish to know, Myrzah Ehm. Believe me, you do not wish to know about the Iceworld Connection." Then he pulled down the aurasuit's coif and raised a hand to the ornamental zipper-pull. Randy squeezed his eyes shut. There she was again. Horrible Hacema. He said, "The . . . Iceworld . . . Connection?" Horrible Hacema was moving toward the door. Damn you, damn you. "Hacema! Tell me!" The ugly figure half turned. The worse-than-unfortunate face stared, or seemed to, at Rantanagar Ehm. 29 "If you think I am going to talk about the most important operation of this decade to a fragged-out bedridden depressive, jacko, you are even worse off than you are trying to convince yourself." Hacema departed, and Rantanagar Ehm sat erect in his bed, staring at the door. "Damn you," he muttered, "damn you Rat, damn you!" He scooped a box of tissues off the extentable beside the bed and slammed it at the door. "Ow! Damn-I am out of shape." 4 The lights cycled off at their regular time. Rantanagar Ehm lay thinking in a bed that had begun to seem chafing. Had to be; he was unable to

get to sleep. (They had begun refusing him sedatives or soporifics over two weeks ago.) Of course Ratran Yao was on his mind. And the Iceworld Connection, whatever that meant. Important? The most important? Nah-he was trying to sell me. Just another pointless operation. More of the same fobbiri stink. He almost had me going there for a min. The old excitement. . . . Almost. I've made bad-boy noises. Whatever the Iceworld Connection is, it's probably something hyper-dangerous. Let the bad boy get himself killed in noble action. There had been a time when he'd have done anything for Ratran Yao, who was also Sinchung Sin, and Sin Yanshin, and sometimes just "Cougar," and a couple of other names, too; Humayun and something else. Anything for the man. Too many years had passed since those days. Too many missions. Ehm had been younger, which explained a lot. He felt hardened, jaded. Something like that. The years had brought him to that, and more. Well, he wasn't about to be such an easy mark again. He was not the super-patriot Believer any more. He was not, in other words, any longer a boy. But . . . the Iceworld Connection. What the vug is- A crack of light alerted him to the fact that the door 31 to his room was being opened. By the dim light from the hall he saw Nurse Appli slip in. Not walk in, all professional and starchy. She sidled in through a half-open doorway, closed the door soundlessly behind her- and Rantanagar shut his eyes. Why can't they leave me alone? Checkin' on me, like mommies. I'll be out of here soon. Flainin hospital! Always messin' around with you! He feigned sleep, hoping the nurse wouldn't be long about her sneaky observation of the sleeping patient/un-patient. Seemed to be taking her time about it. Walked around the room to check the few monitoring devices that were still hooked up. He watched her through slitted eyes while she moved through the shadows. The room's only light was the dim green glow of the tell-tales. She approached the side of his bed, stopped. For a moment he felt panic. What if she'd been sent to-but her hands were empty. He was sure of that. No hypo in the night, to give the bad-boy agent a convenient mouth-closing "cardiac stoppage." (The phrase was still around. Cardiac arrest. It meant that the-patient was dead because its heart stopped. Which of course was an effect, not a cause. Medical science progressed and progressed. Terminology remained the same, and methods: Lie When At All Possible.) Next he had an instant's manic urge to shove out an arm and grab one pushy warhead, right where it pushily pushed against the fabric of her bodice. He repressed that urge-smiling tightly in the almost-dark. Slowly, as if bent on not awakening him (fear and suspicion again!), she moved the sheets back. Her hands were still empty. He prepared himself for another examination. Some of that damned "palpating," which meant a (professional) poking around on a fellow. What he got this time was something else-Something Else. Her hand moved lightly along his leg, brushing his hated hospital gown up. He knew her touch pretty well 32 by now. She had examined him a hundred times during his convalescence. They were deft hands, that much he knew. (And cool. Always cool hands.) Now it was different. Before, her touch had been professional (and cool). Now it was insistent and warm. Hot. Probing. Finding! She reached what she was after and began stroking. First softly, and then with more urgency. That brought the predictable reaction in the object she stroked. It ceased imitating a slumbrous worm. It also became impossible for its owner to feign sleep any longer. "Hey," he muttered. "You looking for something?" Rather than gasp and jump back or even pretend that her interest was professional, Nurse Appli said, "Neg. I've found it." "Hmm. And ah-what do you intend to do with it?" "Shh," she admonished, circling his excited parts with her hand. Both were very warm, now. "Don't question the nurse." "I don't think this is a professional visit-or prescribed therapy." "Oh. Maybe even pro-scribed, hmm? Think I ought to stop?" A twitch shook his voice: "Nope!" "Well then." Her hand left the erection she had created and she reached up and back to let her hair down. It was a long black veil that softly brushed his belly. It trailed after her mouth as she kissed her way down until her mouth continued what her hand had begun. "Uh!" A shudder ran through the prostrate man. He dithered in indecision. Am I ready for this? (Oh lord Yes, but. . . .) He'd been

disinterested in everything for a long while now. Still, she was good and certainly did know how to gain a man's attention and raise his interest. Not to mention his flagstaff. Theba's gonads! If I'm going to do something, I damn well ought to do it right! 33 He said, "Uh. . . ." She said, "Ummm?" "Uh, wait," he said. She turned her head, soft hair brushing, tickling momentarily, and looked up at him. Her lips were wet and her features soft in the subdued light. "You don't like it?" she asked throatily. "See, I love it. But I do know some other ways." "Just come here," he said, reaching for her. His hand went right into the blouse of her scrubbies as if homing in on a beacon. He cupped her left breast. It was delightfully firm and nicely sizable, all warm and rounded. Smooth to his touch-except for its tip. That was already all nubbly with excitement. He held her that way, his fingers and palm cupping while his thumb brushed back and forth across the tip of that growing nipple, and he felt her quiver. He watched her and was delighted to see green-lit lips part, the lower lip sagging as he took control of her. Her heart beat under his hand and somehow that made him feel closer to her than anything she had done. Smiling, he drew her to him, onto him. They kissed eagerly and darting tongues probed, flicking in a sort of loving fencing match. They held that kiss and held it, squirming and sighing into each other's mouths, for what seemed ages. When they broke for air he pulled her shirt up and, with her eager cooperation, over her head. He slung it to the floor. She smiled and brushed back her hair with the back of her hand. He let her stand, watched as for a teasing moment she stood with her hands at the back of her neck in a deliberate lifting and emphasizing of her breasts. She watched his eyes. What she saw made her smile. "I've been waiting for this," she said softly, and the smile turned into a lecherous grin. "Waiting?" "Sure. I saw you when they first brought you in. A 34 lot of you was broken up, but some parts were intact." She reached down and squeezed his slicer. It had grown. "I couldn't help wondering what it would be like. I've been wondering all along. You know." "I do?" he said, while he thought, I think I'm recovered. Would you just shut up and get outta those baggy pants and get in this bed with your impatient patient? "Sure. My head fills with fantasies. You know. Randy fantasies. Most times I can't do anything about it. Maybe this time . . . I can." She loosened the tie to her scrubby pants and let them slip down her hips. Shapely hips, he noted. Womanly hips. Nice. She was naked in there, too. "Maybe you can at that," he said, watching those baggy pants join her blouse on the floor. "Let's find out." He reached for her again. One hand high, one low. She embraced him, slid over him, dragging her breasts over his supine form in a titillating caress. He bade his hand be gentle while it explored the firm-soft bulge of her hairless pubis. Lord, did this woman lubricate! He lay (relatively) quietly while she glided onto him. She leaned forward as she began moving slowly up and down. He accepted the mobile offertory of her dangling breasts. "Umm . . . that does feel good," she said, crooning the words at almost the same instant he was saying, "Ah, oh lord that's good, good, woman!" It didn't take long for her slow pace to become too much for her-or too slow. She picked up the tempo, gasping, eyes bright and becoming fixed. Her teeth fastened in her lower lip and her breath hissed through her mouth. Grunting, he realized that her hands were hardly the only deft parts of her body. This woman had wonderful control over certain pelvic muscles. Fantastic control! He avoided saying it, but he was sure they didn't teach this in nursing school. His hands and her forward tilted position as she 35 pumped sent her soaring, and then she was gasping, flashing. When it hit her she sat bolt upright on him, her back straight. She came down on him hard, to take him deep. Now her eyes were tightly closed, her lips drawn back almost as if in pain. Her hands clutched into tight fists and she was so taut that she shuddered as if cold. As she shuddered through her climax, her flash, her breath escaped her in a short series of vocal exhalations that rose in tone to girlish sounds. Her exciting excitement brought him to the edge. It was almost a reflex. He had been celibate throughout his convalescence and he had been under too much pressure, too much strain for it to take long. He

twitched, surged into her, twitched, groaned, twitched. . . . She slid down onto him, making wordless crooning sounds. He stroked her hair, sighing, smiling at the ceiling. They lay together, stretched out on the narrow hospital bed. After a while he was running a finger down the curve of her naked back, starting at her neck and trailing down to the little dimples of her butt. She wriggled, looked up. "Wasn't so great for you, was it?" "Of course it was!" Her words had made him tense, though. "No it wasn't. Not as good as for me. I know." "Well, it wasn't your fault, darling." He stroked her back, low. "Whose else? I know some tricks," she said, squirming in an all-body caress. He picked up on that, fast. "Gratshit. Just lie still." She didn't lie still. And she did know some tricks, his compleat nurse. The second time was better. They seemed to change positions every few seconds. Rolling about on the bed, always perilously close to its edges, he lost track of everything except the warm sweating body he was coupled with. She did things with her fingers, with her lips She 36 put the muscles in her legs to good use, and the ones in her abdomen, her pelvis, tantalizing him, building lust almost to a pain in him, drawing out everything he had. When he flashed this time, bells rang. Lights flashed. Real bells! Real lights-red. Red lights! Danger! He rolled off the bed and grabbed his stopper on the way to the floor. Without thinking about it he had dropped onto one knee. He held the stopper with both hands and swept it back and forth across the room, glinting. His TGO reflexes had come to the surface. The next thing that moved, he'd zap. Sitting up on the bed, she laughed. "You jump faster than I flash," she told him. "Get down! What's happening?" She flopped over, showing him that beautiful curve of bare hip, and thumbed a bedside switch. The red lights quit flashing. "Heart monitor," his naked nurse explained. "I forgot to cut it off. I think we got you a little too excited. Up went your heartbeat, and that set the darned thing off." He stood, feeling a little foolish. He was standing there, naked, no longer hard but still long and dangling, stopper in hand like a symbol-when the door opened and Kirema-daktari looked into the room. She saw Nurse Appli naked on the patient's bed, one hand idly scratching a softly joggling breast. She saw the patient out of bed, standing naked with his stopper. She smelled sex in the air. "Urn," she said. "Kinky." "We were . . . uh . . ." Randy stammered, "I mean, I was. . . ." "No doubt about it," the doctor said. The thought flashed through his mind that the whole thing could very possibly have been set up by that trickster Rattan Yao. He wasn't beyond giving the nurse orders to arouse his (malingering) agent. Even to test my reflexes-reaction to danger! He could have planned 37 it all to get me back online again. The rotten sisterslicin bastard! Thanks, Ratran. . . . "I've got a liver transplant on the table right now," Kirema-daktari said. "If I get through in time, maybe I'll come back for seconds." Rantanagar looked at Appli sitting on the bed and grinned. If he wasn't all the way back online again, at least he was headed in the right direction. It had been a long time. "You'll have to try for fourths," he told the physician. "Ummmm," Appli said, and let herself flop back onto his bed. "I hate to introduce a subject aside from biology," Kirema said, "but why don't you get her to tell you about her niece." "' Daktari!'" Appli snapped, "' No!'" "She's too young to have a niece," Rantanagar Ehm said. "Not really, but it's true she doesn't have one anymore," Kirema said, backing out. "Appli's niece died two weeks ago, at sixteen. Para-TZ, Randy. Heard of it?" 5 Rantanagar Ehm wasn't awakened next morning by the hospital cybercart bearing breakfast, as usual. He was jerked wide awake by the sounds and then sight of a man jerking open drawers and hurling out the clothing in them. Randy's clothing. "Hey!" "Hey yourself," Ratran Yao said, without turning. "Take it easy! Those are my things." "' Things' is the right word-and I didn't think they were the nurse's." Yao turned, holding an iridescent blue tunic. He held it before him. "Uh. Silky smooth. Migh-tee flashy, but then that's your style. Outreach flash. Like this one?" "Absolutely firm I like that one! What the-" He threw up a hand to catch the tunic when Ratran slung it toward the bed. Randy smoothed it out on the sheet. A pair of cheeks-free red shorts sailed past his shoulder. "Hey!" "You

said that. Musla's eyeballs-d'you really wear this chartreuse shirt?" "Absolutely. What are you doing?" The chartreuse shirt came flying. Rantanagar caught it. "You don't intend to leave these things you call 'clothes' here, do you? You're ready to go, aren't you?" "I, ah. . . ."

Rantanagar grinned at the other man's back. "Actually I thought I'd stay a few more days. 39 I'm finding a new interest in life." He caught an equihyde vest. Scarlet, with black stitching, bold. "Uh-huh." Ratran Yao tossed a purple sock. "I've got a new interest for you, jacko!" He swung around, having yanked the drawer out of the wall. Randy thrust up both hands. "Don't throw it!" Yao sneered. "Big picture, hmm? The man wants the big picture. I'll give you the Big . . . Pic-ture! I'll give you a picture you won't believe. The Iceworld Connection." "The wha'?" "The Iceworld Connection. A . . . person who currently goes by the name Carnadyne." "That's a void, a clouded, starless area in space, not a person!" "Wrong. It's a blank area in space and a person. Move your feet.'" Randy did and down came the drawer on the bed. "Listen, Rando, not more than a dozen-make that a half-dozen-people even know Carnadyne exists. The person, not the void. How's that for a Big Picture, my malingering Outie?" "I-" Leaning against the bed, Ratran Yao jabbed a pointing finger at the other man. "Too many hijackings, Rando. There are patterns, but it takes a lot of looking to see them. Or it, because we think it's all part of one pattern, now. It takes a lot of little missions like your recent little mission to see the Big Picture, Myrzha R.M." "That's R.E.," Rantanagar Ehm said. "How can it be an E when it's pronounced M? Listen. Something mighty funny is going on, out in the void. Carnadyne knows the void like you know the inside of your sister's thigh. I'm-" "Wait a minute! I don't even have a sister. And if I did, I certainly wouldn't be familiar with the inside of her thigh!" 40 Ra'tran Yao smiled that humorless gotcha smile, and Rantanagar sighed. He'd been trapped. "The inside of Nurse Appli's thigh then, stud. Anyhow, it's time you went out there to give Carnadyne a hand. Carnadyne's a genius. Needs someone dumb but good at violence around." "Thanks." Ratran relented a mite: "Well, she really is a genius, jacko." "She?" "Right. She. An absolute raving beauty, come to think. Come on, come on, are you going to get out of that bed, or do I have to go wait in the hall because you're modest? Oh I do think that blue shirt is just you, Rando!" "Sumbitch," Rantanagar said, swinging out of the bed. "I'll bet you know all about the inside of your sister's thigh." "You lied!" Ratran Yao made an "Oh well" face and gesture and leaned back in the chair behind his desk. "So I lied. So Carnadyne's so ugly she makes the holoproj I wore to the hospital as your 'sister' look like a class bust. So here we are, and you were ready to leave the hospital and we both know it." Rantanagar's face worked. "I'll bet Appli doesn't even have a niece." Ratran gave him a grim look. "Dead right. She doesn't have a niece. She did, though. And she did die, two weeks ago. You know how." "Ah, shit," Rantanagar Ehm said, sitting down across from his superior. "So tell me about the Iceworld Connection. Tell me about Carnadyne, and the Void." Carnadyne was a freak, a sport. Not a void; a brimming brain in a genetic mutation. Maybe a genius or a madman, depending upon who was doing the observing and talking. No, not a madman, though. . . . 41 That was before Carnadyne went Forty Percent City. That was before Carnadyne became a woman. Sort of. A putative woman, anyhow. What she was now was almost beyond description. Carnadyne's entry into that nonentity called "sub-space" when the ship jam-crammed into transition phase was jnstantaneous. Ship and all on it became tachyons on the instant, without warning and without a computer look-ahead to make sure the time and place were safe. Forty Percent City! The probability of survival of such a precipitate move was high, considering-but not high enough. Over forty percent of the spacers simply vanished. None of them ever came out of subspace. Gone from the spaceways, all of them. By now that toll included even such charming personnel as Captain Corundum of Firedancer, and dear old Ganesa onboard her spaceborne brothel. One of them was missed, anyhow, Carnadyne came back out of subspace. The probability of coming out alive but with unspecified damage was just above seventy percent. That's the way Carnadyne came out.

He/it was half alive and half . . . something else. Half if? Undefined damage . . . or was it damage? Certainly it was a difference, and certainly it was difficult to define. Death had never been far from Carnadyne, even in her/his previous incarnation. The very things that made him unique were constantly trying to kill her. Her-say "her" and swallow the previous Carnadyne and the generic confusion-her twisted metabolic pathways were both advantageous and self-defeating. Her enzyme system was permanently at war with itself. Her cells ran wild, just this side of rabid cancer. A normal person facing one tenth of what Carnadyne lived with would have been dead within weeks. Carnadyne was, however, no normal person, not by at least fifty-nine-point-seven-seven-three-one percent. 42 She turned what was killing her into what kept her alive. The mostly human . . . being called Carnadyne was heavily bioengineered, and worse. Carnadyne, not a void, manipulated parts of her body to do things they had never been intended to do. The modifications were of her own design. She conceived them herself and developed them herself. They kept her alive, while she was constantly dying. Equilibrium had been achieved. She had been her own prototype, but there had been no risk. Risk could exist only when there was the opportunity for mistakes, and Carnadyne never made mistakes. Mistakes were not part of the nature of Carnadyne. Mistakes were not conscionable and not allowed of Carnadyne, by Carnadyne. Just as she had adapted her body with biological subsystems, she had also devised certain cybernetic devices that augmented her somewhat unnatural form. One device freed her from the unnecessary waste of time devoted to sleep. Another enabled her to project a holographic image without the aid of external equipment. Her mind-comm unit was far more efficient than the standard TGO model and was embedded in the mastoid process behind her left ear. There were other systems, some quite devious. Most of them were powered by interfaces with her natural energy systems or replaceable power-paks. Some tapped the "Other Side of Forty Percent City"-the dark universe-for power in a way she only partially understood. Indeed, Carnadyne was not a void. She was meticulous, a perfectionist. No room for error existed in her life or in the way she looked at the universe. She had been heavily influenced by what happened when that TGW captain panicked and sent her ship Forty Percent City. The captain had been an impulsive fool. There was no room in Carnadyne's life or mind for fools, either. She had always considered herself at least two stages 43 above humankind, even back when she was a he. Surviving Forty Percent City had only reinforced that feeling. It was only right that she had survived when so many others had (presumably) not. She was superior. That much, at least, was absolutely clear to Carnadyne. Not that she had come through unchanged, from The Other Side! She had been through the dark universe and carried a piece of it with her still. In every way, she coexisted in both universes at the same time, striking a balance between the two just as she struck a balance between life and death. To have experienced such a dual existence would have driven most people insane. Carnadyne looked upon it now as good fortune; simply one more aspect of All to investigate, a rather interesting phenomenon that-in addition to keeping her alive-deserved further study. Carnadyne was fond of studying things. She was a compulsive collector of data, the more complex the better. Relationships interested her. (It could almost be said that the accumulation of data intrigued her, but that might be too strong a word to apply to Carnadyne. To "intrigue" implied emotion.) Carnadyne was not a void but he-she, now-was totally devoid of emotion. Totally. Some who knew her considered her callous and ruthless. She considered herself neither. She was merely a being of mind, who sought facts. Emotions were human attributes-human weaknesses. She was beyond such primitive concerns. Oh, she could see how people reached such conclusions about her. They did not perceive the universe the way she did. Indeed, they could not. They saw everything through a hazy fog of human "emotions" that clouded the mind and made accurate judgments impossible. When they thought her ruthless they were simply acting (helplessly) as humans/Galactics. Applying an emotional label to something they did not understand. It was a typical human

failine. 44 The arrogant children tried to reach conclusions without having all the data to hand. That would of course be impossible for Carnadyne. She never acted on anything until all available facts were in (and unavailable facts as well, if at all possible); until all data were carefully collected and had been tabulated. That made the one proper conclusion inevitable. TransGalactic Order made sense, logically. The emotion-colored outlook of others who called TGO "murderers" and "the Bureau of Slick Tricks come alive" were silly and of no concern. The emotional calling of TGO "the ultimate pragmatists" was, to Carnadyne, far from an epithet or criticism. Logically, then, Carnadyne rendered service to TGO. Whether she was really a part of it was something that only she knew. When Carnadyne passed through the dark universe, she posed a vexing problem for TransGalactic Order. Was she now friend or enemy? She had been changed, molded by the dark universe into something they could not even begin to understand. She did not compute, and the finest of computers proved it. He had been an intelligent and efficient TGO scientist-operative before that ship had gone City. Now they didn't know what she was. A small meeting was held. Only a few TGO primes, highest staff, even knew that she existed. Fewer still knew her past. It was decided that she could definitely be useful, but would have to be watched. Watched closely. The Gray Organization was good at that. They installed Carnadyne in a superb and elaborate underground complex constructed deep below the frozen surface of a hateful planet called Iceworld. Inside the planet. (TGO was good at that, too.) They put in the equipment necessary for her scientific investigation- an investigation of everything. Whatever else she needed she constructed herself. Funds and materials were made available to the galaxy's only . . . Everythingist. 45 The Iceworlders had no idea of what existed beneath their feet. Carnadyne was satisfied. This was an ideal place to work. Quiet, with no interruptions and few disruptions, and no human distractions. It also pleased her to be close to the void; the Carnadyne Void. Voids interested her. She was fond of the black or charcoal gray, seemingly empty spaces where there were no traces of human activity. The void was a cold and harsh place. It fitted her well and for that reason she had chosen for herself the name Carnadyne. All references and mention of her previous name (his name, then) had been obliterated to the extent of the power of TransGalactic Order. At that, she was not referred to as a person. The code was simple; she was referred to only as the Ice world Connection. She was that. She was cold. She was harsh. More than that, she was an enigma. 6 Carnadyne was busy in her brightly lit laboratory when Reza arrived on Ice world. A hexaluminum rack held glassy vitrics of all shapes and sizes, through which coursed a bubbling fluid that was sometimes orange, sometimes bright blue. It gurgled and hissed as it sped through the twisted tubes, condensers, retorts, flasks, and beakers. Carefully and meticulously, while Reza fidgeted impatiently, Carnadyne suspended the experiment. Slowly she shut down the equipment, making obscure notes in code on the screen of the massive computer built into one wall of her well-equipped laboratory. "You could at least say hello," Reza grumped, visibly irritated. "Hello," Carnadyne said distractedly, stowing the last of her supplies. "I drag my tail halfway across the universe, leave a nice warm planet to freeze on this noxious piece of work, and all you can say is hello?" "What would you like me to say?" Carnadyne asked equably, disconnecting a complicated coil of glass tubing. "Thanks would be a good place to start. And maybe a word of apology for dragging me out of my nest simply because you have something 'interesting' to show me. I was warm in the nest. I'm cold here." "I suppose I could thank you," Carnadyne said. "But I believe no apologies are in order. You are here, therefore you are curious. It seems to me you spend too 47 much time in your nest anyway. You should go out more often." "You should talk," Reza said. "You hardly ever leave this laboratory, much less this ice cube you arbitrarily call a planet." "I seldom find it necessary to leave," Carnadyne said. "If one examines all the parameters of a problem, a satisfactory solution that requires the least expenditure of energy is often apparent.'" "I think you're just plain

lazy." They both knew it wasn't true, but Reza liked to have the last word and, since it made no difference to Carnadyne, she usually let the creature have it. Reza was a case of arrested development. Literally. It was also one of Carnadyne's experiments. One that worked, after a fashion. Of course they all worked ... after a fashion. The ingredients had been simple, at least to Carnadyne. Take one fifty-year-old man ... a mentally retarded one with the brain of a twelve-year-old child. One who was dying of myasthenia gravis. Take the body of one Jarp whose head had been crushed. Add . . . some other things. Mix that together and put what was left into the tank for a while. Play with various combinations of arms, legs, mouths and "mouths," tentacles, genitals, pseudopods, and . . . some other things, until a suitable combination was achieved. Feed in memories and "memories"-some true, some false-that seemed appropriate. Take it out of the tank. Voila! One had one's very own aide ... an igor. Eventually. Even Carnadyne hadn't got it right on the first approximation. Two and then three were required to get the igor the way she wanted it. There had been errors in judgment along the way. . . . One had been the problem concerning sex. Carnadyne had been curious to see how this creature would handle this particular human difficulty. She made it a he. A well-endowed he. A very well-endowed he. That had 48 proven interesting, but unduly distracting. The creature tried to jump her every time her back was turned, and if she bent . . .! Back to the tank. Since it was a unique species unto itself, she gave it a name but called it an igor. A member of the igor race. The member of the igor race. Carnadyne named it Reza for reasons known only to Carnadyne. She had thought it might be useful if Reza came equipped with built-in armament. An aide and a defender. To that end she molded a stopper into its right index finger. It was a wonderful idea and it did not last long at all. In a fit of adolescent pique, Reza Poofed two cats and a bio-modified grat, and overheated unto death a NERDC computer console. And threatened its maker. Back to the tank. An adolescent it was easier to handle than an adolescent he. An armed adolescent was impossible. With a little help, of course, Reza forgot both existences. Meanwhile, the problem, Carnadyne now realized, was in the raw materials. No matter how much she changed the igor's outward appearance, it still had the brain and emotional development of a twelve-year-old adolescent. It always overreacted. Taking that fact into consideration and considering too her own needs from the creature, Carnadyne did the best she could. The end result pleased her. Reza was scarcely a meter tall and shaped more or less like a fire hydrant with six long ropy arms. The lower part of its body was covered with small scales, which gave way to a rough, pebbly-skinned surface on its upper torso. Small tufts of hair sprouted here and there. (That was the result of a small error, which Carnadyne decided to leave uncorrected because her adolescent igor really did like the random decorations, however untidily placed.) Its two eyes had been placed in roughly the human position on what passed for its head, simply because in Darwin's universe that was the 49 best arrangement for a thinking being-or even a relatively thinking one such as Reza. The head was functional if not exactly attractive. It still retained the orange coloration of the Jarp, without the form. Reza was protected from the intense cold that Carnadyne preferred by an ingenious spacesuit of Carnadyne's own design. A small power-pak generated a flexible transparent field, about two microns thick, around Reza's body. It was strong and comfortable, the next best thing to wearing no suit at all. Still, Reza the igor grumped and griped. The reasons were many, but Reza did not need a reason. Truth to tell, Reza liked to grump and gripe and Carnadyne found it fascinating that the creature had a nature of its own, and a personality. She put up with the griping and grumping in her usual stoically calm way. As a matter of fact, Carnadyne enjoyed the banter. If she wanted intellectual conversation, there were always others whose company she could seek out. They often bored her. Reza did not. Reza never bored her. Reza was a hard worker (once it had gotten its moaning out of the way). The igor was valuable to Carnadyne, as well as good company-now that she had desexed and disarmed it. Were it possible for Carnadyne to have any comprehensible

emotions, it could have been said that she was "fond" of Reza. She had often examined the parameters of that emotion and found quite a few points of correlation in her relationship with the igor. Still, she could not go so far as to say that she was fond of the ... of it. Even aside from its emotional connotations, it was a most imprecise word. Carnadyne did not at all care for imprecise terminology. "So what is this interesting thing you dragged my fragile body over here to seel" Reza asked querulously. "It's a very small problem," Carnadyne said, thinking instructions into the computer. Her edges were starting to blur. 50 That always happened when she was excited or in deep concentration. It seemed normal to Reza, as normal as her maker's ugliness and its own ropy arms. It was the way things had always been and therefore part of the pattern of the universe. "This is hardly worthy of your talents, you understand, Reza. However, I have found it somewhat absorbing, from a theoretical point of view." "Hmp." A representation of a star cluster with its associated planets swirled to life onscreen. Carnadyne highlighted two planets and turned to Reza. "Perhaps you will find this of some interest," she said, pulling the igor closer to the screen. "This is the planet Prodo. A fairly warm, humid place where life is at a rather primitive level of development. Currently it is on the list as a Protected world, though only I and TOO know of its existence, we think. Its inhabitants do have the potential of eventually becoming a sophisticated civilization, given time and left to themselves." Carnadyne pointed to the next planet in the star system. "This is Triplemech, an overpopulated planet with visions of grandeur and expansion. Their plans for expansion are largely based on the eventual takeover of Prodo. Toward this end they are presently decimating the strongest and smartest members of the race, by using the native superstitions. I have been wondering how the inhabitants of Prodo would develop on their own. As a matter of fact, I prepared a hypothetical growth curve for the planet based on the assumption that they would be left alone. I am curious to see how closely it would match." "I'll bet you're curious," Reza grumbled. "I'll also bet you're not curious enough to go yourself. How are they eliminating the natives?" "The Prods are fanatics for a game they call Run-Look-Find. It involves two contestants starting at oppo- 51 site ends of a complicated maze. At intersections, decisions have to be made, various tasks performed, and information integrated. The first one to reach the center of the maze is declared the winner. It is not simply a test of luck and endurance, but a test of intelligence as well. For many years they have played this game, but recently, with the interference of the Trimechs, it has taken a sinister turn. Now the winner kills the loser. He then becomes temporary leader of the tribe, open to challenge at any time." "Sounds delightful," Reza said, in a voice dry as absolute zero. "The killing is only part of it. Their religion is based on the belief that souls can be transferred. By a few cheap parlor tricks, the Trimechs, without exposing themselves, convinced the natives of Prodo that the soul of the loser could be acquired by ingesting parts of its body. Most particularly the brain. The medulla oblongata, to be precise." "Never did like brains," Reza observed austerely. "Don't care for them at all." Carnadyne ignored that. "I have nothing against cannibalism itself but it always seemed to me to be a self-defeating activity. Here more than in most cases. The brains are infectious to the Prods. It dulls their minds and weakens them. They are soon slain by others wishing to be leaders of the tribe-grouping. Somehow this is considered a great honor." "Sick." Raze waved a couple of tentacles. "So they're eating each other up. So what?" "So the most interesting aspect of this situation is that the strongest and brightest natives are being removed from the population. Soon the general level of intelligence will drop, perhaps low enough that they will never recover. I calculate this will take less than two generations. By then the planet will be ready for a complete takeover by the Trimechs. This disturbs my hypothetical model. Feeble as it may be, I have spent considerable time in contemplation of that model." 52 "It's in-teresting all right," the igor said, quite accustomed to Carnadyne's hiding genius under the shadow of self-deprecation. "The only

thing is, I don't see where I come into the picture." "In my own insignificant way I have given some thought to the problem and have come up with what should be a satisfactory solution. Unfortunately, to effect that solution, someone must go in person to Prodo." "Someone, you say?" "That is correct. I perceive that in order for the plan to be effective it must be implemented in that way." "You're going, then?" "I'm afraid that won't be possible." Carnadyne waved at the rack of chemical apparatus and sighed. "I'm in the final stages of another experiment that, however worthless it may seem, cannot be conveniently abandoned. My presence is required here in the laboratory. Besides, my appearance, as confusing as it is to most beings, would throw my calculations far off the mark. Your appearance, though a trifle odd, would not upset things nearly so much. In fact, I have constructed a simulation based on that premise. If I might say so, it looks quite satisfactory." "I get it, Reza said dolorously. "You want me to go." "That would seem to be the obvious solution." "A/owe? Among all those cannibals!" "I daresay you would not be too appetizing a meal for them. Indeed, your chunky body might be harder on their metabolisms than brains." "What gall. You ask me to go alone after that time on Bleak? They really dragged me around on that one." "You should never have tried to infiltrate the city undisguised. That was an error on your part. It was not in the original plan at all. Besides, I rescued you, didn't I?" "And what about that time on Ghanj? By my mother's ovaries, I never thought I'd see the light of day again." 53 "I rescued you that time, too, didn't I? Besides, this plan is very simple." "How simple? Try me-I'm a skeptic." "First you find the current tribal leader and kidnap-" "Kidnap! Where I come from that's usually considered a crime." Reza's eyes rolled wildly. "I could get into a lot of trouble kidnapping people." "I will continue," said Carnadyne. "First you kidnap the current tribal leader, who will undoubtedly be suffering from his latest victory. Then you administer an antidote I have in my own small way managed to compound. It is an insignificant potion, but one that-" "Carnadyne." "... one that will-" "Carnadyne!" "What is it, Reza?" "You're doing it again." "Doing what?" Carnadyne asked. Equably. Innocently. "Popping in and out of the dark universe. I can't follow you when you do that. It makes me nervous. Besides, this whole scheme of yours gives me the wheelin' fobbies." "I'll try to keep mostly in this universe for you," Carnadyne said. "But I tend to lose track when I am thinking of the plan and all the data that I compiled to reach it. A lot of data, leading to deductions and conclusions. Then arranging the-" "Carnadyne. Please stop popping in and out. You are really making me very uncomfortable." "Oh. Yes, very well. As I was saying, after you have administered the antidote and cured the leader, you will undoubtedly have gained his sympathies-and through him, those of the general populace. Then you explain to them that their habit of eating each other is detrimental to their existence as a viable race. Next you flush out the Trimechs that are hiding on the planet." "Tri . . . What Trimechs?" "Oh, did I fail to mention that? I have deduced that 54 their presence on the planet is an accomplished fact. My calculations indicate an area where there is 99.97 percent probability they will be located. Of course, if you have the trust of the natives, they can flush the Trimechs and you can return home." "Please stop popping, Carnadyne." "Oh. Statistics do that to me sometimes. Quite a simple plan, don't you think?" "That's what you said the last time." Reza pointed a ropy arm accusingly at Carnadyne. "I take it you will do this small thing for me?" "I haven't said pos. . . ." "But you haven't said neg, either." "Tell me something, Carnadyne. Are you more interested in saving these people from extinction or in satisfying your so-called hypothetical model?" Carnadyne looked at Reza curiously. "Does it make any difference?" she asked. "I guess not," the igor sighed. "Do you want to take my ship?" "Neg! You keep it too cold!" Reza said. "I'll take mine." "As you prefer. I do hope you will take reasonable precautions on this little venture to prevent any somatic injuries. It would be most inconvenient and time-consuming to train someone else to work with me. Our relationship has been quite, quite . . . quite satisfactory." "If that's a compliment, I'll

accept it. Though coming from you, I'm not sure how to interpret it at all. But you could do me one favor." "What would that be, Reza?" "Please stop popping in and out of the dark universe until after I leave." "Oh. Was I doing it again?" 7 Carnadyne was studying a printout when Ratran Yao reached her through her mind-comm unit. She reluctantly put away the flimsy before she answered. Interruptions were a nuisance, but she knew that Yao wouldn't bother her unless he considered it important. He was decent that way. As decent as any human could be. Which, as far as Carnadyne was concerned, wasn't very decent at all. "Yes, Barracuda," she said, using her code-name for him. "It is always a gratifying experience to be in contact with you." Carnadyne's modification of the mindcomm unit made communication nearly instantaneous within a range of a few lightyears, given certain conditions. It was prone to malfunction, but on the whole she was satisfied. On the edge of the void it worked better than in areas that were crowded with stars. The mindcomm unit drew upon the twisted lines of force within the dark universe for its power—just as she herself did. Sometimes those forces were tricky. They were not completely understood by anyone, although Carnadyne had a better grasp of them than anyone in existence. "We've come up with something curious, Carnadyne. Something you might be interested in." "That is a possibility. I have many areas of interest. Which one might this concern?" "Drug smugglers," Ratran said portentously. "They hardly interest me," Carnadyne said. "I've told you before that the mundane affairs of human activity are of negligible interest to me. What do I care of drugs? Or people who smuggle them?" "They seem to be tied up with the hijackings we've been watching. You remember I mentioned that to you before." "My memory is quite intact. I recall and sympathize with your problem. The lack of data makes efficacious solutions difficult. I do, however, convey my most courteous good wishes that you effect a speedy and satisfactory solution to this evidently perplexing problem." "I need more than your good wishes," the TGO executive said. He always felt a little uncomfortable talking to Carnadyne, a problem he certainly never had with anyone else. "More?" "I need your help, Carnadyne." Surely that was plain enough. "Mine? I cannot imagine how I could possibly aid you in the resolution of this conundrum." "I don't think you understand. We need your help on this. Everything points to the void. You know more about the void than anyone else. Are you free to follow up on this?" "I do have a number of small preoccupations, although they are minor indeed. I would be ashamed to mention these modest projects, they are of such little value. I will apply whatever small means I possess to investigate the situation." "You won't have to work alone." "Oh?" "I'm sending along someone to help you. Rantanagar Ehm. He's a trusted and valuable agent." The mindcomm unit emitted a grating noise. "Do I have to work with him? Is it necessary?" Ratran Yao got the feeling, and not for the first time, that Carnadyne understood humans about as well as humans understood Carnadyne. Which was just about zero. 57 "He's a good man," Ratran assured her. "You would be doing me a great favor." "In that case, I will attempt to welcome him. Though I do hope he does not get in the way." "I'm sure he won't. Thanks." "It is of no consequence, I am sure," Carnadyne replied equably. Ratran Yao wasn't sure of any such thing. That Carnadyne . . . woman was strange, strange, strange. Randy had mixed feelings when he arrived on Iceworld (secretly, unknown to the Iceworlders, who were most often called Bluelips or Snowmen). More to the point, he had doubts. He had doubts as to his ability to function as an agent of TGO. Doubts about Ratran's wisdom in sending him halfway across the galaxy to team up with some inhuman monster named for a void. In some ways it felt good to be moving again. In other ways it was the same old cress, as in pool. He was uncertain about the depth of his recovery and his dedication. Appli had helped. He had regained some confidence with Appli. His sexual drive had been rejuvenated, but he wasn't sure that would be much help in this situation. As a matter of fact, he hoped not. His spirits fell further when he caught his first glimpse of Iceworld. It was too far from its sun. Too cold. Too many rocks. Too much ice. A most inhospitable hunk of frozen planetoid. What idiot had first colonized this planetwide

polarscape, anyhow? His thought was a moan: Nothing good can come from this. Of course then he went into Iceworld. His first meeting with Carnadyne was a shock. Even though Ratran Yao had warned him about her appearance, Randy Ehm was stunned when he first saw her. Ugly? They gotta invent a new word for her! Hair matted. Knots in it animals could live in. Looked as if she'd never washed it. 58 One blue eye, one brown one. Olive brown, at that. Different sizes, too-and one seemed lower than the other. The blue one was larger. They were both bloodshot. Oh, Theba! Fat in all the wrong places. Gourd-sac breasts dangling down around her waist. A patch of skin discoloration covering half her face. Mismatched teeth and bad breath to boot. A positively loathsome growth on her forehead. Even as a potato her nose would have looked unwholesome. And those are her good parts, he mused. The hardest thing for Rantanagar to comprehend was that parts of her . . . vanished, with distressing regularity. Mostly around the edges. Those portions of her that remained visible flexed and waned and grew, never remaining stable for any comfortable period of time. It was like watching someone rot and regenerate-as seen through a piece of flawed glass. Even more, this revolting creature seemed totally involved with some incomprehensible experiment. It preoccupied her to such a degree that she totally ignored her visitor. This was hardly what Rantanagar Ehm had expected. If it hadn't been for Yao's insistence on the mission and constant reassurance that Carnadyne was (in some indecipherable way) more than competent, he would simply have turned around and redshifted with celerity. Carnadyne, meanwhile, was just as irritated by their initial encounter. She was at the crucial stage of this experiment and dared not stop at peril of losing many weeks' work. The gaudy human had arrived at a most inauspicious time. Most inconsiderate. Now all he seemed to want to do was talk. It was an egregiously troublesome situation. In addition, Reza was quite late on its scheduled check-in. It was conceivable that the small creature had run into difficulties. That would be most inconvenient. Still the man persisted in trying to draw her into 59 conversation. Carnadyne ignored him until the final stage of the last condenser yielded a single drop of iridescent yellow fluid. It was the end point of the reaction she'd been working on for so long. It had worked. Her calculations had been correct to the nth decimal point. Meticulously, she collected the drop in a small vial. "This is most satisfactory," she murmured. They were the first words Randy had heard her utter since he'd entered the laboratory, wearing one of Carnadyne's protective suits. (He still felt cold. The transparent nature of the suit seemed only to emphasize the frigid surroundings.) "I beg your pardon?" the Outie said. "What is satisfactory?" Carnadyne turned toward him, seeming to notice him for the first time. She was rather carried away with the success of her experiment and was not carefully controlling the parts of her that interfaced with the dark universe. Portions of her kept disappearing and reappearing in a different place, sometimes in varying shapes. Once she seemingly turned herself inside out. This so obviously disconcerted and unsettled the man that Carnadyne vowed to make an attempt to remember not to do it again. "This tiny drop," Carnadyne said, indicating the vial, "as unprepossessing as it may seem, should be-if I have computed it correctly, and I am sure I have-a cure for the plague that is currently ravaging the, uh, outback of Toktaga, a rather minor planet in a rather secondary star system. Part of the Tri-System Accord. It is not inconceivable that the inhabitants of that world may find it of use." Yes, yes, Randy knew what and where Toktaga was. That was no problem. All this shapechanging was! What kind of beast was this Carnadyne creature, anyway? How can I work with something that looks like yesterday's garbage . . . when it looks like anything at all? Rantanagar Ehm had worked with both Galactics and 60 nonhumans many times before. He prided himself that he had no prejudices or preconceived notions of form, but this was too much. Still, behind that shifting body there was a serene detachment that he could only feel, not begin to understand. He would try his best to get along with this grotesque . . . being. "I've heard of that plague," he said. "Nobody's been

able to crack it. Congratulations." "It was nothing," Carnadyne assured him, calming down and keeping some stability in her visual aspects. "It was simply one of my minor projects, mere trivia, to keep my intellect occupied. I have several such projects going at once. They appeal to my somewhat inquisitive nature." Randy had been told that Carnadyne had a long string of accomplishments behind her. Many were so technical that he couldn't begin to understand them. Strange as this odd creature was, she truly possessed a scillo-sharp mind. "I suppose this drug problem won't be much of a challenge to you," the Outreachers said, rolling his eyes. "They are all challenges," Carnadyne said, "to one of such small abilities as I. Yet in my own way, I have examined what few facts are available in this matter. As with Ratan Yao, I am inclined to suspect pirates of some sort. The drug running and hijackings are interrelated. They may be manifestations of something far more complex. No debris has ever been found of any of the ships, which makes it appear unlikely that they were destroyed." "Lord, lord-where could anyone hide over a do/en spacers?" "It would follow, then," Carnadyne said, continuing her thought as if he had not spoken, "that they have perhaps been . . . hijacked in some manner. Yet not in the usual way, since they have never been located. A search of the spatial areas in which they disappeared has yet to yield any positive results. It is as if they have simply vanished. I have proposed several hypotheses to cover that and similar conjectures. They would bear investigating." "Good. Then we can get started right away." Ratanagar was anxious to get moving. At least action would take his mind off this freakish creature. And possibly off his own anxieties as well. "I fear that won't be possible just now," Carnadyne said. "Reza has not returned from its mission. Reza is indispensable to my current strategy of investigating this problem." "Its mission?" Randy forced his eyes open in time to see a hip phase out of visibility. "What is a Reza?" "You might call Reza a person. A being, at any rate. Part of it is a Jarp. Part is not. . . I would not care to embark on a mission that had the slightest possibility of personal harm, without Reza." "Ratan didn't mention anyone else, Carnadyne." "It is unlikely that he is even aware of Reza. Nevertheless, it is essential to my projected plan. You and Reza will carry out the more active aspects of the venture." Randy blinked. "Aren't you coming, uh, Carnadyne?" Carnadyne fixed him with a blue-eyed look. And an olive-eyed look. "I rarely leave this planet if it can be avoided. Certainly should a journey involve danger or any threat to my well-being, I would not leave except under extreme duress. I have seen enough duress in my lifetime. Of bravery I have no trace at all. My judgment is that we will achieve our objectives if I proceed with the calculations and deductions while you and Reza perform the . . . active aspects of the endeavor." Uh-huh, Ratanagar thought, and was wondering how such a coward could ever have been a TGO Prime when a buzzer sounded. Carnadyne tapped a button. Up slid a communication unit. A warty fire hydrant covered with string appeared on the screen. It had eyes. This is getting weirder by the min, Randy mused cheerlessly. "Ah, Reza," Carnadyne said in a pleasant tone. "I was wondering what was keeping you. Have you finished our little project yet?" "Finished!" came a shrilly querulous squeal. "Your 'little project' has just about finished me. This is a distress call, grade Triple-A. Everybody on this sister-slicin' backwater planet is after my hide. The Prods want to hang me from the nearest shamtree. The Trimechs want to boil me in oil. Things are not going according to plan at all, Carnadyne! This is the dumbest thing I've ever done for you. I was crazier than a mole-mite to let you talk me into this." One of Carnadyne's arms wandered off into the dark universe while she nodded. She spoke in a perfectly level tone: "I take it you are encountering difficulties, Reza?" "Difficulties! My ship has been captured. I'm surrounded at this very moment on two sides by angry Prods who do not like the fact that I tried to kidnap their leader. My other two sides are surrounded by some pretty furious Trimechs who are a little upset that I tried to break up their marvelous scheme. You've got to get me out of here, Carnadyne!" "I?" "Pos! You! I'm trapped. You got me into this-now you've got to get me out of

this!" "Have you exhausted all avenues of escape?" Carnadyne's voice continued calmly equable while Rantanagar stared. Heartless as Rat Yao, this "woman!" "Of course I have or I wouldn't have called! Hurry! I don't have much time left.'" "Suppose I just send someone else to effect your rescue. It happens that I have a nice TGO agent here to hand. I daresay he would do. He seems to be of the type that is accustomed to activities of that sort.'" The onscreen image jittered up and down. "I need you, Carnadyne! Now!" A great sigh escaped Carnadyne, who glanced around 63 with obvious reluctance to leave her (messy) laboratory. "Very well. I suppose there is no other way. It is terribly inconvenient, however." "Inconvenient!" Reza positively sputtered. "I'll show you inconvenience when I see you!" "Now we waste time, Reza. I shall proceed immediately to Prodo." The screen was blank. Carnadyne turned instantly and motioned for her guest to follow her around a long shelf-cabinet strewn with . . . things. "My ship is housed at the end of this tunnel. I suggest we move in haste. It is not in Reza's nature to call so if the difficulty is less than severe." She swung open a side door. Instantly lights sprang up, beyond. "Shouldn't we consider calling for reinforcements?" Rantanagar Ehm asked, as they walked through the cold tunnel. "It seems to me that we could use some help—at least some additional armament?" "I believe that will not be necessary," Carnadyne told him with an air of distraction. "We should be able to handle what must be handled." When they reached her spacer, Randy realized what she meant. It was a superbly equipped vessel, with enough firepower to hold its own against anything short of a fleet. Still, they were only two against an unknown enemy. With little effort, Carnadyne set the ship hurtling along its tunnel for kloms and kloms—so that if it were observed lifting off it would be far from her quarters— and up off the frozen planet. Iceworld hung aglitter below them in all its frigid splendor while Carnadyne punched in the coordinates of Prodo and prepared SIPACUM for transition. Immediately they were on their way, with Rantanagar impressed. He was in the hands of a dam' good ship-handler! "How far is Prodo from Iceworld?" he asked, when he saw that Carnadyne had a free moment. He had taken the second chair; mate's seat. 64 "It is approximately 1.38745 lightyears away at this particular time." "But—you communicated with Reza without a time lag. How is that possible without the mindcomm?" Carnadyne flipped her fingers in an arrestingly human gesture. "Oh, that was another small project of mine. Alas, it is a dismal failure. Instantaneous transmission is achievable with the device only within certain parameters. Hardly practical in most instances." "Theba's bones! Something like that could still be mighty useful!" "Do you really think so?" Carnadyne half-turned from the con to look at him. "I have considered it an embarrassing failure." And she added, while a leg and part of the opposite shoulder flickered, "If I were capable of being embarrassed." The man from Outreach shook his head. Carnadyne was certainly hard to get a fix on. And the way that Reza creature acted (not to mention looked). . . . "Ah, Rantanagar—I suppose you know how to operate a ship equipped with double-P drive?" "Of course," Randy told her. "Would you mind terribly taking the con? It is tiresome for me to perform such routine work. In addition, I think I should spend some time in formulating a plan. Meagre as my mental faculties are, I believe it might be helpful if we had some sort of rescue plan thought out before we reach Prodo. It might save us a great deal of unnecessary trouble." Uh-huh, Randy thought, and took the con—watching SIPACUM run the ship—while Carnadyne started in to think. At least he assumed she was thinking. Her edges blurred and she shifted into an almost translucent configuration. He looked hurriedly away and did some thinking of his own. Carnadyne was a puzzle, a study in contradictions. As slothful as she seemed on the surface, she had rushed to Reza's rescue with no apparent second thoughts. She 65 was obviously brilliant—yet what good was that if she was also totally unfathomable? (And self-effacing, he reflected; lord, lord, what other "failures" has she decided to discard without mentioning!) Her calm competence, however, was catching. Ran-tanagar Ehm was sure of one thing already. If he were ever in serious trouble (again) he would

feel a lot better if Carnadyne were coming to get him! He watched S(hip's) I(nboard) P(rocessing) A(nd) C(omputing) U(nit) [M(odular)] make a small adjustment in the control and asked for explanation. Oh. Merely avoiding a chunk of spaceborne rock wandering about looking for something to orbit or impact. Thanks, SIPACUM. He looked down at his nigh-invisible spacesuit. Brilliant idea. Except that somehow it felt cold on the (unnamed) ship. Didn't Carnadyne ever turned the damned heat up? 8 Prodo hung below them like a dying fruit in molded orange and green. Half impenetrable jungle, half scorched desert, it was not the kind of place where Rantanagar Ehm, given anything resembling a choice, would have stayed very long. Prodo looked about as hospitable as a cesspool. The terminator started to slice across the face of the planet in a sharp line of darkness that crept slowly toward them. Here and there the darkness was broken by small pinpoints of light like ultra-distant stars. Prod towns. Hardly more than villages, Randy realized. The Prods, unlike the conniving Trimechs, had not developed much of a technological society. That-among other factors obscure to Randy-made this world and its people of interest to Carnadyne. She had spent considerable time and effort on this project. It would be worse than a shame to have wasted all those calculations. There was also the matter of Reza. The little being always seemed to get into trouble. Carnadyne had decided it would be best to descend during the night. (Randy could hardly argue with that. It seemed reasonable-by far one of the most comprehensible utterances Carnadyne had so far produced!) Randy felt that he'd never be able to get a handle on Carnadyne's circuitous lines of reasoning. Sometimes her actions and reasoning made no discernible sense at all. When they had first arrived at Prodo, he had suggested that they proceed all-out with a frontal attack. Just go in with everything blasting to get Reza out. 67 There couldn't possibly be much resistance on a backward planet like this! Probably wouldn't even have to hurt anyone, just scare the whiskers off the fobbers. Assuming they had whiskers. Carnadyne had said no; stealth was often preferable to direct action. It sounded cowardly to Randy, and that didn't make sense either. He shook his head and did what Carnadyne told him. Carnadyne, on the other hand, saw Randy as a rather foolhardy human, always anxious to rush into an altercation when there might be ways to avoid trouble altogether. Carnadyne liked to avoid unpleasant situations. Especially when they involved the potential of bodily harm- her bodily harm. Far better to look carefully over the aggregate of possibilities and choose the course that involved the least danger with the maximum potential of success! Randy couldn't understand that at all. He was an exponent of direct action and forceful confrontation. Sitting around bothered him. The Prods had apparently gotten to Reza first and were holding it prisoner. Randy didn't see how that was much of an improvement over the Trimechs, but Carnadyne assured him it was. The Prods would be easier to handle. Supposedly. As darkness began to purple the planetary hemisphere where Reza was being held, Carnadyne set the ship quietly down just out of sight of a small settlement. Leaving the ship, they were quickly engulfed by the oppressive jungle. The air was heavy with the musty smell of rotting vegetation. Carnadyne led the way through ragged undergrowth. Huge olive and yellow-green vines, over a meter thick, hung from the towering trees-trees whose dark tops were so interwoven that the jungle seemed covered by a solid canopy a hundred meters above the ground. Thick brush, brown with yellow thorns, lashed at their legs. It tangled in their feet and hampered their progress. The darkness was filled with scuttling and slithering noises as well as the 68 cries and howls from a thousand unknown, unseen beasts. Despite the syrupy heat, Randy shivered. None of this seemed to worry Carnadyne, who plunged fearlessly ahead, blazing a trail through the bothersome brush. Occasionally she would stop to check an instrument reading or to listen to a particularly interesting sound. Once she stopped for an unusually long time over a plant. She took extensive readings from a probe she had clipped to her belt. Her suit expanded and contracted as she absentmindedly changed shape, lost in thought. Randy stepped to Carnadyne's side, assuming his weird

companion had found something of moment to this mission. "What is it?" he asked, peering around her for a better look at the plant. It didn't look special at all. Just a plant. Leaves like seven-pointed stars. Oh, it must be that strange ultramarine color. "What we have here is quite a unique adaptation. This plant exhibits a highly sophisticated degree of negative phototropism. Its main body grows away from the light rather than toward it. That would seem to be highly advantageous in an area such as this where the growth above blocks out most of the sun. Look over here. You can see that very little of this plant protrudes above the surface. I would say that approximately ninety-seven percent of its mass is below the surface, where it gathers nutrients." "How does this help us rescue Reza?" Rantanagar Ehm dared ask. "Oh, it doesn't." Carnadyne sounded astonished at the question. "When why bother with it?" "One never halts in the lifetime pursuit of scientific investigation." "But that's so trivial!" The words blurted from him. Carnadyne bestowed on him a lofty gaze. "One person's trivial information is another's master's thesis. 69 Information is information. It's all input. You would do well not to have such a closed mind, a fault you seem to share with the majority of humans I have been in contact with." "I could say something similar about you." "Most would," Carnadyne said equably. "It is a superficial assumption based on careless and incomplete observation. Another human trait, I might add." "So where does that get us?" Randy asked, in frustration. "Where we are." "And where's that?" "Approximately ninety-one meters from the perimeter of the village where Reza is being held prisoner by the Prods." "I don't see the village," he said, and wished he hadn't. "You can't see it from here. The trees hide it. The village is composed of thirty-seven buildings surrounding a large field where the Run-Look-Find course is laid out. A bonfire is kept burning on one side of the field to keep away the gnashers, a small but deadly animal native to this planet. Reza is being held in the largest building, which serves as the village headquarters. Reza is being closely guarded by several Prods and is, as yet, uninjured. They plan to execute in the morning. It would be most unfortunate if this eventuality were to manifest itself." Randy stared at Carnadyne in amazement. "How did you do that?" "Do what?" "Get all that information. We didn't know any of that while we were in orbit." "It was quite simple, really. While examining the plant and conversing with you with a small portion of my mind, I was also reaching out mentally to insinuate a tendril of my mind into that of a convenient Prod. Most of his thoughts were insignificant, but some may yet prove useful." 70 "You mean you can actually get into people's minds?" "After a fashion, yes. There are certain limitations and difficulties. It is not exactly what you might call mind-reading, but more of a merging. Uppermost thoughts are the easiest to detect." "Could you read mine, for instance?" Randy tried not to sound nervous. "Probably, if there was sufficient reason to do so. I also have some small ability to transmit as well, but I seldom engage in that activity. I have no desire to probe people's minds in an indiscriminate fashion. It would be exceptionally boring." "I suppose you lifted a plan out of that Prod's head while you were at it," Randy said, not bothering to conceal the sarcasm in his voice. Carnadyne ignored it, or did not notice. "A plan?" "To rescue Reza. Surely you remember." "I have had a suitable plan for quite some time, subject to such modifications as the changing circumstances may warrant." "Then I don't suppose you'd mind filling me in?" "Filling you . . .? Oh, you mean you would like to know the details of our projected endeavor." Randy sighed. "Something like that." "It is really a simple maneuver. One of your considerable resources should have no difficulty with it at all." "My resources? Me?" Randy was suddenly suspicious. It didn't pay to take anything for granted when dealing with this Carnadyne . . . person. That much he had learned already. Genius, sure . . . but Carnadyne had all the thoughtfulness and social graces of a chair. "What about you?" he asked, squinting away from the insect that wanted very much to explore the interior of his eye. "Oh, I have a role in this too. It is I who will rescue Reza." 71 "Really!" "From a safe distance, of course." Randy nodded. "That's

nice," he said, and his voice was the only dry aspect of this damned jungle. "And what am I supposed to be doing while you rescue Reza?" Carnadyne was squinting at some sort of crawling insect. Orange. She waved at it. At the first hint of the air current from her hand, it turned the color of the creeper on which it crawled-and flew away. "Interesting. It-what did you say, Rantanagar?" "I asked what I'm going to be doing while you are rescuing Reza." "Oh, of course. You create the diversion. Keep the Prods occupied while I see to Reza.'" "A simple maneuver, you said. Carnadyne . . . that's simple?" "It should be. You are most experienced. It will be simple for you, Rantanagar." "Uh." Somehow, Rantanagar doubted it. Nothing seemed simple around Carnadyne. Nothing. 9 The Prod village was considerably smaller than Randy had anticipated. The buildings were crudely made, quite low to the ground. Lights burned in several of the windows, generated by some sort of primitive electric power. Randy assumed that the Prods had a severely limited technology. Perhaps they were evolving in a different direction, away from technological advancement. Maybe they were developing into a race that put little emphasis on the hard sciences, as many others had. It would take time for them to realize their potential. At any rate, they would be easy pickings for the Trimechs, who at least had space travel. The huge bonfire at the edge of the field sent flickering shadows throughout the townlet. Among the shadows moved the Prods. The Prods were short in stature and a strange sort of greenish-tan or pale olive in color. Slightly over a meter and a half tall, they tended to be rather bulbous. Every male's straight black hair appeared never to have been cut, and was tied behind with a red bow. Their heads seemed to be all mouth and eyes. Lost Galactics? Another race? Rantanagar Ehm did not know. Their coloration came from the way their sun's rays hit their planet and its atmosphere. Meanwhile he was to challenge their leader to a session of Run-Look-Find. Wonderful! He was hardly impressed with this Carnadyne plan that he did not understand. While that was going on, Carnadyne would somehow 73 spirit Reza away to safety. The leader-ik-Fubli-had been given the antidote by Reza, but had proven distinctly ungrateful. As a matter of fact he had gone all selfish and decided that with the aid of the antidote he could remain leader forever, no matter how many brains he ingested. "It is time for you to go," Carnadyne communicated, from what Randy assumed was a comfortably safe distance. "Now?" "'I believe you are expected.'" Randy frowned. "What? Expected? Now?" Me? "Now.'" Crisply. Randy stepped from his hiding place into the clearing. He felt exposed, vulnerable. Two decimeters tall and naked. He swallowed hard, working to bury the feeling. Since he was what he was, he tightened his mouth, stood straight, and walked toward the center of the hamlet. He was quickly surrounded by Prods wearing long knives. Up close they didn't appear particularly dangerous, but Randy knew that looks were often deceiving. The Prods stayed a healthy distance away from him and made no threatening gestures or motions. He headed, as Carnadyne had instructed him, toward the largest building. He'd seen better in slum areas. Even on Bleak. As he approached the structure, a Prod stepped from the doorway. Flanked by two others holding staffs, he was wearing a gold chain around what passed for his neck. Randy rightly assumed him to be the leader, or mayor-the il-Fukli. "Halt," the Prod said. "You will go no farther." By virtue of the mindcomm unit he wore, Randy understood him. A supremely efficient and versatile device, the mindcomm as modified by Carnadyne allowed its wearer to communicate directly with any form of intelligent life. It was a permutation of the translator helmets Jarps 74 wore. Randy was growing used to this aspect-only one of many-of the device. "You are taller than we anticipated," the Prod said. "The other is quite small." "We are different species." "It is all the same to us. You come from the stars. You are not of the Prods, large or small." "I have come to challenge you to Run-Look-Find." "That, also, is expected. The small one spoke of it." "If I win, the small one goes free," Randy said. "It is of no matter," the Prod said. "You cannot win. Only a Prod can win." He sounded sure of himself. Wonderful, Rantanagar thought, fighting his treacherous doubts. At a gesture, the other Prods stepped forward and

escorted the stranger to one end of the maze, the path where Run-Look-Find was enacted. Again, they were not hostile in any way Randy could detect. Still, he had a feeling that they could be dangerous. If pressed. I'll try not to press. Wish I had a nice bag of grenades! The maze was a series of interlocking pathways formed between hedges covered with sharp yellow thorns. Randy assumed that the thorns would be no problem beyond the psychological; his suit would surely protect him. Though the hedge would be quite high for a Prod, it came only to the Outie's chin. He could see over the top easily, though not well enough to discern a path. A piece of cake, he thought, and the treacherous doubts washed away. ik-Fubli was at the entrance at the other side of the maze. The objective was a clearing in the center. As Carnadyne had predicted, a crowd was growing around the perimeter of the maze. He was indeed creating a diversion, but he wasn't sure he liked it. As more and more Prods arrived, Randy gained the definite feeling that he was outnumbered. 75 "Begin," a Prod voice intoned, and someone rattled a something. That was when Rantanagar Ehm realized that he hadn't the faintest notion as to what he was supposed to do. "Enter the maze," Carnadyne transmitted. "Take the first turn on your left and go three paces." Good old Carnadyne. She's got it all figured out! Randy entered the maze, turned left and took three paces. Nothing happened. A pile of sticks lay by his feet. They meant nothing to him. He stared at them for a few seconds. They still meant nothing to him. "What do I do now?" he asked Carnadyne, who was probably reading the other Prod's mind. "Arrange them in a hexagon." Randy squatted to rearrange the sticks. It reminded him of a childhood game. He felt foolish. When the sticks were in a hexagonal configuration, a pathway opened in the previously closed hedge. He walked through it, keeping his eye across the maze, where he could only just see the head of the Prod leader. Theba's eyeballs, I don't even know thejacko's name! "Now go right," Carnadyne prompted. (In the background, Randy could hear the cheers of the Prod crowd. He was obviously falling behind.) "Stop!" Carnadyne ordered, and Randy froze. A dark shadow scuttled across his path not ten centimeters in front of his left foot. It made a fearsome clicking sound, not unlike a knife being sharpened for the kill. "That was a gnasher," Carnadyne said. "Do I have to do everything for you? Be careful. Watch out." Randy nodded, even though Carnadyne could not possibly see him. He didn't even consider mentally thumbing his nose. He moved ahead slowly, made guesses at two intersections and-stared. He was facing a dead end. "What now?" he asked his invisible guide. What he got in reply was the equivalent of a busy 76 signal. Carnadyne was occupied. Rantanagar Ehm was on his own. He stared to backtrack, assuming that he'd made a wrong guess at one of the intersections. The conformation of the maze seemed to have changed after he passed it. He had lost his bearings. Clearly this was trickier than it had first appeared. Even peering over the top didn't help. He guessed again. Dead end. He turned around and dodged-only by reflex-another gnasher. Charming. He also bounced off a sapling. Then another roar bellowed from the crowd. A different pitch this time-not one of celebration, but of anger. He stood as tall as he could and saw Reza running down the steps from the building the igor had been held in. Several Prods leaped in hot pursuit. Greenness, Randy saw, was no deterrent to speed. All of a sudden the rules of the game had changed. Randy's mind immediately left the complexities of the maze for something he could easily understand. Here was an ally in clear danger. He needed help-that is, it did. Hmp. So much for Carnadyne's plan! Without another thought, he burst through the thorny boundaries of the maze. Prods were running everywhere. Two came toward him with their staffs raised. He yanked the curved rod away from the nearest, rapped him with its tip and swung it in a wide circle. Three Prods went down and a path opened for him. He waded through the opening, swinging the staff. Now and again it caught something solid. Most satisfactory, that. He was gaining on Reza, who was losing ground to its pursuers. More chased Randy, now. The nearest to Reza hooked it with his staff and pulled the igor off its feet. He brandished a sword, waving it over the fallen figure menacingly. The

execution was about to take place a day early. Leaping through the air, Randy clonked the Prod away with a blind-side clip. He'd learned that unsavory maneuver from Ratran Yao. He snatched up Reza like a 77 football and, keeping his head down for a smaller profile, sprinted toward the shelter of the jungle. Reza had sense enough not to wriggle. He expected to find Carnadyne when he broke into the heavy growth. At the very least, he expected to run into the ship, or safety of some sort. He didn't expect to run into the Trimechs. They were fearsome beings, all tooth and nail. Randy tossed Reza into the shadows and took them on, all of them. He was outnumbered twenty to one. It wasn't even a fair fight. Rantanagar Ehm, TGO, demolished them. He beat them back with tree limbs. He fought with his fists. Once he picked up a Trimech by the legs and swung him like a club. In the midst of the frenzied attack by the driven Trimechs, he was an island of satisfaction. This was more like it! He did what he had to do, with what was available. When it was over, he left them scattered about, stunned and worse. He was hardly scratched. The Prods would undoubtedly find them, question them. The truth about their manipulation of the Prod culture would come out. A grinning Randy grunted happily as he picked up Reza (who was grumbling) and headed in the direction of the ship. Carnadyne was waiting when they arrived. "That was most satisfactory," she said calmly. "Satisfactory, my mother's ovaries," Reza snapped. "They almost had me that time. If I ever get involved with you again, remind me to have my brain pickled and sent to the Science Institute." "You're rescued, aren't you?" Carnadyne said. "Why do you persist in complaint?" "I almost wasn't," Reza griped on. "I had nearly escaped-with very little help from you, I must say- when this oaf of an Outie carries me around like an Adelpian foot-bag. Most undignified." "All according to plan," Carnadyne said complacently. "Wait a minute," Randy said. "Whose plan?" "78 "Mine, of course," Carnadyne told him. "Did that plan include my getting bashed around, having to fight my way out of all that mess?" "That was one possibility. It had a very high probability," Carnadyne admitted in that maddeningly equable way of hers. "Why didn't you just invade a few minds and save us a lot of trouble?" "I was doing that," Carnadyne said. "There were, however, a large number of individuals involved and my insignificant resources were spread rather thin. I did manage to arrange for Reza's release by feeding appropriate visual input into the Prods that were guarding it. After that there were too many minds to manipulate. I was also busy observing the way Prodo's moon was occulting this system's two innermost planets. It is worthy of observation. I made some nice records of the phenomenon. Perhaps some day you would like to view them.'" The man from Outreach was furious. "You put us both in danger for a thing like that?" "Not 'a thing like' that-for the thing itself. But indeed-were you really in danger?" Carnadyne gazed blandly at him. "It was my impression that while you were fighting your way out and rescuing Reza you felt like a TGO agent for the first time in a long while. It was not something I could take lightly, or negate with a casual bending of minds. It seemed important to you." Randy thought about that. It was true! For the first time since he'd left the hospital he felt very much his old self. This Carnadyne freak is more complex than I'd thought! His reverie was broken by a mindcomm transmission: "Cougar to R.M." "Ehm here." He stood a little straighter in spite of himself. Or because of himself. "What's the status of the investigation into the shipping disturbances ?'" Rantanagar looked at the enigma that was Carnadyne, and the still sputtering Reza. He realized that he felt good; felt more alive than he had in months. "We're getting right to it," he told "Cougar"-Ratran Yao. "First we had to take care of a little unfinished business." "You're not out there to finish others' business," Yao transmitted gruffly. "You're out there to see what's happening to those ships!" "Getting right on that," Randy said, with high good cheer. 10 Captain Maprik shifted his swivel chair to the left and checked the viewscreens. Her face was grim as she tapped the buttons on the arm of her chair, entering a new set of coordinates. The scene in the main viewscreen shifted abruptly as Norcross Citizen responded to the changes she'd entered. It wasn't enough. Three

seconds later the five small fighters appeared on the screen again. "Can't shake them," she said. "We'll have to fight. Start an evasive pattern and send the standard distress call." "Aye, Captain." Lights flashed into life across the massive control console as the computer responded. A wailing siren sounded battle stations throughout the ship. Captain Maprik had hoped they would be able to outrun the fighters, and all the while she knew that was a long shot. Norcross Citizen was a big cargo spacer, a merchanter not built to match the speed of the much smaller fighters. That didn't mean she was helpless, not by any means. There had been too many disappearances along the shipping lanes for anyone even to consider sending out an unarmed ship, especially one carrying such valuable cargo as the Qalaran merchanter. Norcross Citizen was loaded with scientific equipment bound for a research station out beyond Barbro. Some of the equipment was bulky, some ultraminia-turized. All of it was valuable and all of it was of the very latest design, some even one-of-a-kind pieces. Two worlds out beyond Barbro Transfer Station were 81 involved in a terraforming experiment. It was conceivable that the equipment could be modified for use as weapons. Not the kind of material to fall into the wrong hands. Thus the ship was armed . . . well armed. The fighters had the advantage of speed and higher maneuverability, while the cargo ship had considerably more firepower. They feinted and thrust at each other with warning shots while they parried for position. The fighters-sleek, two-man jobs, slim as needles- circled the larger craft. They stayed well away from Citizen, at a distance where their SIPACUMS had time, measured in the smallest fractions of nanoseconds, to react to and deflect the deadly bursts of energy the cargo ship threw. Yet they couldn't stay there forever. A stalemate wasn't what they were looking for. They were looking for a kill, a capture. One of the attackers broke formation and headed toward the bulky merchanter. Zigzagging and cartwheeling with evasive maneuvers plotted by the onboard computers faster than any human mind could think. It was firing as it attacked, twenty bursts a second, locked on target. Maprik's ship was hardly defenseless. Too, its computers were every bit as fast as those of the attacking spacer. Defenses were automatically deployed, thrusting aside the energy blasts from the attackers. Simultaneously, Citizen maintained enough fire on the remaining fighters to keep them occupied. (Somewhere deep in the bowels of Citizen SIPACUM was rapidly predicting and calculating the most probable course of attack the smaller ship would take. It reviewed, updated and corrected its calculations fifty times a second. It controlled the awesome firepower of Citizen and it was fast, incredibly fast. It was also deadly accurate. It caught the fighter in a searing blast of pure energy. (A brilliant orange and black churning sphere of destruction marked the end of the attacking vessel.) The bridge filled with cheers from the crew. Captain 82 Maprik did not join in. That left four. Five had been one too many. If they had all attacked at the same time there would have been big trouble. As it was, their hesitation had probably cost them the battle. But Captain Maprik hadn't gotten as far as she had by taking things for granted. She set her jaw and ordered a direct frontal attack. The huge spacer swung into action, splitting the remaining fighters into two isolated groups. Next it turned its attention and most of its firepower on one of the groups, keeping just enough pressure on the other to keep both busy. The element of surprise was on Maprik's side. The attackers would hardly be expecting a simple merchanter to undertake such offensive maneuvers. The two fighters in the first group, realizing too late what was happening, split apart and headed out in different directions. And they kept on going! They were firing as they fled, throwing everything they had at Citizen, but they were no match for the larger ship. Two soundless, blinding explosions marked their end. Now Maprik and the onboard computers turned all efforts toward the two remaining fighters. It would truly be no contest. Citizen clearly had superior firepower. In a matter of seconds they had demolished one of the fighters and were concentrating on the other. Maprik had saved it for last because it had suffered a near miss earlier and seemed

incapable of making a run for it. Still, it was stupid to take chances and Captain Maprik was approaching it in what she hoped was the way of the renowned Captain Cautious. Even partially disabled, a fighter was no mere toy. If possible, she wanted to capture the vessel. She approached the stricken craft slowly, carefully. She felt that she was prepared for anything, anything at all. Thus, she was utterly surprised when it happened. One minute the fighter hung in the viewscreen against a background of stars. The next minute everything blurred and shifted, the stars became rainbows, and the ship 83 became a smear of light against a blurred background. Then everything went black. From the fighter's point of view, it was as if the massive cargo ship had simply disappeared, whisked away by some powerful, invisible hand. It was gone. Nothing remained. It was as if it had never existed. 11 Rantanagar Ehm settled back as best he could in the uncomfortable chair to enjoy a good stiff drink-his second. Carnadyne had prepared this unexpected treat, using fermented extract of a small berry that valiantly flourished on Iceworld's surface. While Carnadyne drank nothing stronger than herbal tea, she had developed this alcoholic refresher out of curiosity. So she said-and when she evinced such pleasure at having someone to test it on, the Outie believed her. He thought it was great, in spite of its teal blue color. It also tended to bubble and fume now and again, and its aftertaste was unfortunately chalky. Still, Randy warmed to it quickly. He was feeling better. They'd been back in Carnadyne's underground quarters for several hours. Enough time for a lukewarm shower followed by a change into some decent clothes . . . velveen trousers of burnt yellow and a magenta tunic. Enough time for the pain to go away and the aches to start. They were sitting and waiting. Reza was still griping, but mostly to itself, quietly. It bitched about the danger and it bitched about the cold. It bitched about almost everything. The igor was right about the cold, Rantanagar thought. Could use a little warmth in here. Carnadyne's quarters were cold in more ways than one. Stark bare walls and no hint of carpeting. Nothing frivolous or even decorative in sight. Everything spoke 85 of efficiency, nothing of esthetics. Randy's Outie love for the flamboyant was a bit offended; at least bereaved. The place was impersonal. As cold as a hospital operating room. Yet as they sat and talked he felt the warm glow from his drink and was moved to try a question or two on the strange . . . person called Carnadyne. To his surprise, Carnadyne answered them. She viewed curiosity as one of the useful human activities. Now Rantanagar learned a few things about Carnadyne. It didn't help much. The more he learned about her, the less he understood her. In a roundabout way, he asked why she looked the way she did. In a roundabout way, she told him. Becoming female was just one of the things she had done to make a break with her past. All that had happened to her before her ship went into the dark universe was behind her. She renounced the human part of her background much as a butterfly would deny ever having been an ugly caterpillar. An inferior stage of existence. The break was clean. Total. Rebuilding herself after the accident had taken time and a little work. Realizing that she could take any form she wished, she had chosen this one. Chosen. It was a functional form and in many ways it pleased her. Randy couldn't help but ask-in a roundabout way- why the form she had chosen was so ugly. Carnadyne looked at him blankly. Didn't he know that beauty-or the lack of it-was a wholly subjective value judgment? A terribly human failing, one that she felt herself far above. "My form is simply there, here, like an atom of hydrogen or a planet or a tree. It exists without prejudice, like everything else in the universe." / know ugly when I see it, Randy thought, feeling no guilt as he indulged in a human failing. Her form was transient, she explained. It existed the way it did because she caused it to be that way. It could 86 easily be another, and often was. The fact that he could not perceive it was not her fault. That was where she lost her guest. The dark universe was beyond him. Carnadyne really tried to put it into words he could understand. She failed. It was a part of her life just as air was to his. That was the problem. What was common to her was alien to him. Like the Iceworlders above them who had twenty words for ice at various

stages, but no word for cold (because it was always cold), she had no words for the dark universe that meant anything to Randy. She saw it as a natural part of her environment. Rantanagar Ehm saw it as strange. Part of her would always exist in the dark universe. It was an aspect of her being that she had grown to accept. It was like living in two places at once. It was like double vision. At times-especially when she was distracted-the distinctions blurred and she lost her place. At such times the part of her that existed in what others viewed as the "real world" tended to shift and change unless she watched carefully. None of this made much sense to Randy, who was stuck with human failings and human perceptions. He stopped short of disregarding it, though. He'd seen her in action and had a healthy respect for what she could do. No matter what she drew upon to do it. While they were talking, Carnadyne's complex and sprawling network of monitors scattered all across the parsec abyss, intercepted the CR! distress call from Norcross Citizen and relayed it immediately to that frigid planetary ball called Iceworld. The trio, tucked away in Carnadyne's laboratory, had been waiting for such a message. Because they were waiting, it took them only twenty-two seconds to reach Carnadyne's small, efficient, heavily-armed ship. Carnadyne's better-than-SIPACUM redesigned computer (at finding a tachyon conversion point) saw to it that they arrived at the battle scene a short time later. 87 It was obvious that they were too late. A lone fighter, apparently disabled, was the only intact craft in the area. Scattered debris spoke of a recent battle, but it could not account for the huge mass of a cargo ship. Carnadyne held her ship steady, seemingly lost in thought. "I guess we've caught one of them," Randy said. "We ought to be able to track down the others." "Good," Reza said, slapping two of its ropy tentacles together. "That means I can go home. Never cared much for this hijacking business from the start. Sounds like entirely too much work. Got to get back to my warm nest." Carnadyne's edges wavered, solidified. "I am afraid it will be quite some time before you will be able to return to the nest, Reza. Far from being solved, our problem has become considerably more complex." "What do you mean?" Randy asked. "There's the fighter and there's the space-junk. We've got them red-handed." "We don't have them at all," Carnadyne said evenly. "The scattered wreckage you see is from his compatriots in crime, not Norcross Citizen. They are very small fish indeed. Not the hijackers." "How did you figure all that out?" Randy was frowning suspiciously. "I touched the minds of those in the small fighter," Carnadyne said. "They are common thieves, a raiding party from Suzi. They had heard of the shipping disturbances in this area and sought to take advantage of it. They were quite surprised when the cargo ship disappeared. ' ' "What?" Reza squealed disbelievingly. "Things don't just disappear." "Norcross Citizen did exactly that," Carnadyne said. "One moment it was engaged in heavy battle and in the next instant it simply vanished without a trace." "That's, ah, contrary to the laws of physics," Randy heard himself say, with some relish. 88 Carnadyne turned slowly to regard him with a cold eye. "The so-called 'laws' of physics are nothing more than theories we have developed to explain, in small part, the workings of the universe as we perceive it. They are only as good as our knowledge of physical systems. The galaxy is a large and complex system, operating on levels we can only guess at. There is much we do not know or cannot explain. The word 'impossible' is not in my working vocabulary." "I bet they lied," Reza snapped, still hoping for a quick trip back to the nest (while Randy went back to feeling two decimeters tall.) "That's it, they're trying to pull something over on us." "They are unaware of my touch in their minds," Carnadyne said. "They could not lie to me even if they wanted to. That is what they saw and their instrumentation backs up their visual observations. Simply: the ship disappeared." Rantanagar Ehm heaved a sigh. "So what do we do next? Seems to me we know less now than we did before." "It is time to start on the next phase of the plan," Carnadyne said. "You will go deep cover, Randy, posing as a buyer of exotic goods. You will travel to various trade planets and shows, looking for material from the hijacked ships. It stands to reason that some of

it will show up soon, either as legitimate goods or on the black market. When you find something, we can trace it back." "There must be hundreds of planets, ships, and stations specializing in trade in the galaxy! It would take years. I wouldn't even know where to start." Randy was none too sure that years made a bit of difference to Carnadyne the compiler of facts. Maybe this was what Ratanagar meant when he'd bidden his agent to keep an eye on her. "Some places are more probable than others," Carnadyne said. "I have a list." 89 I'll bet you have a list of everything, Ratanagar thought. "'And I get to go back to the nest," Reza said. "Right?" "Wrong." Carnadyne shook her head. "I want you to ride along with a few cargo ships passing through this area. We might be able to pick up some first-hand information." "First-hand information my ass!" the distressed Reza squealed. "All that will get is a disappeared me. I don't think much of this idea, I really don't. If all you want to do is get rid of me, I'll go home to my nest." "It is part of the plan," Carnadyne said patiently. "As soon as the plan is completed and we have solved this little mystery, you will be able to return to that overheated nest of yours, though I can't see why you would like to." Reza moaned. "I suppose you have a part in this plan?" it asked. "A suitably dangerous one, I hope?" Carnadyne ignored the jab. "I intend to return to my laboratory. There are facts to be sorted, new data to be considered. I am best suited to endeavors of that type. In addition, it will provide us with the necessary base of operations. I can coordinate the activities of the two of you better from there." She stared at Reza. "Sometimes just keeping track of your whereabouts is a full-time occupation." "What about the fighter?" Randy had to ask. "We can't just leave them here." "I don't see why not," Carnadyne said. "They are planning to return to Suzi. Due to the nature of the damage to their craft, it will take them several months. I don't expect it will be a very pleasant trip. When they arrive at their planet they will be severely dealt with. The Suzite policers are quite harsh and I will see to it they are informed." Randy shivered. He was glad he wasn't in the thieves' boots. They'd be at each other's throats long before 90 they arrived at their home planet. Come to think, he liked that prospect. Carnadyne turned back to the controls to key in the coordinates for Iceworld. Neither Randy nor Reza felt very confident about the plan. It was impossible to tell what Carnadyne thought about it. Still, the less-than-happy Outie mused, he wasn't sure that he wanted to know. 12 Ratanagar Ehm made his way through shifting gravity fields. The space station of planet Shankar was different from others orbiting other planets along the spaceways, and yet almost identical. Most of the station was dedicated to moving people and merchandise in and out of the ships berthed all around its gigantic wheel. A sprawling, busy place crammed with milling people all of whom seemed in a great hurry to get down to Shankar or back to their spacers. All seemed to be talking at once in the accents of a dozen and more planets. The voices' owners wore the clothing of those planets, and others, contributing to the bustling atmosphere. The noise level was tremendous. People calling out greetings and farewells, curses and warnings. Barkers and mnemonic adverts hawking their wares. Voices raised in anger, in shouts to clear the way, in orders and instructions. Only the security personnel seemed quiet, and the occasional rushing loner. Wandering entertainers (?) added to the bazaar-like atmosphere of clamorous confusion; they passed through the crowd looking for an occasional tip or an unguarded wallet/perspak or careless spacefarer's neglected go-bag. The young Thebanian he saw, all jiggly in the strap-titser that barely contained her abundance of bosom, was looking for something else. That one Ratanagar Ehm paused to watch. He was jostled by a Jarp that apologized with such profusion he knew it was a slave. 92 Work, Randy reminded himself. You're not here to inspect warheads, Ranti m'laddl Yet he did pause again to watch the third and fourth HRal he had ever seen. No warheads in evidence there, despite eight breasts on the female! The felinoprimates from HRalix moved so sinuously that they seemed to flow. Another Jarp moved past, in company with its crewmates. Free, that one. With the exception of the colors of the stevedores' and securers'

uniforms and local products, Medina station was not significantly different from any of the other docking stations he'd visited recently. Too many--this was the fifth planet he was investigating on behalf of Carnadyne. So far he had picked up no hint of the information he wanted. Somewhere among all these people there might be a clue to the disappearing ships. Yet his checking had to be done on planet. He took the shuttle, picking up a token for some bar or other and a sexual invitation along the way. Hipparkos, Shankar's big yellow sun, was sagging low when he set foot on the planet. In Shankar's capital of Medina, he headed for the downwind area: the seedier area, and the field-like area of hastily-erected shops that sold and bartered goods from here and there. Often such merchandise had shadowy origins. Rantanagar Ehm hoped so, reluctantly passing up the thrill-palaces and shops filled with the usual cheap merchandise. What he was looking for would not be in one of these places. He made his way to a more sedate--if no less corrupt--part of town, where scientific equipment was bought and sold. Several places he rejected as unlikely candidates; others he merely passed on this whim or that. He pursed his lips at a likely prospect, muttered "Think positive, Ehm," to himself, and went in. The shop was run by a Reshi, recognizable by his yellow Gri-sash. Looked like a toad, Randy thought, 93 and likely had bought his morals third-hand. The little flainer eyed him while Randy looked over the stock. Most of it was aged junk, salvaged from ships long past their prime. Small-time pirates--or would-be pirates--and others on the run often used outdated ships. This sort of shop helped them keep the clunkers running. He was rummaging through a bin of old tracking equipment when something shiny caught his eye. Instantly excitement was a tingle all through him. I've found one! It was the quaternary memory unit from the latest model Sindbad pulverizer, manufactured on Jasbir. The pulverizer, guided by its multifaceted crystalline mem-unit, could reduce tons of solid rock to dust within seconds, using very little energy. Naturally Randy Ehm had been studying; spacer Norcross Citizen had been hauling four of the machines. "A fine memory unit there," the proprietor rasped, approaching. Randy held to his role. He merely raised one eyebrow and looked at the Reshi with just the hint of disdain. "A fine one," the little fellow repeated, undaunted. "Latest design, you've noticed. Eighteen patch points! Multifunctional! Never been used." He reached Randy with greed in his eyes. Randy nodded. "You don't have to insult me--I know what it is. They make only the best, on Jasbir." "Ah, a man of knowledge and taste. I can get you a very good price on that--and others?" Memory units were not cheap, and he had reason to assume that his customer knew it. "My cost plus ten per cent," he said. "Now that's fair! A good deal for the both of us." Randy stared, made a face. "Let me name a figure," the Reshi said, a little too quickly. "You'll see that you can come to agreeable terms with Injucan of Temple City!" 94 "I doubt it, Injucan. This is indeed a fine m.u., but it's only a part of what I need. You couldn't possibly help me with that." Now Injucan looked anxious. "Try me. I can provide a great many things. This is only a small sample of my stock, you must realize. I agent for others, too." "I still doubt whether you can help me. Wish you could. I need a Sindbad pulverizer," "What?" The Reshi covered quickly. "Really!" Randy could practically see visions of fat commission dancing through Injucan's head. The Sindbad was signally expensive, which was just why someone had broken one down for parts. Harder to trace this way, too. He had just let Injucan know that he was more than he appeared on the surface--either wealthy or a lunatic, for one thing. He wondered just how shrewd the hijackers were, and if this fellow did indeed deal with them or "agent for them." "As a matter of fact," he said, casually measuring out the words for maximum effect, "what I really need is three Sindbad pulverizers." "Thr--oh my. Now what could a man want with three such marvelous and frightfully expensive machines? Why a man could turn a fair-sized mountain into a desert before lunch, with three Sindbads from Jasbir!" "What I want them for is none of your business," Rantanagar said loftily. "I have the credbacking--that's all anyone needs to know. I guess I'm in the wrong place, hmm?" The proprietor managed to keep his warty face calm.

"I'm the right person," he said, doubtless with visions of sugarplums jingling through what passed for his brain. "There's hardly anything I can't get my hands on, for the right buyer." Admission enough, Randy thought, and kept his excitement masked. Even a couple of percentage points of the price would set this fellow up for years. For life! Yet he shook his head. "Oh, I'm sorry, Injucan. I deal direct with the hold- 95 ers of the merchandise or I don't deal at all. That's part of my protection." The proprietor nodded even as he winced. Randy had just let him know that he walked the shady side of the street. Now-no big markup, probably no commission. Just a nice bonus from the "owners." "I can't let you miss your chance," Injucan said, hurrying to secure his shop. "I can take you to the ... holders of the merchandise. It happens they are presently right here on Shanki-right here in Medina!" "Chanks?" Randy asked, showing interest and wondering if the whole hijacking operation could be emanating from Shankari natives-Chanks. "You'll see. Come along, won't you? They are . . . discreet." "Now we're getting somewhere. Lead on, Injucan," Randy said, since he'd never dream of turning his back on this creep. Both planetary capital and port city, Medina was a city of many bars. Rantanagar had sojourned in more than one and was abruptly nervous that someone might just possibly recognize him. He had been disguised last time he was on Shankar-and got himself thrown out of two bars because that was part of the mission. To his relief Injucan the shopkeeper led him down unfamiliar, .twisty streets in a rundown area. He and his contacts seemed to have chosen the darkest, dirtiest, foulest-smelling "lounge" in Medina for their meeting. That was fine with Rantanagar Ehm, and not just because it diminished the possibility of someone's recognizing him even in the shadow of the yellow-plumed cocked hat he affected here-this time. He was also oddly fond of dark, dirty, rundown bars. Even in an unfamiliar one, he would be in a familiar element. It took awhile for his eyes to adjust to The Wheel's dim lighting. They never did adjust to the smoke that grayed the air. The Wheel was a small place, and crowded. Loud. 96 Lots of people, all talking at once. He smelled sweat and alcohol, cheap perfume and cologne, Heaven High and bad breath. At least the babble would make it unlikely that his business would be overheard. He almost wished that he hadn't worn the blousy, full-sleeved chartreuse shirt and sky-blue pants. . . . He tugged down his tricorne hat and his face relaxed in shadow while the shopkeeper led the way to an empty table in the rear of the dim room. Out of old habit, Randy took a chair that set his back to the wall. "They should be here shortly," Injucan said, glancing about. "Uh." Randy was scanning the room, working for a feel of the place. He mapped out the quickest route to the rear door that had to be there, in case he had to redshift suddenly. Over those two tables and jump the end of the bar. No problem. The Wheel's rustic motif was mostly natural. A spoked wheel hung before the mirror behind the bar, set with imitation candles in blinky neon. Lots of weathered wood in the place, from Shankar's own forests. Also a goodly number of busts, he noted. Paint-on jewelry had arrived here and he noted wigs, too-mostly scarlet. The husts were attractive, mostly. (The one trying to hide under the deep purple bangs should have worn a mask, he mused, poor thing.) He wondered idly how much a night might be with the one in the orange wetcloth jumpsuit with the fascinating cutouts. He also wondered if that fantastic butt was enhanced. It wouldn't cost a great deal, he assumed. This was hardly a class area of town. Nor was The Wheel full of hustlers. Just a rundown bar in a rundown part of the city. An honest, unassuming dump. Already Rantanagar Ehm liked it better than a thousand polished plasticene bars in which he'd been bored half fobby. Someone plugged in some music. Sort of. A maudlin off-key ballad about a spacefarer who picked up a disease from his cousin. It was over-instrumented. All that did was cause people to talk more loudly. Too bad too 97 many bar proprietors thought their customers needed to be "entertained!" Randy saw the two weirdies walk in and he tensed. They certainly weren't native Chanks and they didn't have the look of tourists, either. What the vug had caused that skin discoloration-or could it be dye? They came over. Injucan jumped up. The two stood at the table and were

obvious about looking Randy over. He looked them over. Without saying a word, they sat. Injucan had been waved silent, twice. For a long moment they stared at each other across the table. Randy felt the tension rise. It was a familiar feeling and he realized that he still liked it-or liked it again. Back to walking along the ragged edge, living life at the limits. Why the vug else join The Gray Organization? Sizing up the (presumed) enemy, he realized that he'd missed the feeling. He felt ready for anything and it felt good. Must've been some other jacko malingerin' in that hospital bed! A very human waiter came and took the order. The newcomers had to explain. Randy tipped up his hat to let them see his eyes, pulled it back down again. The plume whispered. "You're an Outreachier." "True," Randy said, staring with flat eyes. "Just an observation," he was assured. "I, ah, can't place you." "I wager you've never heard of our planet. Few have, though that may change soon. We are Mirese. From Mirayat. Not that it matters." The man from a planet that Randy had-impossibly!- never heard of was about his own size, with long pointy nails, carefully manicured to sharp edges. Charming. Painted steel gray, too. Mottled grayish skin with splotches of unpigmented areas. (Double charming!) Both were hard-faced, expressionless. Mouths were severe slashes almost without lips. Galactics, yes, but. . . . Hard radiation? Randy wondered. Generations of it 98 Where the flainiri hell is Mirayaf! Gray, in Theba's name! Well . . . under the skin . . . me too! The Mirese turned to face the shopkeeper. "You can go now." "Now wait a minute, I-" "Your services are ended. You have brought us together. Now I wish to be alone with this Outreachier. Leave." Injucan rose, turned toward Rantanagar. "A small finder's fee would be in order," he said in an oily tone. "A token of your appreciation." Randy shook his head. "Take it out of your commission," he said, in a carefully cold voice of unconcern. Grumbling, the shopkeeper departed. "There will be no commission," the Mirese said. "We do not encourage scum like that." "I didn't figure there would be," Randy said, smiling, even while he thought: You cheap, cheating son of unintroduced parents! The Mirese settled back. "You have expensive tastes," he commented. "Sindbad pulverizers don't come cheap." "I know what I want," Rantanagar told him. "I'm willing to pay for it." He produced a small card from a fold in his tunic, flipped it onto the table. Its gold sheen made it glitter in the darkness. So did four eyes from Mirayat. The Mirese immediately recognized the card as one issued by the Bank of Thebanis. Its gold color told him everything he needed to know. The man must have a fortune deposited there. "I see. You are indeed a wealthy man." "I didn't get wealthy sitting on my butt in stinkin' bars," Randy said. He gave his surroundings a sneering look. "What about those pulverizers?" Casually he picked up the card and replaced it in his tunic. Carnadyne had shown an unexpected and delightful talent for forgery. She wasn't such a bad old bird, when she kept her mind on business. 99 "Are you sure you need three pulverizers? They are quite powerful." Rantanagar nodded. "I know what they can do, and I want three. Let's just say I am embarking on a rather large project. To inquire further would be impolite, not to mention dangerous." "It must be a big project, to require three of them!" Trying to get a handle on me, Rantanagar thought. My job is simple-see that the ugly flainer fails! He said, "You do have them, don't you? If I'm wasting my time, I'm going to be very unhappy." "We have them," the Mir told him blandly. "You can-" He stopped talking abruptly as the waiter approached with their drinks. The Outie had ordered beer-Starblaze. His companions had asked for something that looked like a plassful of writhing spaghetti. It foamed and gave off a yellowish steam. Randy looked away while they sip-munched. "I want to see them in operation before we transfer any cred," he said. "Of course," the uglier Mir said. "We can take you to them." "When?" "We can leave in just under an hour. You have false ID for the gate?" "False I-me?" The Mirese gazed blandly at him. The other one sipped. Chewed. "I'm not an amateur," Rantagar said, leaning back. "I didn't think you were, Outreachier." Randy nursed his beer. Going to take several sonics to wash this scum off, he thought, while wearing a pleasant expression. 13 Of all the scattered worlds on which Rantanagar Ehm

had set foot, Mirayat came mighty close to supplanting Bleak as the worst. A dark, cold, windy wasteland of muck and mire. He was convinced that nothing approaching sentience could have evolved naturally on such a dismal, uncompromising, poor excuse for a planet. Except frozen mud, he told himself. They were met at the touchdown site by a driver in a small surface vehicle. Its crude atomic power-pak clanked and wheezed. Didn't look as if it could get over a hundred kloms an hour without shaking itself apart. (That Was just as well, since they got stuck in the mud twice before they reached what passed for a city. Despite the fact that the thing was a half-track!) There was nothing to look at on the way, though Rantanagar tried now and again. Everything was the same shade of brownish gray. Mud-colored. Could a whole planet be such a slop-mire? Ah, but then they came to the city! Crude, gray, unsophisticated. Looked as if it had been extruded by the mud. Randy Ehm was beginning to wonder how such an apparently backward people could have pulled off the hijackings. He tried to avoid forming opinions based on quick impressions, and it was not easy. (Things are seldom what they seem, Ranty m'lad, he told himself, and tried to cling to the cliché. And added one: He kept his eyes open.) 101 Mirese trudged about much the way people trudged around any city. There was the usual assortment of shops and businesses. It all looked perfectly legitimate, perfectly normal on the (ugly) surface. Maybe the hijackers were just a corrupt group within an otherwise incredibly dull "normal" society. Well, when the time was right he would elude his companions and investigate. For the time being, he would keep nice and close to them. Just a buyer with the potential of affording them one hell of a profit. Soon he was in a conference room with three Mirese. His impression was that they were stalling. He put on a brusque act, shaking his head in response to a question. "Neg. You get nothing until I see the pulverizers in operation. I don't have anything but your word that you even have them. Right now I'm not sure that your word is worth very much." "You must understand that we have to be careful," one of the grayish uglies said. "We know nothing about you." "All you have to know is the potency of my cred. What do you want—a pedigree and the actual clink of stells?" That brought a long silence. The stony faces were impossible to read for an indication of what they were thinking. The alien on their world sat just as still as they did. The authority figure nodded. "Take him into the dome. Show him the pulverizers. Watch him carefully." Randy let his eyebrows rise. "The dome?" A gray hand drew back the tan blinds that covered one wall. Beyond the large window, almost blending into the landscape, rose the top of a large—no, an enormous—dome. Rantanagar estimated its height and distance and came up with an impossible figure. The dome had to be at least five times larger than the city! It lofted over a klom into the air and he could only estimate the distance around its base. The thing was huge, prodigiously huge. An opaque hemisphere flecked 102 with scattered flashes of subdued light in several colors including nasty pure white and an electric blue. It reminded Randy somehow of a tornado under control. He didn't like it. "Urn," he heard himself say with incredible coolth. "A dome." He didn't like it at all. It gave him an uneasy feeling and worse, way down in his intestines. 14 Reza paced through the corridors of the cargo ship Bayport with ropy arms tangled in nervous knots. It didn't like this one bit. Carnadyne was always talking it into foolhardy missions. Why was it always—but always—getting into impossible situations because of the Iceworlder? The truth was that Reza was fond of Carnadyne, though it would never admit that. That would have ruined the chance to gripe. Reza did enjoy griping. Reza had few compatriots and fewer friends at home. To be truthful about it, they bored Reza. One thing about life with Carnadyne—it was never boring! There were always gigantic problems to be solved, fantastic adventures to embark on. The fact that these adventures almost invariably were dangerous bothered Reza. It was the price it paid for getting away from home. Much as it complained, Reza'd go fobby if it had to stay there. Fond as the igor was of Carnadyne, it didn't begin to understand her complexities. Carnadyne's mind always seemed to be up in the clouds when everything fell apart. Although Reza couldn't fault

her logic, it wasn't always clear where she was headed until she arrived . . . and announced the accomplishment with that maddening self-denigration she affected. Reza's usual response to Carnadyne's circuitous reasoning was to shrug and gripe a lot. It liked to complain almost as much as it liked to worry and did a lot of 104 both. Now seemed to be more of a worrying time. (There wasn't anyone around to gripe at.) The con-cabin of Bayport was deceptively calm. The captain, an old hand by the name of Kurian, sat in the command chair, seemingly bored. Actually he was concentrating on a small panel directly in front of him. It had been installed just before they left their last port of call, and kept track of the most sophisticated and sensitive sensor network ever developed. The engineers who had fabricated it assured him that nothing could get anywhere near him without detection. Kurian, even with his ingrained faith in technology, had his doubts. Nothing was a pretty strong word in the face of ships that disappeared in the blink of an eye. He turned to face Reza. "Almost halfway there," he said. "Halfway is nowhere," Reza grumped. "I won't feel safe until we're all the way there!" "Doesn't look like anything is going to happen," Kurian said in that disgustingly calm voice, waving at a serene console. "You may have wasted a trip." "I hope so," Reza said, with fervor. "I'd much rather waste a trip than disappear. Disappearing is not something I'm enamored of." It tasted a tentacle tip, looked around. Captain Kurian grinned. The little . . . thing was doing all his worrying for him. And keeping him amused, if a bit edgy. . . . "The odds look pretty much in our favor," he said. "The last five ships through this area had no trouble at all. Besides, we're not carrying anything valuable." I, Reza thought-with a stare-am valuable. The computrician glanced around from her SIPACUM post. "I've got the spray sensors at farthest reach, Captain. Nothing of any significance within their range.'" Captain Kurian glanced at screen and telits and nodded. "Good! Carry on, Jakdan." A tight ship, that was Kurian's answer to a galaxy Musla had been pleased to make unpredictable and 105 dangerous. Never mind that he had taken on Jakdan because she had the best-looking rear assembly on the spaceways; she was also highly competent at her computrician's duties, with good recs. Bayport's Master turned a smile on his diminutive passenger while Jakdan kept on carrying on. "As I said, there is absolutely nothing to-" Yes there was. It happened suddenly, without warning or hint of warning. One instant the normal starry background filled the screen; next moment everything went wild. Telits flashed while stars blurred, went out of focus. Bayport's very hull seemed to bend and warp. Its creaking was all too apparent. Then came the maelstrom. Sensory overload. It was as if every one of Reza's senses had been magnified a thousand times, a million times. Its vision was a swirling, shifting riot of colors and shapes. Its sense of touch made it seem as if the igor was being alternately crushed by stones and tickled by feathers. Sound was a booming echo that reverberated in its head like a marching army. Soon the pain circuit cut in and everything focused on that alone. Now it was painful to look, to breathe, to hear, to touch. Time was as blurred as everything else. A year could have passed, or only a nanosec. It stopped as abruptly as it had begun, like snapping a twig. Or a neck. Then . . . blackness. Reza discovered its arms would tightly around its body, a natural reaction to overwhelming circumstances. The captain was bathed in sweat, which seemed normal in him, too. "What in the Seven Hot Hells was that?" he gasped. "We've disappeared," Reza said bitterly. Carefully, it unfolded and unlaced its arms one at a time. "I can't say that I care for it at all." "We can't have-Jakdan? What is our location? What do the readings look like?" "You're not going to like this, Captain." 106 "Blast it, I already don't like this. What have you got?" "Nothing, sir. And everything, sir. All at the same time, sir." Reza looked at the viewscreens and wished it hadn't. Solarized colors shot through true black, shifting and blurring in patternless swirls that changed shape and texture as it watched. Nothing seemed constant and there was nothing of normal space in it. It was considerably worse than confusing. "Our instruments have gone crazy, Captain," Jakdan said. "Our velocity shows here as zero, here as infinite. Our location is nowhere, or

everywhere, depending on which reading you want to believe." "It's all Carnadyne's fault," Reza muttered. "Should never have listened to her." "This doesn't make any sense at all," Captain Kurian said, low. "Blast! Double check all instruments, get direct visual readings if possible. I want to know where we are, and now." A few minutes later they knew nothing more than they did before, though it was not from lack of trying. Everything that could be checked was checked. Twice. Everything was functional. It was just that the readings were impossible. Bayport seemed to be caught in a whirlpool of violent, churning activity of a nature and substance they could not even guess at. Stuck in some sort of a universe that could not possibly exist, but did. All they knew for sure was that there was little or nothing they could do about it. "Could this be what happens," computrician Jakdan muttered cheerlessly, "when a ship goes Forty Percent City?" They tried applying full power in an attempt to blast free of whatever held them. It made absolutely no difference. Next they tried cutting all power with exactly the same result: nothing happened. They seemed to be in the steel grip of a tractor field more powerful than could be imagined. Reza was taking it all in, even if it didn't understand it. It cursed Carnadyne even as it gathered information for her; even as it doubted it would ever see the Iceworlder again. It had been sent along as an observer and it was observing. Deep in its heart it felt it was useless. The ship came violently alive in a lurching wrench and the horrors started again. Reza had just enough time to wrap its arms around its body before the walls fell away. An attempt to slip into a state of self-hypnotic calm was a failure. The sensory overload was just as overpowering as before. It was as if it was floating in a sea of bubbling oil, of ice water, of hot coals, of slime. The images came one right after the other, crashed together, piled sensation on top of sensation. Time meant nothing. It lasted an hour, a year, an eon, a millisecond: time stretched and shrank for Reza and all the others. Suddenly it stopped. As the igor carefully unwrapped its arms, it felt a pressure lift, a pressure it had been only marginally aware of. Its absence was stronger than its presence, but by that absence Reza realized it had started with the first occurrence of sensory overload and had continued while the ship was helpless. Maybe we're back in normal space. Maybe we're free. . . . The captain cleared the screens. Reza was prepared to see a repeat of the confusing shapes and colors. It was even prepared (and hoping) to see the great dark of deep space, the small pinpoints of stars. It wasn't prepared for what it did see. Bleakness. Desolation. A graveyard of ruined ships. They were on a planet! A planet filled as far as the squinting igor could see with spaceships-broken spacers-of all sizes and descriptions. Some of the craft were rusting hulks while 108 others shone like new in a variety of colors. Some few were intact. Most were broken apart, others seemingly purposefully dismantled. Throughout that jumble of mangled spacecraft moved small figures. Humans-Galactics! They walked slowly, in the manner of prisoners who had given up hope. There was no sign of excitement at the arrival of the newcomers. The scene was dismal, depressing. Overhead, a huge gray dome filled the sky. It blotted out the sun. Whatever sun it was. 15 If the dome was impressive from a distance, it was overwhelming up close. Randy felt dwarfed by its imposing bulk. The immense gray sides arced up and away from him. He had been warned not to touch it. The warning was unnecessary. It had the look and smell of something extremely dangerous. Rantanagar Ehm had no intention of coming any closer to it than he had to. . The sides of the enormous structure constantly churned and shifted, appearing almost alive. A dismal corpse-gray, the material seemed to swirl madly just below the surface, a surface made hazy and indistinct by an odd flickering motion around the edges. Randy found it impossible to focus his eyes on it-and at the same time was drawn to it in an almost hypnotic manner. Scattered bursts of subdued light in red and yellow flashed randomly within the murky depths of the transubstantial walls, giving the impression that they were extraordinarily thick. Rantanagar was at a loss even to hazard a guess at the material substance of the dome. It was totally alien to anything he had ever

encountered in all his peregrinations. Perhaps it wasn't an artifact at all, but some incredible natural force; a tamed and confined hurricane? Whatever it was, it gave off an aura of barely-contained herculean energy. If it was an artificial construct, then it would have to be powered by a force so colossal that Randy had trouble even imagining it. 109 110 "This is where we enter," said the Mir who had been introduced as Snarg. What he was wearing appeared to be sackcloth, though the only ash was his unappetizing complexion. They were standing in front of an apparent entrance. It was the only one Randy had seen in the dome. It didn't look as if it went all the way through, because he could see the same deadly-looking shifting gray wall inside. He hesitated. "The wall is arranged so the force is weaker here," Snarg said. "It is still sufficient to kill, so we must wear these protective devices." He handed Randy a metallic clasp. It was copper colored and arrestingly heavy. Randy would have liked to take it apart. Maybe he could sneak one back to Carnadyne. He slipped it on his wrist, noticing that Snarg wore one, too. "That's all?" he asked. It didn't seem much protection against the wall. "If more was needed, you would have it." The Mirese started toward the portal. "Do not stop once you enter," he said. "Keep walking. You will feel some discomfort as you pass through the wall, but don't hesitate. It is fatal to do so." "Oh." Randy watched the bony gray man walk into the portal and disappear through the wall. It was as if the shifting gray had simply swallowed him up. Randy rolled his eyes. Oh, wonderful. He was far from sure about all this-not to mention his guide!-but he took a deep breath and walked forward with a bold stride. The wall interface came up too quickly, and there was pain. Mind-searing pain. The hijackers boarded Bayport as soon as it arrived. They started to herd the crew into the cabin but Jakdan protested, shoving the nearest grayish pirate against the wall. Another hijacker pointed a rifle-like object at 111 Jakdan and she vanished with an odor of burned flesh. There were no more protests. The Mirese searched the ship. Although they were disappointed to find so little on board, Reza noticed they didn't seem too surprised. Reza supposed their hijackings were more or less random. They were interested in the sensor network, however, and started dismantling it at once. Captain Kurian was taken for questioning and the rest of the crew was ignored. They were given no instructions, no warnings. Reza left the imprisoned ship to do a little exploring. The dome blotted out whatever warmth this planet's star could provide-whatever star it was. Everything was grayed in the constant dim light. It tended to flatten things out, to drain them of color. Of life. All around the igor, people were walking somberly in small, desultory groups, hunched and huddled against the windless chill. Reza turned up the heat in its form-fitting, transparent suit. Reza had never seen such a hangdog group of dispirited people. It was as if their very essence had been drained away. As if they had given up all hope or had it ripped from them. Most of the prisoners-there was no other word for them: prisoners-seemed to share one unifying characteristic. Despair. Their clothing varied and was in varying stages of deshabelle and disrepair. The igor rebelled against the all-pervasive gloom. It was not in Reza's nature to give up, no matter how bleak the situation appeared. There was always hope. In the meantime, Reza would see what it would do. It approached a man and a woman huddled under the rusting strut of a demolished spacecraft. They looked as worn out as the ship. Their clothing, Reza saw, was worse than worn; it was positively moribund. "A new one!" the man said, pointing at Reza. "Hey! You some kind of midget Jarp?" Reza waved a ropy tentacle in what it hoped was a friendly greeting. "In a way." "I don't care what you are," the woman said, "but 112 you look too healthy to have been here very long. Probably come in on that last ship?" "By the universe!" the man muttered. "You call that healthy looking?" Reza ignored that. "Don't they feed you here?" it asked, and its anxiety showed. Food was a subject almost as dear to the igor's heart as its warm nest, and as long as it was investigating for Carnadyne it might as well find out about such truly important matters. The woman barked a raspy, humorless laugh. "I suppose yer could call that slop food," she said, tugging at a torn sleeve too short now

to cover her bony wrist. "Every now and then they shovel some garbage in here. Some of it's edible. I suppose yer might find something to eat in it if yer got hungry enough. They don't pay much attention to stuff like that." The man had decided to accept Reza's appearance too, probably in a sort of complacency dictated by the ennui of malnourishment. "We're excess baggage s'far's the hijackers are concerned," he said dully. "All they really want are the ships. They jus' keep us alive so's we can move stuff around. Ain't too many of them ever comes in here. Feed us just enough to keep us alive." "Why don't you escape?" Reza asked. "Escape!" the woman echoed. "You crazy 'r something?" the man snorted. "Easy," she said with a sigh. "This, uh, fellow is new. He don't know." "Uh, pos, sorry, I forgot." The fellow looked at Reza, shook his snaggy head. "Some tried to escape, back at first. No way. Touch the dome and you're gone." Reza swallowed. "Gone?" "Firm. Loud pop and you disappear. Nothing left but the stink of toasted flesh. Some take that way out when they can't take it no longer. Wouldn't call that escape, though. It's kind of permanent." Reza swallowed, glanced at the rising wall of the 113 dome, and swallowed again. It didn't sound pleasant. Nothing around here did. These people didn't smell so good, either. Suddenly the pair jumped to their feet. "'Gorgers!'" they yelled almost in unison, and immediately disappeared into the tangled remains of their ship. Reza turned. Four of the beasts were headed its way. Gorgers, it saw, were carnivores, shaped and built like bears, though with longer claws and fangs. Their eyes were dull red. In certain shadowy corners of the universe they were nearly invincible. They were ruthless and had a nasty habit of eating their competition. The beasts advanced on Reza, swinging their large, bulky frames with a menacing rhythm. They looked hungry. Reza whirled and tried to flee, but stumbled on loose rubble. With a cacophonous roar, the gorgers fell on the newcomer. Randy walked down the path with the Mirese called Snarg. Without doubt this was the place he had been looking for. Gazing at the scattered ships lying atumble all around, he realized that TGO had underestimated the number of hijackings. Some must have gone unreported, he thought. Pirates seldom report losses. The transition through the wall of the dome had been a real jolt, physically and mentally. He had felt torn apart in a thousand different directions. His mind and his body had been bombarded with sensations he found impossible to describe. He knew the copper-colored clasp he wore protected him and he did not care to think what would have happened without it. The whole situation spoke of enormous power and it smelled of death. Their path wound around ships in various degrees of dismantling and decay. Randy could see faces darting in and out of the shadows. They were being watched. Followed. He was watchful. It wouldn't do to have 114 something disrupt things, not when he was so close to the heart of ... things. "They won't attack, will they?" he asked the Mirese, and he didn't have to exaggerate his unease. Snarg didn't even break stride. "There is nothing to be afraid of as long as you are with me," he said. "They are broken, a cowardly bunch. They fear the dome and they fear my longstick, which works with the same force as the dome." He patted what was apparently his longstick. It resembled the sort of old-fashioned rifle used on Mott-chindi. Instead of having a bore for bullets, though, this weapon's end flared out and was covered with a wire mesh. Looking at it closely, Randy could see that the mesh flickered and blurred in the same way as the dome. Have to stay away from that thing no matter what! Weaving in and out of the towering hulks of the downed ships, they came at last to a ship Randy recognized. Norcross Citizen appeared to be essentially intact, though that might have been due only to its relatively recent arrival. One of the Sindbad pulverizers had been removed. Even next to the bulk of the ship, the pulverizer still looked impressive. It stood about fifteen meters tall with a small cab up top, for the operator. The front of the massive machine was a mixture of grinding plates and interlocking carbosteel teeth, surrounded by a ring of sonic disrupters. It looked what it was: powerful. Two more Mirese and a man stood at its base. A prisoner; he wasn't gray. Lackluster, he was attired in . . . dirty rags. Rantanagar Ehm gritted his teeth. At their approach, one of the

Mirese waved the man onto the pulverizer. He climbed slowly to its top, looking at Rantanagar Ehm as if he were the worst traitor in the universe. Randy could hardly blame him. "Impressive," Snarg said, "is it not, friend Cluman?" Rantanagar nodded. "Always," he said. (He'd never seen one before.) "I trust you haven't changed it," he went on, maintaining the belligerent character he had assumed as "Cluman." "I must see it work." And he thought: Oh, cleaning house around here is going to be such a pleasure! With some prodding, the Mirese convinced the Galactic to operate the pulverizer. He swung its ponderous mass around to confront a large mound of dirt and debris. When the front end of the machine was engaged, the air split with a piercing whine that changed to a bellowing roar. That lasted less than two seconds. The pile of debris, taller than a spaceship, had been reduced to fine sand. With attachments, the pulverizer could have separated the elements while it crushed whatever was in its path. "Satisfied?" Snarg's tone and manner were smug. Rantanagar didn't answer. He was working to think of a way to redshift and let Carnadyne know what he'd found. This was the place, all right. All he had to do was get out of the dome. All, he thought, glancing up at the immensity. That might take some doing. Reza was giving it everything it had, and then some. Every tentacle wielded an improved weapon. It swung boards and jagged pieces of metal at the advancing gorgers. Reza was fighting like crazy, fighting valiantly. And losing. The gorgers had gotten to it a couple of times and bounced the igor around like a ball. Its head throbbed unmercifully. Its tentacles felt as if they were going to fall off. And the uglies surrounded it now, closing in for the kill. Reza swallowed hard, blinked. Was that a voice, a laugh? A shockingly clad human female just seemed to appear in the midst of the snarling beasts. She was wielding a club, much as Reza was, though with greater authority and considerably more success. 116 "Hit them under the chin," she yelled. "They've got a soft spot there." Reza did not question her wisdom. The way she swung her club gave her all the leadership qualities she needed. Reza would have followed her to the end of the universe. Right now, this lumpy-chested Galactic looked better than Carnadyne. Reza snaked out a snaky tentacle and hit one of the gorgers under its chin. It turned, howling, and departed at speed. Oh, that was elating! Reza spun in quest of another and was disappointed to discover that the woman had taken care of the other three, just that fast. Her strength and courage were impressive. Desexed as it was, Reza did not fully appreciate her other qualities except in an abstract way. Her other qualities were anything but abstract. High, well-developed breasts seemed a serious threat to the seams of her (sadly tattered) blue jumpsuit. Her jet hair caught the light bluely in its loose fall over her shoulders. Unlike the other people Reza had seen here, this one's hair was neatly brushed and her face was clean. This one clearly had pride, and took care of herself. Her high cheekbones and sparkling brown eyes were lost on Carnadyne's construct. Reza did, however, admire her uppercut. The lady was handy with a club. Just as the torn jumpsuit could not conceal the development of her bilobate chest it also failed to hide the gentle curves of her slim waist and full hips. Arms and legs shapely, but obviously strong. Again, Reza failed to achieve proper appreciation. The igor moved her way. Seated on a twisted metal beam, the woman was laughing. "You are one scrappy little fellow," she said. "Sure have to admire the way you stood up to those gorgers." "I have to admit I had no choice in the matter," Reza said. "It was a matter of self-preservation. Bravery was your coming to help me! My name is Reza." "Pleased to meet you, Reza. I'm Lorisameh from 117 just about anywhere. Call me Lori. Always glad to meet someone with spunk! Most people around here would've lain down and died if four gorgers came after 'em! That's why gorgers are so fat." "Dying isn't one of my favorite responses," Reza said. "I much prefer the alternatives." Lorisameh from just about anywhere laughed again and it was a pleasant sound to Reza's aural receptors after so much gloom. It was one of the nicer habits humans had. Odd, how this one's sort of bulwark chest jiggle-jumped when she laughed. "Have you been here long?" Reza asked. "A few months. Long enough to know my way around, long enough to want to get out of

here." "The others I talked to said that escape is impossible." "Nothing's impossible, Reza! Some things are just harder than others. Been thinking of ways to get out ever since I got here. Most of m'plans take more than one person and I've had no luck at finding anyone. I guess you've noticed how most people here feel-and act." "There does seem to be a pall, a noticeable lack of spirit," Reza said, wondering if it would be polite to try to talk as fast as Lori did. "Do they feel anything?" "Th'environment does that to them, along with th' indifferent treatment by the grayfaces. They've robbed these people of hope and that's the most precious thing you can steal from anybody." "You don't seem to be affected," Reza pointed out. She jerked a shoulder in a shrug, and there went her thrusty chest again. "Giving up isn't one of my favorite responses, either," Lori said with a smile. "You know, Reza-I've never seen anyone of your . . . kind, before." "I'm specially made," Reza said proudly. "I think you've got yourself a partner, Lori, if you like. Where do we start?" Still grasping its various weapons, it looked around for something to use them on. "We start by moving out of this particular place. 118 Those gorgers have terrible tempers and may come back with a few friends. It's best we don't wait around for 'em." "I can appreciate the logic of that argument, pos," Reza said, trying to shrug and wishing it could jiggle as she did. With the woman chuckling, they slipped into the shadows of this and that wreckage and left. As they walked they talked, and Reza learned a little about the female called Lorisameh. Lori had been captain of her own ship, a small freighter. She'd been working for a small business concern out on one of Andor's moons when her ship was grabbed. As well as Reza could recall, her absence had not even been reported. At least her ship-Sendalk- hadn't appeared on the list Carnadyne had showed her assistant. (There must have been others too, Reza realized. Small ships that simply hadn't returned from their missions or arrived at their intended destinations.) Unlike the others Reza had met, Lori was definitely interested in escape. Tunneling under the edge of the dome had never been tried, mainly because of the obvious danger. No one really knew if it penetrated the ground or not; the thing could be an entire sphere. Another possibility-the one Lori favored-was to use force and obtain some of the copper bracelets or clasps worn by the hijackers she called "grayfaces." "With one of those 'm just sure I could slip out of the dome. Trouble with that is we don't have much force, Reza, while they have plenty. On the other hand, they just don't really seem particularly intelligent, Reza." How the hijackers had ever developed the dome technology was a mystery. Apart from their longsticks, there were no signs of a supportive technocracy. Maybe it was all outside the dome, Lori said-a place she'd never seen. Reza did not favor the tunnel idea. The dome simply looked too awesome. It didn't care to take a chance of 119 bumping into it while mucking about under all that frozen mud. Reza much preferred bashing a Mir over the head and stealing his clasp. That was direct, simple. "I like to do direct things, Lori, and the simpler the better." Suddenly the igor came to a halt. A human figure was standing with a few Mirese a short distance away. He was wearing a clasp and seemed to be in control. Even from the back the human looked familiar. What other Galactic would wear such polychromatic clothing? It was! Randy had come to the rescue! Reza tugged at Lori's arm. "Look! That's a friend of mine, Lori! He's going to get us out of here!" And it started running across the rubble-strewn ground toward Randy. "Wait!" Lori shouted, trying to stop the impulsive creature. "'Randy!'" it yelled, tentacles imitating Medusa's head as it ran. "Here I am, Randy." Even TGO agents slipped. Rantanagar Ehm turned at the sound of that familiar voice. It was the wrong thing to do; for one thing, "Randy" was not the name he was using here, and the person he was supposed to be would have no reason to know anyone under the dome. He recovered quickly and turned to the Mirese. First we try a quick trick, then we go to the good ole last refuge of the incompetent! "Did that thing call you, Snarg?" But it was too late for either quick tricks or brute force. Two Mirese had pounced to his side. Snarg raised his longstick and pointed it directly at "'Cluman's'" belly. The Outie fainted toward the hijacker on his left. With a minuscule

movement of the longstick, Snarg pushed its firing stud. A chunk of rock twice Randy's size disappeared with a loud pop. "That's you next time," the Mir said, again covering Rantanagar with the longstick. "Be still." Rantanagar Ehm stood still, fighting every impulse to lash out. That would serve no purpose, since his 120 purpose was not to get himself blasted into his component atoms. "Take his clasp," Snarg directed, and one of the other Mirese removed it from the Outie's wrist. Damn that impulsive dummy Reza! The little fobber had blown the whole double-flaining thing! Another coveralled grayface approached, carrying the still-struggling Reza. Callously he dumped the igor at Rantanagar's feet. Another Mir brought Lorisameh over, marching her along by prodding her back with a longstick. "This slug was with the small one," he said. "I'll show you slug, you mud-faced cinder-coveralled son of a cesspool!" Randy did like her definite flair with words, and the fact that she was also smart enough not to try to back them up right now. He liked several other aspects of her, too. "We will question them all," Snarg said, nodding. "Bring them to the compound." Fairly ripping his eyeballs to remove his gaze from the blue-(almost)-clad woman, Rantanagar looked down at Reza. How could it have done such a foolish thing? And the creature hadn't even the grace to look remorseful. Reza looked, if anything, angry. "'That was ill-advised,'" Rantanagar Ehm said quietly, in a masterpiece of understatement. "Ill-advised?" Reza stormed. "By my mother's ovaries, you were rescuing me and let me tell you, I was ready to be rescued! I've had enough of this mudball planet!" "I didn't even know you were lost," Rantanagar snapped, foregoing any mention of whether Reza had a mother, "though I should have guessed. You seem to have a real knack for getting into trouble. I really wasn't here to rescue you. What you've done is blown your own rescue, my cover, and the operation." "But . . . Carnadyne always rescues me," Reza whined. 121 "Carnadyne is a long way from here. I wouldn't count on her.'" Even as he said those words, Rantanagar wished he had the blind faith in Carnadyne that Reza had. As they plodded across the frozen ground with Mirese all around them and all looking mean, he mentally admitted that a little blind faith would be a comforting thing to have. Too bad it was in such short supply around here. 16 Carnadyne was pleased. She was very close to isolating the multi-valent isomer of a new compound. As she flicked around her spacious lab under the surface of Iceworld, she felt as good as it was possible for her to feel. Things were going well. Equipment hissed and gurgled while reagents crackled and boiled. The air in the room bore the combined odors of burnt rubber and cinnamon. She'd just finished fine-tuning the ultracentrifuge she would need to purify the compound. Of course the compound had no apparent use, but that never stopped Carnadyne. Investigation was investigation to Carnadyne. It mattered little to her whether the results had no foreseeable use--such as the new compound--or an immediate use, such as the investigation into the shipping problem. If she had possessed gods, they would have been Pure Research and Serendipity. Right now a considerable part of her attention was occupied by the compound. She was busy, and she liked being busy. It was life's essence to her. She collected filtrates and triply-distilled solutions. She weighed powders to twenty-five decimal places of accuracy. She mixed fluids with a sure hand. Miles of transparent tubing pushed brilliantly colored liquids through complicated pathways. She was tending to a thousand things at once: it seemed as one task to her. Doing the work of ten people, she juggled complex procedures with ease. While she worked, her form shifted and changed at 122 123 unpredictable intervals. With no one around to offend, she relaxed and part of her that controlled her bodily shape. She kept her hands intact. Hands she needed for the work she was doing. Everything else flickerslid back and forth like a faulty hologram as her physical form wavered between the dark universe and normal space. Carefully she removed the end product of a reaction and weighed it on a quartz-fiber scale. Satisfied, she moved it to the ultracentrifuge, set it in motion. The ultracentrifuge was a tricky device, especially in this process, since many different side compounds would come off at different g-points.

Carnadyne had no doubts about her ability. Confidence was one of her strong points-or weaknesses, as some saw it. Of course, she backed up that confidence with a long string of brilliant accomplishments. As she set the machine in motion, she reviewed her other projects, among them the shipping disturbances. All seemed in order there. Randy was deepcover somewhere and Reza was riding shotgun on a ship someplace else. Ratran Yao would be pleased. Things were being taken care of. Everything was under control. 17 Randy was not in control, nothing was in control at all, and he didn't like it a bit. While he ground his teeth and watched for opportunities that never came, the armed escort of Mirese took them to a fenced enclosure within the dome. The purpose was interrogation, of course. First they tried the usual questions. When that gained them nothing they switched to the predictable. There was nothing of the technological about it. It was laughably simple. No one laughed. They had a go at Lorisameh first. When she refused to tell them anything, they started tossing her around. Back and forth with hard shoves, Mirese to Mirese. When she twisted away from one, one jumpsuit sleeve was torn halfway down, from the shoulder seam. That's when Randy decided to test their alertness and reflexes. Both worked well. Randy swung a foot-edge into the shin of one guard and clamped another's longstick with both hands. He yanked, twisting, while the man he'd kicked moaned and sagged against the wall. He also whacked Randy in the thigh with his longstick. At the same time the other one not only held onto his weapon, he jerked a knee up. Randy protected his crotch by swerving his thigh to catch the blow, was struck again, and gave it up. He had proved something or other. That he was stupid enough to make a try for it in a small enclosure full of armed enemies, most likely. He wasn't about to be stupid enough to force them to give it to him really good. 124 125 Snarg moved close, slapped his face, and stared. Waiting. Daring the "buyer" he had known as Cluman. When Rantanagar gave him nothing but a mean look- only three longsticks were leveled at him-Snarg proved something: he sneered and turned away. He said something to the one presently holding Lorisameh from behind, by the armpit. Randy watched them shove her around some more. From man to man to man. While Randy watched, sizing up Mirese and the woman, she whipped up a knee as she staggered into one. He went into the appropriate pop-eyed doubling over reaction, and another gave her a nice hard bunch of knuckles in the breast. She clapped a hand to herself there, moaning-and spat in that Mirese face. Snarg snapped something else, then glanced at Rantanagar Ehm. Randy was very still, trying to look unconcerned while noting that it took two of the creeps to hold her. They did, while Snarg slapped her face. Again. A dozen times, her hair flying, tears spurting- from impact, because somehow she wasn't sobbing. Snarg yelled at her, cursed her. She yelled and cursed right back. Randy shook his head with an admiring expression. Some nice phrases in there! Snarg tore her jumpsuit some more, stripping her to the waist. He gave an order and held out his hand to one of his men without looking at the fellow, who looked dubious. He obeyed though, removing his belt and handing it to his chief. Snarg folded it, slapped it into his hand, staring at the woman, bare now to where the jumpsuit caught at her hips. She stared right back. He snarled at her. She bared her teeth back, and advised him to take the folded belt as a suppository. She even strained against the two Mirese holding her. Snarg didn't take the belt as a suppository; he used it across her midsection and watched her automatic attempt to double, face writhing, bare breasts bobbing. 126 She was held. When she straightened, he gave her the makeshift whip across the breasts. She cried out. It was too thick to make a really vicious whip, but naturally it made loud impressive noises and left dark stripes. He gave her some more, on shoulders, breasts, midsection. She took them and when he moved closer she tried to kick him. Randy kept telling himself to be smart. It wasn't easy, watching without reacting. The trouble was that two of the others never looked at her. They stared at Randy, who kept telling himself that to try anything would be foolish, as well as futile. He had no weapons and no shining armor. Sometimes damsels in distress just had to be distressed. His turn

came. Getting no response from Lori, Snarg gave it up and turned to Rantanagar Ehm. He wanted to know the usual who-why, and Randy just couldn't help suggesting that he upend a longstick, drop his pants, and have a seat. "Ooh, not smart," the igor muttered, and Randy thought it would be nice to stuff the little blabbermouth full of its own tentacles. Of course Reza was right. They dragged Randy to the fence and threw him against it. Outnumbered and far, far outgunned, he concentrated on protecting himself and minimizing pain while avoiding any serious damage. I'm going to get you all real good, you know, he thought, and did a good job of protecting himself. Meanwhile a glance at Lori told him that the red marks were not welts and were fading away. These fobbers were just going through the motions! They must be following orders, Snarg included. All this was uninspired, and sadistic impulses really didn't seem a part of Mirese culture or machismo. Even the whip looked worse and sounded a lot worse than it felt. (Oh it hurt, it hurt.) 127 It was soon over and with the exception of his jaw (where a lucky shot had landed), nothing hurt much. Rantanagar and Lorisameh exchanged a look. They kept their faces bland. By the time the Mirese turned on Reza, they were clearly bored. They simply kicked it around and pounded its long ropy arms a bit. (Too bad they didn't start on the little blabbermouth first, Randy reflected uncharitably.) Of course anyone hearing Reza's squawks and squeals would have thought it was being tortured unmercifully not to mention killed. Even that display failed to inspire the half-hearted interrogation team. They soon released the trio with Snarg doing no more than grumbling. Randy was confused and admitted as much to Lori. He couldn't understand interrogators who gave up so fast; couldn't understand why they'd just been let go. "Why not?" She was gingerly trying to fasten her jumpsuit as they paced from the enclosure. "Damn! They ruined it, the rotten pigs!" Naturally and male-ly, Rantanagar Ehm though the jumpsuit looked a lot better this way, but he forebore to mention that. "They don't expect any real resistance," she said. "The dome is all the protection they need. With the longsticks they can take care of any troublemakers and we all know it. It was silly of you to try resistance that way, as a matter of fact." Starting to say "Thanks," Randy tightmouthed a "Sorry," instead. She let the satire go. "It serves their purposes better if they release people like us-you know, dummies who dared try-so others will see the supposed futility of the action. You're wearing a nice bruise on your jaw for everyone to see, you know." "Oh." He glanced at her. Most of her bruises were covered. Not all, but he forebore to mention what he could see. "The red badge of stupidity, hmm?" 128 "That's the way it's going to be interpreted," Lori told him. "What's your name, by the way?" "So where does that leave us?" Reza anxiously asked. "I'm Rantanagar Ehm. Call m-" "Oh, an Outie. Cute clothes," Lori said, and to Reza, "Right back where we were. Except that now they'll be watching us closely." "Thanks," Randy said. "You know, I don't know your name either." "There are also three of us now," Reza said. "Just call me Lori, that's enough." "No there aren't, you little blabbermouth, there are two and a half of us!" And Randy looked so mean that Reza forebore to gripe or grumble. Lori looked at the man beside her, in his colorful Outreach finery. "I've seen a lot of good people broken by life under this dome, Rantanagar Ehm. Do you think you're going to be able to stand up under it?" "Call me Rand-" He broke off, taking offense. Who did this woman think she was/he was, to say such a thing? He'd had enough trouble with self-doubts without someone prejudging him. Besides, he was almost afraid to answer her. He glanced up. Under the dome. Dome. Dome. Doom. Reza relieved him of the necessity of responding, although that was not the igor's purpose. "Randy can take it! Don't worry about that!" Randy looked at the little blabbermouth. Well I'll be damned, he thought, and very nearly smiled. Nearly. He forebore. Lori was looking at Reza. She shrugged. "I hope you're right. I'll take your word on it, for now." Damned nice of you, Rantanagar Ehm managed not to say. They trudged along in silence for a while. He was as unsure about this unknown quantity of a young woman as she was about him. He also had plenty of doubts about Reza, who seemed willing enough but who had a real knack for getting

itself-and others-into trouble. 129 All in all, Rantanagar Ehm felt that he could have picked better companions for such a sticky situation. Soon they had come to the rusted-out shell of an abandoned spaceship. A long-abandoned spaceship. Lori led them inside and along unlighted, musty old ship's tunnels. "This was my ship," she said as they rounded a corner. "Damn' spacejackers took a lot of stuff out of here, but they missed some, and I was able to scrounge up some other things." She led them into what had been the spacer's con-cabin. As they entered, a few lights winked on. The illumination was feeble, but it was the first artificial light Reza had seen under the dome and the igor drew a cheering feeling even from the dimness. At least someone was fighting the system! Maybe winning a little bit. Lori noticed its interest. "I cobbled it together," she said with pride. "With a lot of different parts from a lot of different places." Reza waved its arms in appreciation. Six tentacles made that gesture worse than disconcerting. Rantanagar was frowning. "I don't understand. What's so wonderful about this dim lighting?" "When you've been here as long as I have," she snapped, "you'll take delight in any constructive action, jacko!" "I don't intend to be around that long," he told her. Lori's annoyance showed. "And what are you going to do? You spend half an hour under the dome and you think you know everything about it. D'you have an escape plan all worked out? Some miraculous way out that we don't know about-after all the time we've been here?" "Well, uh, no, not yet. ..." Angrily she slapped a hand against her leg. It was loud in the echoic cabin of the dead ship. "You didn't even have a plan t'rescue your friend here when you came into the dome, did you?" "I didn't know Reza was here." 130 "Uh-huh. It was a possibility, though, right?" Randy had to admit that was true. After all, both he and Reza had been on the trail of the shipping disturbances and it seemed that the trail led here. He should have been prepared. As a matter of fact, now he was rather impressed. He hadn't given Reza credit enough to work anything out in its limited brain. Reza was meanwhile noting the tension between the two humans. In a way that was understandable, under the circumstances, which were rotten. On the other hand, it was unreasonable. Lori was being unreasonable. Randy was being unreasonable. Reza sighed. It had felt it before, this tension between a male and female human. It had to do with reproduction, or their desire for it; what they called sex. That didn't make sense to Reza. After all, sex didn't have anything to do with getting them out of this dome. In fact, this snarling at each other wasn't getting them anywhere at all. Reza said, "Can't we do something useful with all this energy?" Randy and Lori looked at the igor, then at each other. "You're right Reza," Lorisameh said. "I'm sorry, both of you. This place-" She gestured. "There's no such thing as being natural or normal around here, and you, uh, hit my ignition switch, Rantanagar." "Maybe I had it coming. Call me Randy, will you? It was pretty stupid of me not to have thought things through." "No, no-not really," Lori said. "It's my being so edgy. My fault!" When Randy started to speak, shaking his head, Reza waved all six of its "arms." "Wait, wait-let's don't argue about that, too! It's all settled-you've both been stupid. Now can we get to business?" "Not," Randy said, "until we get through telling you how stupid you've been." He was fighting back a grin. What the vug-it was easy to blame it on Reza, 131 but it was done now. What the vug-there was plenty to be learned from the past, but nothing to be gained by wandering around back there assigning blame. On the other hand, he was damned if he'd let this little halfwit smugly call him stupid and take none of the "credit" unto itself! "Me?" Reza's protesting voice rose into a wail. The igor presented such a ludicrous figure that Lori laughed out loud. Randy was helpless not to join her. The laughter filled the pathetically lit little cabin. It was a rare sound under the dome. The laughter seemed to push the gloom a little farther back, if only for the moment. Within a few moments more the two humans were embracing, still chuckling. Reza watched with mild interest. Were they going to perform the reproductive rite now? Couldn't this man smell it as Reza could-the woman's pheromonal odor so distinctive to Reza's Jarp

senses? Apparently not. They drew apart, and although Reza really would have liked to witness the phenomenon, it decided to say nothing about it. All humans, it had learned, tended to be touchier than Carnadyne, and in the dome everyone had a right to be touchier than that. The trio stayed together. They were apart from the others in their very attitudes. They roamed through the dome, scouting and scavenging. Using what was left of Lori's ship as base, they worked hard gathering . . . things. Materials they could use when they escaped. When they escaped. Not if; when! Rantanagar Ehm gained a better idea of what life was like under the oppressive gray dome. Within it. He was shaken by the hopeless, aimless lives most people lived here. That led him to a growing appreciation of Lori's strength. She just kept on fighting, trying to plan and plot. Trying to better life here while thinking of getting out of it, while nearly everyone else had quit trying. They had given up hope. 132 He also appreciated her good looks, both in face and in the figure that poor, tired, torn jumpsuit so precariously contained. On the other hand Lori was having some trouble adjusting to Randy. She was used to working alone, with neither help nor hindrance from anyone. A lifetime spent looking out for herself had given her that much- and more. Clashes came when Randy wanted to do something his way. Usually he capitulated to her greater experience under the dome. On the other hand, she was competent and stubborn, not dumb. Twice she gave in to his greater knowledge of logistics and plans of attack. Respect rose in both of them, each for the other. Yet Lorisameh wasn't so sure that Reza wasn't of more use. At least the igor rarely talked back! Besides, it was small and could sneak about, get into places impossible to her and Randy. It proved enviably adept at thievery, putting those extra arms to good use. They could creep into the tightest places, too! As for Reza, it wasn't too sure about either of the humans. Neither of them could hope to compare with Carnadyne when it came to good old-fashioned rescue. Reza had plenty of experience on the receiving end of a Carnadyne rescue operation and it had nothing but admiration for the way Carnadyne carried them out. However, she wasn't around and it didn't seem likely that she'd be just popping in. Therefore these two Galactics-inept as they were and still prone to testy arguments with each other-seemed to be Reza's best bet. Their stock of liberated materials grew and so did their plan. The plan was to waylay one of the Mirese, preferably one carrying a longstick. Once they had his clasp, they would hold him hostage and overpower a couple of his cohorts. With the protection of three of the clasps, increased by three hostages, they hoped to force their way through the portal and out of the dome. Randy was 133 sure that from there they could reach the spaceport and do some hijacking of their own. He had fabricated a crossbow and filed down several tungsten rods for use as bolts or arrows. The device looked more formidable and deadly than makeshift, both Lori and Reza had to admit. "Good," Randy said. "I hope looks will be enough. Actually the thing's underpowered and hard to aim for any accuracy." "Practice, practice," Lori said. "Oh, thanks. Reza, want to play target?" "I believe I'll hurry off and try to find another something I can use as a knife," Reza said, and hurried off. Lori had equipped herself with a smallish knife and an improvised electric prod. It ran off something the Mirese had overlooked: the little power-pak someone on a carelessly-scavenged ship had used to power a minicorder. She had found some cloth and improvised a new bra or bandeau, too-something that was important only to her. Reza had used steel balls and flexible cable to make several bolos, which it wore slung around its middle. Oh they were a ragtag little strike force, but what they lacked in equipment they made up for in dedication and enthusiasm. And they had become close, three friends with a common purpose who shared their excitement, their plotting, their disappointments, and their triumphs, however small. At least one of them wanted to be a darned sight closer. Rantanagar Ehm was beginning to think he'd be a lot better off if Lori was as homely as Carnadyne or plain weird as Reza. He'd have a lot more peace of mind, anyhow. 18 They'd had a close call and were working at relaxation, late at night. The nervousness was still there as they murmured about their plans and

The Plan. Randy was sprawled on the cabin floor, half on a cushion they had scavenged. The odds for success were hardly sweet, as the close call had reminded them. But they were going to try, which was more than anyone else around here was doing. (They knew that because everyone else around here was still alive, but never mind.) Lorisameh's unwavering determination was infectious, Randy mused. One of her best points. But not the best, he thought, watching her move about in the dimness of the captain's cabin of what had been her ship and was now their hidey-hole and home, not to mention Command HQ. She moved gracefully, smoothly. The wan light caressed and emphasized the curves of her body in that snug but ruined jumpsuit. Over the past few days Rantanagar Ehm had come to appreciate this woman's spirit and independence. Now he was appreciating the slope of her backside. I have got to get my hands on that, he mused, and shifted position to rearrange his pants. The close call had brought them closer in more ways than one—pressed tightly together out there in the shadows while the Mirese moved past, suspicious because of a sound the trio had made. Now Lori turned and caught him staring. Her eye- 134 135 brows rose just a little and she smiled, just a little. Randy swallowed. Reza, go off and die, will you? At that moment the igor piped up. It would. The little creep had all the timing of an untended two-cylinder engine. "We need to make sure of our schedule," it said. "Maybe we should run through it again, compare notes." Rantanagar Ehm groaned inwardly. Damned sexless adolescent construct! He looked at Lori, over in the shadows beyond the weak light. She was smiling. "I think Randy has a project for you, Reza," she said quietly. With her gaze on Randy. Randy blinked. I have? What the v-O Theba's Dark Light! She wants to get rid of the little creep too! "Right," he said, nodding soberly. "A project. An important project." Come on, he told himself, Myrzah hotcha TGO agent—you're supposed to be able to think on your ass as well as on your feet! Stop thinking about Lori's and come up with an idea. Never mind what else was coming up. "We need something," he said, "and we need it bad, Third Musketeer. A swingle. The swipple of a flait. I just realized that I saw one over by the wreckage of Aganis." He gestured. "Other side of the dome. Mighty good time to have a look for it." And it'll take you at least an hour to get there and back, darling Reza, you sexless darling little freak who is not horny as poor ole Ranty Ehm! Reza said, "A what?" "A swingle. Very important." (Peripheral vision showed him Lori clamp her hand over her mouth to mash a laugh back inside.) "It's near where the after DS was, Reza. Brown. You can't miss it. When you get there, ask anyone. You're irresistible." Just as he said that last, he looked from Reza to Lorisameh. "This is really important, Randy?" "Vitally," Randy said, and he meant it. "You think I'd ask you to go trekking out there if it wasn't vitally important?" 136 Reza made a sort of caressing gesture and left the ship. Lori released the laugh she'd been burying. "You're not as slow as I thought." "I can be pretty fast when I have to be," Randy said, shoving himself to his feet in a way that he knew was attractively fluid. "Would you like a drink, lady?" "Sure would!" she said, her eyes sparkling as he moved to her. "Sorry, no drinks available. How about me instead?" He was sliding his arms around her as he spoke. He found her muscles hard but her body yielding. "Sold," she murmured, and their lips came together. The kiss became deep and lengthened. Hard muscles pressed soft body hard against him. He tightened arms and hands and pressed right back. It was her tongue that did the stabbing in and out, in about as clear an invitation as she could give him. Realizing that her desire was genuinely as intense as his, he tightened his lips about that thrusting tongue, let her feel his teeth, settled his hands onto the very firm swells of her buttocks. Oh, that felt good! "Umm," she breathed into his mouth, "'at 'eels 'ood!" She thumped his crotch with hers, just short of painfully, and he slid his hands in and up onto her breasts. She moved them in his hands by wagging her shoulders. Gliding an arm under her shapely butt then, he lifted her and carried her to the bed that had been hers alone. She slid one arm around his neck for support and toyed with his hair. "Oh, my," she said softly, "carried to bed,-1 get." She bit him playfully on the shoulder, then

turned that into a long sucking kiss, right through his bright yellow tunic. His knee found the bed first and he fell onto it with her. Their chuckling didn't last long. She was working at getting him out of that goldenrod tunic while he had both hands inside her jumpsuit to fondle every sem of soft womanskin he found there. 137 Suddenly she was nibbling at his nipple until he groaned with the pleasure of it, then swinging off the tired old bed of her ship's cabin. With her eyes smokily on his, she got out of the tired old blue jumpsuit, with grace. She worked at the catch she had fashioned for her makeshift bra. Her gaze never left the man on the bed. She needs that thing like Reza needs another arm, he thought. Abruptly he had another thought, and flopped around getting the hell rid of his pants and boots. Nothing wrinkled, of course; the cloth couldn't. He tossed pants and tunic atop her jumpsuit. Nice symbolism, he thought, gazing up at her from the bed in her ship's captain's cabin-her bed. Naked and lovely in the light that now was entirely sufficient, she moved closer to stand over him. "Want a drink?" she said softly, not quite smiling. "Nope," he said, grinning, and another thought brought a blurted "yes!" as he lurched up into a sitting position. He tugged the willing suppleness of her body to him and applied his lips to her leftward nipple while she stood quivering. His mouth and tongue moved there for a long while before moving to give equal time and attention to her right. Meanwhile she was pressing in to him, her hands never still on his back and in his hair. He tongue-stabbed and pretended to drink until her nipples were hard fingertips stabbing into his mouth while she moaned and writhed on weak legs. "R-Ran-n-d-ee," she stammered, moving slowly, sensuously against him, standing over him. "D-do-do me-uh!-a fa-vorr. ..." "You've got it," he told her, and slid his hand between her upper thighs. His wrist moved caressingly, teasingly up under her loins, back and forth, while he spread a hand over a very round buttock and pressed her to him. 138 She hung on when he fell back, and this time there was no giggling at all. She was already moving when he started to turn her. Her hand found his stridently erect slicer, guided it. Then they were joined, and both of them strained to make it total, to force him deeper. For a long while he was still, in her and holding her, enveloped by her body and her arms. He sensed her need for him to move, and put it off just a little longer, and began moving. She murmured things in a throaty voice, let him know what was good and what was better and presumably, by making no sound at all, what was not quite as good. All of that made it all better than good for her lover. She proved remarkably adept, as enthusiastic in lovemaking, in their slicing, as she was about their plans for escape. Sometimes she took the lead, sometimes she' gave it completely to him. She was as serious about it as he, and all he wanted to do was somehow meet and unite the dichotomy: make it last forever while assuaging his urgent need to soar and flash. Though she twice giggled, he had the feeling that this was no small thing for her, that it was because he was he and they were friends, not because he was a man and she a woman and both of them had a need. "Uh-if you'll pardon my saying so," she murmured once, grinding to him, "that's not-hard enough!" He corrected that with more than willingness and in seconds she was cooing and keening, losing control. When climax hit her she drove hard at him as she flashed, swallowing her breath in gasps. He felt the intensity of it, the explosive release, and he loved it, felt loving and proud, felt her give way and soften, almost limping. Then he too hit his peak and went hurtling over. Even then he kept moving until he couldn't bear to move any longer. When he sagged, gasping, she en- 139 folded him to hold him close. They lay together bathed in sweat, and they were happy with it. After a time he moved, stroking her softened breast and running a hand down her side, kissing a sweat-damp stomach that, with her on her back unconcernedly asprawl, was concave. She sighed and stroked his thigh and butt, nuzzling closer. Prisoners, conspirators, lovers, they dozed and awoke touching each other. Kisses and half-hearted, languorous caresses trailed off into another doze. Later, through a sleepy haze, they heard a noise. Reza. "I've been had," the igor said, stomping into the ship. "So have I," Lori whispered

sleepily. Reza expressed dissatisfaction at having missed the "human reproductive rite" and was sternly assured that there would be no reproduction. That led it to ask a few questions, which led to its being threatened. Reza subsided and sulked. Watching the Mirese movements, they found that they must modify their plan a bit. Although the hijackers moved freely through the dome without any indication of fear, they seldom walked alone. More to the point, never once did any of the trio of plotters see a lone Mir carrying a longstick. "If we're going to take a single hostage," Rantanagar Ehm said through tight lips, "it's going to be one without one of those zippersticks." "That or we're going to have to try for two at once," Reza said, without a great deal of enthusiasm. "What do you think about that idea, Lori?" Randy asked. "I think it's a good way to wind up dead." "Me too." And that was it so far as trying an attack on two at once. Several of the hijackers seemed to take predictable paths through the dome at regular intervals. Those they watched, and about those they conferred. The conspirators chose one who they hoped could be ambushed at a spot not far from the portal. "There'd better be enough debris to give us cover," Lori said. Randy looked at her and grinned. There was enough debris around to conceal a dozen people. If they were short of anything in this plan, it wasn't wreckage and debris. What they were short of, Rantanagar Ehm mused, was an arsenal. Say, three stoppers and a box of grenades! They decided to try it the next day. They returned to Lori's ship. Lying in the darkness, Randy thought of all the things that could go wrong. Too many. Thousands of them. They were stronger than sleep. After a time he turned to Lori, who proved wide awake also, and came to him. They couldn't get rid of Reza this time, but they managed. They managed quietly, until Lori lost control and cried out in orgasm. They told the igor it had been a nightmare, and they slid into sleep. Randy made his way slowly through the loose rubble to the vantage point they had decided was best. He would be hidden from view there, while still fully able to see the path the Mirese would soon be taking. He knew that Lori was hiding on the other side of the path, although he couldn't see her. He had ceased worrying about her competence. She had been the driving force behind their escape plan and had worked as hard and long as he and Reza. Lorisameh was a survivor. A strong woman. His smile was tight as he remembered last night. More than pleasant to be with, too, he mused. And to trust with! Appli had been . . . Nurse Appli. A willing partner for a one-night slicing session. The squeamish would call it lovemaking and the careful might say that Randy and Appli had "shared sex." What they had done was flopped into his hospital bed and sliced themselves weak. Lori . . . Lori was different. Lori was making it harder and harder to remember details about Fayna. At last, after all these years, he was moving poor dead Fayna into a rearward corner of his mind. Now, a few minutes after he had settled into his niche, the lone Mir came into sight. Strolling. Confidently ambling along, unarmed. Just before he reached their hiding spots, a small chunk of plasteel came arching from a third direction. It barely missed the Mir, at that. That would be Reza, who was supposed to be distracting the hijacker in the best way it knew how--by making a fuss. Now he stepped onto the path, made a sickening noise, and threw another missile twisted from the interior of a ruined spacer. Meanwhile the igor cursed away in a high-pitched, whining voice. Randy Ehm couldn't understand a word and was sure the Mir couldn't either, but the intent was clear and so was the insult. The Mir charged the igor. As planned. Before he had gone a dozen steps, Lori tripped him by tugging up the wire she had strung across the path he habitually took. Immediately she was pouncing, zapping him with the electric prod. Unfortunately neither prod nor the fall was enough. Both slowed the hijacker down, but didn't stop him or noticeably hurt the flainer. Rantanagar Ehm stepped from his hiding place with his crossbow cocked. "That's enough," he said. "Don't move or this steel arrow goes right through you." The Mirese glanced at the primitive weapon and refused to take it seriously. "And into her?" he sneered, and grappled with Lori. Meanwhile he yowled for help. He was stronger than he looked and Lori was having a hard

time with him. Randy was afraid he'd hit Lori if he released one of his crude quarrels, and yet he hated to put the crossbow 142 down. While he paused in momentary indecision, Reza dashed into action. One of the igor's bolos whipped through the air with a little humming sound. It struck the struggling pair. The free arms spun around, immobilizing the struggling Mir. Unfortunately its weighted end didn't hurt him enough--and the cables immobilized Lori as well. "Get me off this sisterslicer!" she yelled as they rolled, entangled, in the path. "His damned hand's right in my--" Both her comrades leaped in response. Randy got there first. At close range, his crossbow looked quite impressive. The Mir seemed to acknowledge defeat and ceased fighting. Randy freed Lori before he bound the hijacker's arms. Lori removed his clasp and slipped it onto her own forearm. The three exchanged a smile. "One down and two to go," Rantanagar said. "Mighty nice throw, Reza." "Oh sure," Reza said, as if it were the galactic champion. "How's our hostage?" Lori crisply asked. "We'd better be moving on.'" "This fobber's ready," Randy smiled. "I've never seen a finer hostage." "It won't work," the Mir muttered. "Whatever it is you think you're trying to do, it's hopeless. You cannot escape. They will kill you." "Not with you in front of us," Randy said cheerfully. "They wouldn't dare take the chance, sweetheart." "All that shows is you don't know a thing about us. That won't slow them down a bit. What's one life more or less? I'm not important to them. No one of us is. They won't let me stand in their way." "We'll see about that," Randy said, prodding the Mirese down the path. "Get moving." Yet the hijacker's words and tone gave Rantanagar Ehm a sinking feeling way down in his stomach. A hostage was no use if the other side didn't value his 143 life! Well, it wasn't far to the portal. They'd find out soon enough. Maybe they'd be lucky enough to reach it without a direct confrontation. They ran out of luck right away. Before they had gone fifty meters their way was blocked by a half dozen angry Mirese. Two of them were armed with longsticks. "Stand aside or we'll kill this one," Randy said, making sure his crossbow was in plain sight. One of the Mirs raised his longstick and aimed. At the last second, Randy hauled himself out of the way, kicking his hostage out of the line of fire. No question about it, the bastards would have sacrificed him without hesitation! "Take cover!" he yelled. Only then did he notice that Reza and Lori had already disappeared into the debris along the path. He quickly followed. They ran in a zig-zag pattern, heads down, keeping low. Sharp bursts from the longsticks sizzled over their heads. Occasionally nearby objects vanished as they were hit. Reza was unable to keep up the pace, so Randy picked the igor up and carried it. Too abruptly, they ran out of cover and into a clearing. The area was familiar to Randy. He looked around and saw the Sindbad pulverizer still parked next to Norcross Citizen. Without hesitating he ran for it and clambered up to the operator's cab. Depositing a fuming and sputtering Reza on the seat beside him, he quickly scanned the controls. They were simple and clearly labeled, obviously intended to be mastered easily by a laborer with only marginal intelligence. He twisted the starter and tapped it into gear at the same time. It must have looked formidable to the Mirese on the ground. The massive machine turned toward them and the air filled with an overpowering, ear-splitting roar as the pulverizer devoured everything in front of it. Some of the Mirese scattered; others held their 144 ground-shakily. They seemed confused. Randy saw Lori huddled near the edge of the clearing. "Go! Escape!" he shouted. "Head for the portal!" Seeing that she couldn't possibly hear him above the noise the pulverizer was making, he waved her off in the direction of the portal. He saw her shake her head and advance toward a nearby Mir who was taking aim at the pulverizer with his longstick. There was no way the hijacker could hear her approach. Swinging a plasticene beam with all her strength, she caught the unsuspecting Mirese in the gut. As he doubled over, she brought it down on his head. He went down. Hard. It was over in a second and the Mir lay sprawled on the ground. Lori waved the longstick over her head. Randy headed the pulverizer toward the remaining hijackers. Hell, we might just make it, he exulted. Lori had removed the clasp from the fallen

creature. The portal- their way out of the dome-was in sight. A short distance away. Hope faltered as quickly as it came. Lori was struck from behind by a charging Mirese. The longstick flew from her hands and was quickly grabbed up. They beat her until she was unconscious. They weren't careful about where they struck and kicked, and it didn't take long. One of the Mirese pointed the longstick at Lori's still form and motioned for Randy and Reza to get off the pulverizer. They had managed to turn the tables. It was the hijackers who now held the hostage and the fugitives who felt the pressure. Unlike the Mirese, Randy and Reza had considerable respect for human life. Lori's in particular. "I guess that's it," Randy said, shutting down the pulverizer. "I don't think I'm going to like this," Reza moaned. Carnadyne swirled the bubbling fluid and reluctantly stoppered the Felayviss flask, setting it in the storage chamber with the others. Given another thirty-six hours of uninterrupted work she could have finished the experiment-an analysis of the primary growth enzymes of a small albino slug found only in deep caves on cold planets. It was a pity she did not presently have the requisite thirty-six hours. Preliminary results had been most encouraging. However: 1) Randy had not reported in since he had left for the station orbiting Thebanis in search of contraband. Considerable time had elapsed since then. 2) There had been no word from Reza. 3) Bayport, one of the ships that Reza could have been on, had just been reported missing. It had been overdue for quite some time. The report was delayed while the ship's owners tried to manipulate the insurance contract. Carnadyne's usual response to situations of this sort was to give the matter lengthy thought. This she had already done while terminating the enzyme experiment. To her dismay, she was unable to come up with any solutions that could be effected without her leaving the comfort of the lab. It was this regrettable conclusion that made her feel things were out of hand. Carnadyne did hate to leave her laboratory unless it was absolutely necessary. She could not raise Reza on the communicator that 145 146 was built into its suit. By far the most likely reason for that was that Reza might be beyond its effective range. Still, it was also possible that the unit had become defective or was being shielded in some way. Carnadyne could think of other, more dire possibilities, too. At any rate, her best bet was to look for Randy first. At least she had a location from where to start. When I catch up with him, perhaps Randy can find Reza while I return to the lab for more important concerns. Methodically she finished closing down the experiment in progress. It shouldn't take her long to get to Thebanis. Perhaps she could clear the whole thing up quickly and get right back to her work. That would be the most comfortable solution. Carnadyne did like comfortable solutions. Randy sat on his cold plasteel bunk and looked across the cubicle at Reza, who was complaining loudly. "It's all Carnadyne's fault," it whined. "I should never have listened to her. She always gets me into trouble. I'd never have this kind of trouble if I stayed home in my nest. It's a lot warmer there, too." "You'd have died of boredom five years ago," Randy said. "Boredom? Boredom? I should only suffer such a curse. Anything would be better than this." Randy thought Reza was probably right about that. It was a dismal situation, one of the very worst he'd ever been in. After the failed escape attempt, the three rebels had been dragged and pushed to this place, the most escape-proof prison Rantanagar Ehm had ever seen. A prison within a prison, their cell was apparently an extension of the dome itself. Within their enclosure (which measured about four meters square) was a suspended metal latticework that formed the actual room and kept its occupants from inadvertently touching the dull gray wall. The sole entrance was a smaller version of the portal to the dome. Furnishing inside the room was spartan: four beds with thin mattresses. There were no windows. Everywhere they looked they saw only gray. Their moods soon matched. Any questions they might have had about the material surrounding the cubicle had been answered by the Mirese when they first arrived. One dropped Lori's knife through the latticework and it promptly disappeared. By careful experimentation they found out the same was true for the walls and ceiling. It was not a comforting

discovery. Escape seemed exceedingly remote. Although they couldn't see outside the cell, they were told it was constantly guarded. None saw any reason to doubt that. It was difficult to get any rest, and sleep was impossible. Mirese came and went at all hours. Sometimes the trio were bound to their bunks, other times they were allowed to walk around. Loud noises and intermittent shocks through the metallic latticework kept them constantly off balance. Food was withheld for long periods of time. Worse, so was water. It was impossible to keep track of time. The only stable aspect of their existence was each other. They clung tightly to that, became closer. Two guards came for Randy and dragged him away. They were rough about it, but he didn't fight back as long as they were in the enclosure. He'd developed a healthy respect for the gray walls. Once outside, under the dome, he pulled his arms away from them. "Keep your stinkin' hands off me," he said, brushing off his clothes. Fobby freaks. What I'd give for a stopper! They shoved him ahead of them as they walked through the dome. One of them carried a longstick and he held it casually, never taking his eyes off his prisoner. From the look on the guard's face, he'd love to get a 148 chance to use it. Randy refused to give him the opportunity. He kept his eyes open, but what he saw failed to give him hope. Prisoners hid in the shadows and disappeared when they approached. No help there. Making a break for it would be foolish. Even if he could avoid the longstick (which he doubted), they'd easily track him down. There was nowhere to go. Soon they came to a low building. The guards shoved him inside and stood by the door. Snarg was leaning against one of the walls. A single chair sat in the middle of the room. It was bolted to the floor and had straps on the arms and legs. Two additional guards flanked it. Randy took an involuntary step backward and was stopped by someone behind him. "Sit down," Snarg said tersely. Randy didn't move. If they wanted him, they'd have to take him themselves. Damned if he'd help them. Three guards grabbed him and carried him to the chair. He fought back. A kick connected and one of the guards went down screaming in pain. Two others replaced him. It was a losing battle-as he'd known from the start-and they soon had him strapped in the chair. "We're going to have a little talk," Snarg said. "I don't think so," Randy said pleasantly. "You'll change your mind soon enough," Snarg told him, standing before him. "I want to know why you came and what you were looking for. I want to know who the other two are. I want to know who you're working for. You have caused me considerable trouble. I don't like trouble." "What's to tell? We tried to escape and we failed. That's it." "We'll see about that." Snarg nodded to one of the guards. The man left the room and returned with a small box. He was carrying it carefully and walking slowly. 149 Oh, wonderful. Randy didn't like the looks of that thing at all. Reaching into the box, Snarg removed a flickering gray device. He looked at it and smiled. "I'm told this is a very effective tool," he said. Snarg held it in front of Randy to give him a good look at it. More than he wanted. Slightly triangular, it had a thin wire-mesh base. A handle rose up from the base and curved to where Snarg held it in his gloved hand. The rest of the device was the same maddening gray, the same flickering bleakness that surrounded everything here-the dome, their cell, everything. Its shape twisted and blurred. Randy remembered what had happened to Lori's knife and the stories of people throwing themselves against the wall of the dome. It was the same gray the longsticks apparently drew their power from. Rantanagar Ehm tried to pull away. The restraints held him fast. "Let's give this a try," Snarg said. He held the device above Randy's left arm. He lowered it slowly. First there was nothing. Then a tingling in his arm. As it got closer the tingling turned to pain, dull at first but growing fast. Snarg held it steady when it was about five sems above Randy's arm. The pain was intense now, traveling up to his shoulder, his neck, his head. The pain spread, worse than a drilled tooth. Unrelenting. Sweat beaded on Randy's forehead. It dripped from his armpits. His neck muscles tensed, fists clenched. "Do you want to talk to me now?" Randy forced his tongue to move. Everything hurt. "No," he said. "Nothing to say. I-I'll take dictation. ..." "A pity," Snarg said. "I guess

we'll have to try it a little closer. I do hope I won't get careless. If this should touch you . . . I'm sure you can imagine what will happen." Randy could. 150 The pain grew worse. The muscles in his belly knotted up. His ears roared. Lights flashed before his eyes. It seemed a thousand needles stabbed him at once. Time slowed, held still. Snarg's voice seemed a million kilometers away. Talk. Talk. I can't even think. How could I talk? It seemed it would never end. It couldn't get any worse and then it did. Snarg brought the device close to Randy's face. He could smell the crackling energy. He could feel it. Powerful. Deadly. He was screaming. The noise was far away-like Snarg's voice-it seemed to belong to someone else. In the midst of the pain he had an instant of clarity. That gray. That flickering gray. Carnadyne flickers the same way! That was the last thing he remembered. When he opened his eyes again he was back in the cell. Lori lay on one bunk. She looked drained, exhausted. With an effort he sat up. It felt as if every bone he had was broken. At least twice. "Did they . . .?" he asked. Is that my voice? Ugh! "They took me," Lori said. "Same as you." And same as I, you didn't tell them anything, Randy thought. Strong woman. He tried to stand and couldn't. He crawled over to her bunk. When he touched her bare skin, she jerked involuntarily. He could feel her pain and knew what she had endured. Nor could he touch her just on her clothing; Lori was bare all over. "Sexless cruds stripped me and didn't even try rape," she gasped, trying to sneer. "They have Reza. It'll talk, Randy." Her voice was sad. Her hand quivered, but did not move to him. He understood that; the effort would be too painful. Just breathing was pain. "Reza won't talk," he said bitterly. "Carnadyne has seen to that. It can't be tortured into telling anything. One of Carnadyne's little safeguards-a mental block. 151 No matter what they do to Reza, it won't be able to tell them a thing. Not even to save its life." "She's no better than Snarg then," Lori said, and he felt her quiver. "She sounds like a monster." "Neg, she's not a monster," he said, trying to convince himself. "She's just different." "Some different," Lori said. Then her eyes closed. He held her, gently, for what seemed hours. She moaned and moved fitfully in her sleep. The hopelessness of their situation weighed heavily on him and he tried to drive it from his mind by focusing on the woman he held. He touched the sweat off her brow and tried to make her comfortable. He was drifting when noises told him the guards were back. They dumped Reza on the floor and left without any sort of check of the other two. Randy went to the broken igor. It looked terrible. He lifted it to the bunk. Its arms were limp spaghetti. Its eyes were unfocused and dull. Randy sighed and would have ground his teeth if it hadn't hurt too much. When he'd laid it down, Reza turned its head to look hazily at him. "Caradyne will come," it said weakly, with an adolescent's undying faith. "She always comes." "Absolutely," Randy said, to be reassuring. The only "absolutely" about it was that he absolutely did not believe it. Not for a minute. Hope had moved far away and was growing fainter by the hour. Carnadyne picked up Rantanagar Ehm's trail on Medinastation. The snivelly shopkeeper was sleazy and devious-and Carnadyne easily pulled Randy's destination out of him. It pleased Carnadyne to leave the bug with a mental block that would make it impossible for him ever again to trade in stolen merchandise. Carnadyne's good deed for the . . . year. She had also ascertained that Reza had definitely been onboard Bayport. Her search of the disappearance 152 area had, of course, turned up nothing. That did not set well with Carnadyne. She moved on. Mirayat seemed a pleasant enough planet, Carnadyne thought. It was a trifle warm, but well within tolerable range for her. That gave her the cover story she needed to investigate the planet and look for Randy Ehm. As soon as she had docked her ship, cleared customs and Medical and gone down onplanet, she went into her act. It was hardly a favorite role. She needed only a short while to locate a suitable Mirese official. She burst in unannounced and without an appointment to confront a confused and bewildered bureaucrat. Burok was burok, wherever she found it. First this overpaid clerk tried the "How did you get in here" business, whereupon she indicated the door. With an exaggerated sigh and a great air of

the patience he did not have, he stared. "Well, you're in now. What can I, ah, do for you, uh . . .?" He got the words out even though he was reeling in the face of her form. Carnadyne had purposely laid it on extra thick, this time. Having adjusted her form, she was even uglier than usual. She wore a brightly colored smock, vivid green clashing horribly with fluorescent orange. Her eyes were frantic, full of unfocused energy. She affected a manic air. All this, she knew, would keep this little swine off balance. "Kergent's the name. Real estate's my game," Carnadyne said brightly, constantly in motion. "Nice planet you have here." Jumping around. "Very nice. Unlimited potential." "Uh, we like it. Some say it's too cold." Who-or what-was this strange animated person and why did she seem to flicker around the edges? "Oh, no, no. How can anybody say that? This is an ideal planet." "Where did you say you were from, uh, Kergent?" "I didn't," Carnadyne chortled. "But since you ask, 153 I'm from Iceworld. Hardly the garden spot of the universe." "I'm afraid I don't understand." "Oh, we Iceworlders toil day in and day out on a frozen hunk of rock. It gets quite dreary. Our sun is so far away one can hardly tell when it is in the sky. What we need is a place to get away from it all for a while. This looks like the perfect spot." "Here? You mean this planet?" (What was that irritating flickering? Why didn't this Kergent hold still for a moment?) "Of course. Your whole planet is covered with slush and muck, a wonderful gelatinous ooze! There's nothing an Iceworlder likes better than to wallow about in slush and ooze. Nowhere to do that on our planet; it's too cold." Carnadyne paused for a second. A wild look came into her eyes. She waved her arms frantically. "What I propose to do is acquire some land-rent it if necessary-to construct a vacation spa for wealthy Iceworlders. Very trendy place. Sophisticated. Iceworlders really go for that kind of stuff.'" The Mirese obviously didn't know a thing about Iceworlders. Carnadyne fully realized the other's confusion and played it for all it was worth. "Are you serious about this?" The man considered. As thoroughly bizarre as this person was, there was something about her that made her seem sincere. "Of course I'm serious." Of course. "Iceworlders are very wealthy." Very wealthy. "They would pay a great deal to visit a nice place like this. We could share the profits.'" Money for you. It started to make sense to the Mirese. He could make money. Lots of money for you. The more thought he gave it, the more sense it made. Perhaps this Kergent creature was onto something. She seemed a personable . . . lady. A little weird-and ugly as sin-but someone a person could trust. Trust me. 154 After all, the clique that ran the dome skimmed a lot of money off the top. There was no reason why he shouldn't watch out for himself. It sounds like a good idea. "It sounds like a good idea, Kergent. You've convinced me. I do believe we can do business." He was positively beaming. I'll need a pass. "You'll need some documentation to get around the city. Why don't I write you out a pass?" "Oh, that would be terribly nice of you, thanks." Carnadyne relaxed and let her mind wander to other minds in the building. She had picked up some valuable information. Things were beginning to come under control again. Carnadyne did like to have things under control Randy sat on the bunk, talking quietly with Lori. Reza was on its bunk, snorting softly. That meant it was asleep, or doing whatever it did that passed for sleep. This was a rare moment-no shocks, no noises, no interrogators. Just the dread anticipation of them. Such times were to be treasured, now. "You seem awfully young to be ship's master," he said, making conversation. The luxury of idle talk helped keep them from dwelling on their untenable situation. "And I'm a woman, too. I suppose that's the next thing you'll say." She was piqued and didn't bother to hide it. "Hey-I wasn't going to." She didn't look convinced and he didn't leave bad enough alone. "I really wasn't thinking about that, Lori. But-yes. You are young and a woman and ship's master. It's an unusual combination." "I don't see anything unusual about being a woman or being young. Or captaining my own ship, for that matter. I worked, I studied, I passed the test. There's a loan on the ship. It all seems perfectly natural to me. I've worked hard for it, too." 155 "I'm sure you have," Randy said. "It's just not something you see every day." "What

if I had been a young man? Would you still have been surprised?" "I guess not," Randy said truthfully. "Female spacer captains of any age are rare. It doesn't seem to be a profession they're drawn to." He thought of that pirate, Hellfire, and decided she was better left unmentioned. "I'm not attacking you, Lori." "For me, it was the only way out of a bad situation." She glanced over with an almost-smile to let him know she was off the defensive that so often was offensive. Seeing his look of genuine interest, she went on. "I was abandoned when I was two years old. Parents were slaves. Spent most of my childhood in a creche on Jasbir. Do you know Jasbir?" Randy nodded. "A stinking pit of a planet, that's what it is. Fobbin' Council lets slave owners get away with everything. The only thing to do there is scratch to stay alive. Even as kids we were sent out to work harvesting scrub. It's the base for an aphrodisiac. The only future I faced was a lifetime of pulling more scrub out of rock fissures. Getting sliced by anyone who walked by. I couldn't take it." "I can't blame you for that." "I was never one for standing still, even then. When I feel trapped or something gets in my way, I do something about it." "I've noticed," Randy said with a smile. She stared at the shifting gray wall. "The only way I could see to get off that rotten planet was the monthly ship that came to pick up the scrub. I planned my escape for almost a year, working out all the details. When I was thirteen I stowed away on it." "That was dangerous." And he thought: Lord, thirteen! "It was necessary," Lori said flatly. "Besides, it 156 wasn't half as dangerous as what followed. I jumped ship at its first port. That happened to be Havoc." Randy knew about Havoc. He couldn't imagine a thirteen-year-old girl surviving long there. It was a rough and tumble place, inhabited mostly by miners and thieves. It was no place for a child. He said as much to Lori. "At thirteen I wasn't a child anymore," she said softly, and he knew better than to pursue that. "I'd left all that behind. I made friends. They taught me a lot. For a few years I worked the ice emerald mines. Being small is no disadvantage there. I could work as well as any man, better than some. I learned to pilot a sledge. That's seat-of-the-pants navigation; that's the key. A regular ship is a piece of cake after you've pushed a sledge around." She came close to smiling. "How did you get your own ship?" Randy asked. "You couldn't possibly have accumulated that much money in the mines." "I didn't. I won it." "What?" "I won it. In a card game." "A ship? There was that much money in the game?" Randy was incredulous. "Not exactly money, but the stakes were high. I could have lost everything, probably my life. I wanted that ship. I wanted to get away from Havoc and build me a new life." "So you put it on the line? On the turn of a few cards?" "It wasn't quite that way. I cheated." Randy laughed, surprised. "You what?" "The other fellow was cheating. I cheated. I was better at it. My friends taught me a lot." "Remind me never to get in a card game with you," Randy said with a smile. He reached over to touch her hand. It was cool. "You'd never stand a chance. I could clean you out in five minutes." 157 They laughed together. The happy sound bounced from wall to wall in their small enclosure. "Can't a person get any rest around here?" grumped a just-awakened Reza. "Great idea," Randy said. "What?" Reza asked. "What's a good idea?" "Rest," Randy said. Lori put her hand on his leg. "I have an even better idea," she said. Randy slipped his arm around her and pulled her toward him. Reza watched and shook its head slowly. If it lived to be a hundred, Reza was sure it would never understand humans. Still, it was interesting. All that sudden flurry of activity! And no reproduction, both of them insisted. Weird. Humans were weird. Two Mirese faced each other across a low table. Their conversation was low in tone, serious. "You're getting nowhere with the three troublemakers." "It takes time," Snarg said. "We're working on it. They'll have to crack soon. I think one of them must be an undercover agent." "So what, Snarg, so what? We've had undercover agents here before—even that TAI one. The alphabet of TAI/TGO/TGW doesn't worry me. I want to know if this troublesome threesome of yours is part of a plot." Of mine, Snarg thought nervously. He dared not say anything. "We just haven't been able to find out. Yet." "You haven't been able to find out much at all, have you." Snarg winced.

He kept his mouth shut. "You haven't even been able to break the weak one, that orange thing, Jarp or whatever it is." "We've tried. We can scare it and torture it and it hurts. It's even acted as if it wanted to talk. It just shuts up before it can tell us anything." "Good Makokis, Snarg! Is that the one you think is TGO?" The Mir laughed. "I've listened to the playbacks 158 of the eavesdroppers. Bugging the cell hasn't turned up much. This Carnadyne they keep talking about-it can't be the void. Who's Carnadyne?" "We have absolutely nothing on anyone called Carnadyne," Snarg had to admit. "Nothing at all. It has to be a code name. You see? A code name indicates a broad-based plan. We'll get it!" "I'm doubting it." The other Mirese closed his eyes and sat quietly for a few seconds, contemplating the troublesome business. Then he opened his eyes and looked into Snarg's. Snarg wanted to look away, and didn't dare. "Kill them, Snarg." "Wha-" "Kill them. One at a time. If they don't tell us anything, at least we won't waste time with them. They did actually try to escape. They're dangerous." Snarg nodded and got up from the table. He was grateful to be dismissed, to have orders. And this made sense. Dead, they could cause no more trouble. 20 Carnadyne paced through the twisted streets with her eyes open and the tendrils of her mind reaching out to touch the native Mirese she passed. From their jumbled and cluttered minds she discovered many interesting facts, some of them even related to her current project. With reluctance, she mentally shelved the rest and concentrated on the matter to hand. It was apparent that she had come to the right place so far as the hijackings went. An aura of wickedness permeated the upper segment of Mirayat's society: government officials and other Mirese of power. The question of whether or not Rantanagar Ehm was on the planet remained unanswered. So far she had not come across anyone with any knowledge of him. Continuing, she projected a mental picture of Randy, sorting out the passersby. Any Mir who had seen or heard of him would immediately be brought to Carnadyne's attention. As she walked, the minds of the citizens wove a tapestry around Carnadyne as real and as solid as the cobblestones beneath her feet. Patterns and currents of thought visible only to her became part of her knowledge of the planet and its people. Very little malice or evil was inherent in the majority of the inhabitants. That much was abundantly clear. For the most part these are normal people living normal lives with normal concerns: their work, their relationships with others. Almost like the counter-melody of a song or the background color in a painting, a thread of fear ran ISO 160 through their otherwise uneventful lives. Mostly it was a vague fear of authority, but a few points of focus stood out. Specifically, their major fear was directed toward something variously referred to as a dome or enclosure or simply bad place. The overall impression was danger, don't go, death. Whatever the specific nature of the place was, and what-if anything-it held, was unknown to the general populace. Mirese in positions of power were a different matter entirely. The masses existed in their minds simply as objects for manipulation and exploitation, easily intimidated by force. Carnadyne had met only a few examples of this segment of Mirese society. The contact had been both fleeting and distasteful. (It had also been useful.) Carnadyne had obtained, with their unwitting cooperation, a hazy idea of what was going on behind the scenes. It wasn't a complete picture by any means, but it would have to do until she came into close proximity with someone with more detailed knowledge. Something criminal was taking place outside the city. It could only be the hijacking, from the vague references she had managed to pick up. It had something to do with the dome, or whatever that structure was that most of the people feared. The information she had was unclear because the operation was shrouded in deep secrecy. It might take considerable time to come across an individual highly placed enough in the operation for Carnadyne to find out much more than that. Meanwhile she concentrated on Randy, extending the range of her mental probe. When Carnadyne found it, she did so in a big way. How big, she wasn't aware-at first. Initially she was aware only of a Mirese in a great hurry, filled with stress. This in itself was unusual for the normally placid citizenry. Then the image of Randy snapped into his head and Carnadyne

focused intently on the harried individual. It was like opening a door. 161 A flood of information washed over Carnadyne all at once. She took it all in, missing nothing in the process, and filed it in appropriate indexed-sequential categories. In a tenth of a second she knew the Mir—from his birth to that very second—better than the man himself. By far the majority of the information was personal and trivial: sleep habits, the foods he liked, his friends and enemies. Yet what remained was vitally important: 1) Hijacked ships were snatched in space (the Mir didn't know how) and brought to the "dome" (he didn't know-how they did that, either). 2) The ships were stripped, and anything of value was sold through the black market. 3) The crews were imprisoned within the dome, exploited if they were useful, killed if they caused trouble. 4) The dome was escape-proof and dangerous. (He didn't know what it was made of, how it worked, or where it came from.) 5) Randy was trapped within the dome. 6) Bayport had recently been captured, and Reza was also within the dome. 7) They were being held, along with a female, in a cell within the dome (escape impossible). 8) The Mirese was on his way to kill them. (He felt no remorse, felt no pleasure. It was his job.) To say that it took a tenth of a second for Carnadyne to collect and understand all this information along with the millions of other things in the Mir's mind would be to do Carnadyne a disservice. For all intents and purposes the process was instantaneous. It did, however, take a full tenth of a second for Carnadyne to formulate and initiate a new plan of attack based on this recent influx of significant data. Turn left. Her sharp mental command insinuated its way into the Mirese's mind. It was indistinguishable from the man's own thoughts, yet carried precedence over everything else. 162 He turned left, convinced it was what he'd been planning to do all along. Turn right. Go down the alley. The Mirese did; Carnadyne followed. Tall, windowless buildings flanked the narrow passageway. It was deserted. Perfect. We are old friends. I am a Mirese of considerable power and influence. We have known each other for years. Even as she projected these thoughts, Carnadyne concentrated on rearranging the part of her body that most creatures observed. She adapted her corporeal form to roughly the configuration of a Mirese. Although it flickered around the edges and lacked detailed definition, it would suffice as a disguise for any casual observer. More to the point, she surrounded this new construction with an aura of Mir-ism. People within sight of her would automatically think of her as a native, though a camera would have seen through the ruse immediately. I am known to you. We have exchanged the usual pleasantries. You feel relaxed toward me, yet are slightly in awe of my position of power. I am to accompany you to the prisoners. You will take me there now. In all matters you will defer to my authority. The Mir turned abruptly, headed back toward the busy street. Carnadyne, in her disguise, tagged along. They commandeered the first surface vehicle they came across and instructed the driver to head away from the city. Once inside the vehicle, Carnadyne could relax a little. It was much easier to keep up the Mirese facade in front of only two people. Maintaining the illusion in a crowd took considerable energy and attention. Thus her mind was relatively free when they cleared the city and she gained her first glimpse of the dome. She saw its true nature, and it hardly resembled a dome at all. To Carnadyne form and function were all cut from the same cloth. She could look at a caterpillar and see the 163 latent butterfly inside. One look at the dome and the whole hijacking scheme unfolded before her. Of course she had an advantage. She was not wholly a creature of the normal universe. And the dome was not wholly a construct of the normal universe. Not by any means. For the dome, like Carnadyne, extruded from the physical world into the dark universe—a place totally beyond the experience and comprehension of beings from the normal universe. Fundamentally Carnadyne perceived the dark universe as interrelationships between lines of force. There was no normal universe analogue for it at all. The nearest approximation would be a universe that existed as a dynamic balance of shifting forces, constantly in movement, constantly seeking an unobtainable equilibrium. This was, to Carnadyne, superimposed around and through the dark universe. There were touch-points

where the two universes physically meshed, such as collapstars-"black holes"-but for the most part they were layered around each other. Independent in some respects, closely tied in others. To Carnadyne, the dome more closely resembled a tornado. A funnel of energy pulled from its normal position between the stars to the planet's surface. It was highly unusual. The power necessary to establish such an unnatural system-not to mention maintaining it-would have to be enormous indeed. Who? How? The twisted fingers of force arced up in an ever-widening spiral from the dome-like physical manifestation of the enclosure. They ripped through the atmosphere into the interspatial dark universe aspect of Mirayat. Interacting and disrupting the larger network that included its sun and surrounding planets. Now that Carnadyne had seen the anomaly, the irregular aspects of the dark universe interactions became readily apparent. She'd have noticed them as she approached the planet if she had been looking for them. 164 Yet dark universe interactions were part of Carnadyne's normal background. She would no more think of closely looking at them than a human would examine its own fingerprints simply to see if they had changed. The fingerprints had changed. As they approached the dome, Carnadyne could feel powerful forces at work. They pulled at her skin, tugged at her insatiable curiosity. 21 Randy finished telling his life story for the third time. He had tried to juice it up a little bit, for variety's sake, but gave it up. His imagination didn't run in that direction. Lori and Reza had listened and made appropriate comments. What else could they do? Time was an oppressive weight that squatted on their heads. They had far too much time. . . . On the other hand, they had too little. They could sense that the hijackers were losing their patience. Each inquisition was a little harsher, each physical punishment a little more severe. Something was going to break soon, and Randy was now convinced it would be none of the trio. That made him proud-and it also frightened him. It wasn't too difficult to predict what the Mirese would do once they decided they would get no information from the uncooperative three. From what he had observed, they had few scruples and even fewer qualms about murder. Reza slid from its bunk and began pacing the floor. Even with its short legs the igor neded only a few strides to go from wall to wall. It waved its tentacles in frustration as it went, mumbling to itself. Its pacing had become a ritual, its mumbling a litany. Randy and Lori had reached the point at which they could almost mumble along with it; word for word, grunt for grunt. It seemed .that long a time. "I should never have listened to Carnadyne," Reza dolorously moaned. 165 166 "It should never have listened to Carnadyne," Rantanagar and Lori echo-moaned, in unison. Reza reached the wall and turned, unaware of the other two, lost in its musings. "This would never have happened. I wouldn't be here." Together: "It wouldn't be here." Invocation and response. Their eyes caught for a moment, twinkled. Humor was an antidote; their situation was dreadful. They had become a bit punchy. Their good humor was short-lived. Two Mirese abruptly entered the room, effectively cutting off frivolous conversation and Reza's pacing. What would it be this time; more questions? Torture? The end? A new one-could he be the provider of Ultimate Solutions? They started by grilling Lori. Randy paid hardly any attention to what they were saying. He had heard it all many times before. As usual, he carefully scrutinized the interrogators, always looking for the weak spot he never found. He hoped that one day they would slip in some way. He'd take advantage of it in a second. It apparently wasn't going to happen this time. Again-or rather still. The captors were solidly in control, as always. I am glad to see you have managed to survive this ordeal. Randy twitched. The crystal-clear thought was so sharp in his mind that he assumed it had been spoken aloud. He looked around the room. Nothing had changed. It didn't seem that Reza had heard it. It remained on its bunk, tentacles tightly knotted. The two hijackers were still questioning Lori. Was he starting to hallucinate, to hear vouces? I think not, Randy. You seem to be as rational as ever, allowing for the fact that you are human. Humans are never truly rational. What? It couldn't be! Carnadyne? Of course it is I. Whom else were you expecting? One of the Mirese looked over at Randy-and winked. 167 He was

flickering slightly around the edges. / suppose you are anxious to depart this place? A classic Carnadyne understatement. Yes! Is the female to be included? You'd better believe it. We don't go without her. Carnadyne projected a weary sigh. / was afraid of that. It complicates matters. This would be so much easier with just the two of you. I can do it, of course, but it will require the expenditure of additional energy. It is wise to conserve energy whenever possible. I, myself, in fact- Carnadyne! Yes, Randy? You're blathering. Let's go. Very well. The other Mir slumped to the floor like a suddenly deflated beach ball. Simultaneously Carnadyne assumed her normal appearance and configuration. Reza screamed with joy. Lori screamed in horror. "I think she liked me better as a Mirese," Carnadyne observed with austerity. "You've come! I knew you'd do it!" Reza shouted, jumping up and down. Randy went to Lori. "This is Carnadyne," he said, calming her. "She's come to rescue us." "She looks like she's come to eat us," Lori said a little doubtfully, visibly working at regaining her composure. A first encounter with Carnadyne was shocking even under the best of conditions. For her to appear without warning, suddenly transformed from the body of another creature, would be an extreme jolt to anyone's senses. That Lori recovered so rapidly spoke well of her. The fact did not escape Carnadyne's attention. "Boy, am I ready to get out of here," Reza said. "This has not been my idea of a fun time. How do we escape? No doubt you've concocted some devious and highly complicated plan." 168 "We walk out," Carnadyne said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Just like that?" Reza asked. "Just like that. More or less." Carnadyne produced three of the clasps the Mirese used to penetrate the dome. The others quickly slipped them on. "What about yours?" Randy asked. "I don't require one," Carnadyne said. "The dome and this enclosure are composed primarily of dark universe energy, which is a natural state of affairs for me. I can pass through it with no more difficulty than you would have swimming a river with a strong current." Reza was already heading for the exit. "Wait," Carnadyne said. "Listen very carefully. It is important that you do exactly as I say." The authority in her voice commanded their complete attention. "As we leave this cell we must keep to the shadows and side paths. I will attempt to project an aura about us that will make us seem to be Mirese. More to the point, we will seem something not-of-interest to them. It is also possible I can fog the mind of anyone who becomes too curious. You must realize, however, that I will be operating at the furthest extent of my meagre powers. Therefore the aura will not be perfect. To maintain the illusion you must move very slowly. Above all, do not speak aloud." With that chilling warning, they left. Carnadyne went first, suggesting to the guards that they were in need of napping. By the time the others had exited the cell, they were sound asleep. Lori and Carnadyne led the way, with Randy at the rear. They walked quietly and slowly, but it was impossible to avoid Mirese altogether. The dim light under the dome was an aid, true. Still, Randy would have given a lot for some pitch darkness. Carnadyne was exerting herself to the limit. It was much easier for her to alter her normal universe aspect than it was for her to cover all these people with a 169 blanket of illusion. There were far too many Mirese around. Each had to be dealt with individually. She was constantly forced to wriggle into unfamiliar minds in order to trigger the appropriate responses. It was exhausting work and took every bit of mental energy she had. Two new creatures came around the corner in front of them. Carnadyne quickly entered their minds. She was overextended and she knew it. Reza also saw them come into view. Its reaction was quite different. "Gorgers! Watch out!" it yelled, darting to the left. "Don't do it," Randy gritted, reaching for Reza. It was too late. Before she could withdraw her mind from the gorgers', Carnadyne felt her hold slipping on the nearby Mirese. Trigger-happy, one of them fired his longstick in the direction of the sound. For all he knew, he could have been shooting at a friend. He wasn't. The steady stream of energy hit Randy and Reza head-on. With a loud snapping sound they disappeared. Lori tried to dive out of the way, but before she hit the ground she too was struck by the deadly force. Carnadyne shook her

head, looked disgusted. How could they bobble such a simple task as keeping quiet? This will complicate matters, she thought. Then she too disappeared. 22 Total darkness. The taste of carbon steel. The smell of cotton. Sabotaged senses and twisted, rootless feelings. A blackness so complete that light could never exist. Powerful forces crushing. Pulling. Silence. The emptiness of a person born deaf, born blind. Total deprivation. Total annihilation. Randy felt the waft of a lemon breeze, the tug of a thousand planets. Blood pounded in his ears, slowly at first-like the solemn beat of a faraway drum. Gradually it grew quicker and louder, until his whole existence was one pounding, pounding force. His body seemed to expand and contract with each beat of his heart. His eyes saw nothing. The pounding was inside his head, not through his ears. Time compressed, expanded, was made meaningless by his jumbled sensory inputs. The pounding grew until he could stand it no more. Then it doubled, trebled. A pinpoint of light hung in front of him. It grew in size with each painful beat of his heart until the pinpoint became a ball and became a tunnel and finally washed over him with such a blazing whiteness that it pushed away the blackness. It pushed everything away. The absolute whiteness seared his every nerve. He tried to close his eyes but it wouldn't go away. He tried to raise his hands to cover his eyes and nothing happened. He could not see or control his hands or any other part of his body. For what seemed a never-ending period nothing existed for him but the burning whiteness. Time was nothing. Then the barest hint of a shadow, a faint flickering within the eternal washed-out landscape. It 170 171 was gone as quickly as it came. It seemed he waited years upon years for another one. Then they came more rapidly, at first brushing only the edges of his awareness, his field of view. Soon everything in front of him began to churn and swirl as phantom shadows danced and twisted. Piece by piece, the vista grew more solid. Pastels appeared, then stronger colors. Shapes gained definite edges, took on form and depth. Randy was poised on the edge of a sheer cliff, a blazing sun overhead. Clouds swirled above and below him, obscuring the bottom of the cliff. Jagged rocks tore through the clouds at his feet. It was sure to be an impossible drop. It was certain to be death. He moved and the dirt shifted beneath him. Losing his footing, he tumbled end-over-end into space. The lethal rocks reached out for him as he opened his mouth to scream. He made no sound. The vad/baye came swooping out of the sky, pure death on the wing. Its sawlike teeth were bared, its talons extended. Reza ran for the cover of the grove of bluetrees. Reza didn't make it. Reza was lifted into the air, hurled unmercifully across the scrubby veldt. As its battered and bloody boay rolled across the ground, everything went black. As always. When Reza opened its eyes after the passage of eternity, it was back on its feet again. The vad/baye was swooping down. As always. Reza ran ... was caught. . . . The cycle had no end. Its beginning was lost in some distant past-maybe not even Reza's past. It didn't matter. Over and over again Reza rose to fall, only to rise and fall again. And again. As always. There were other memories. An old woman with a child's body. Nameless diseases that did dreadful things to the afflicted. A Jarp. An ugly woman. Some memories were real and some were artificial. Some belonged to other people. Reza could no longer tell the difference. 172 Aloneness. The empty nest. Its special terror and ultimate fear. Darkness of the heart-of the very soul-gathered around Reza like a dark cloak and closed in on the igor like a dreadful stormcloud. Cold. Deserts. Aloneness. Nothing left now, nothing but the death-song. Helplessness. That was the worst part of all; that was the ultimate terror. Since her childhood days Lorisameh had been in control of her life. Her destiny had been of her own making. In captivity she maintained the illusion-she still strove. Now she could not even move an arm of her own volition. An unseen puppeteer walked her across the frozen wastelands, dragged her over burning deserts. And she was unable to resist in any way. Lori's frustration and anger mounted. She was whipped through space and monstrous forces tugged her this way and then that. Every bone in her body ached unremittingly. Her muscles twitched with uncontrollable spasms against the

'iron vise that held her. Anger burned red. She faced countless deaths, looked each in the eye and was dragged on to the next. Callously, brutally, she was forced on, and on. When she was sure she couldn't bear it anymore, she was pushed harder. She was caught in a stampede of murderous forces she could not resist or comprehend. She could either give up or fight. Lori fought. She fought and she was beaten, every time. Broken mentally. Hopes slammed down into despair. Each time she pulled herself together; rose up to face the challenge one more time. She failed again and again and yet again and yet she would not admit defeat. She could not. Confronting endless disasters and experiencing endless horror, she would not break. Caught in a manic kaleidoscopic universe totally beyond their experience or understanding, the trio was subjected to an overload of simultaneous impressions 173 that bombarded their every sensory system. Their worlds were jumbled, torn apart, put together again and ripped apart. Solids ran like water, colors became odors and feels. In vain they sought to make sense of a system that had no sense, no connections with the universe that was their normal and rightful place. Each of them was taken to the breaking point-innumerable times. Yet they did not break, could not break, never gave up. They were that strong. Carnadyne saw it all and she viewed the scene with worse than alarm. She could see in the minds of the three the trials and travails they were subject to. Even Carnadyne (to whom this plane of existence was an everyday matter, a part of life) could feel that things had gone dreadfully awry. A malevolent force was at work here. Left unchecked, it could do untold harm-and to more than "merely" this unusually brave trio. Then I must seek the means of its checking. First things first. She steeled herself, for she would have to quest deeply into those three minds. In their present condition that would be a numbing ordeal-for Carnadyne. Deftly she made her way through the superficial sensory inputs they were fighting. She sought out the basic level of consciousness of each. Hear me. Pay attention! You are in a plane of existence that is beyond the ability of your senses to comprehend. Do not trust what your eyes tell you. Disregard your ears and your sense of touch. If you panic you will surely die. Follow me-my presence in your mind. Do exactly as I tell you. To Randy alone: You are an agent of TGO; never forget it. You are a very special person, a man of uncommon character. Cast aside the illusions and allow your mind to follow mine. The forces are strong, but you are stronger! To Reza: You have spirit, my friend-a will to live! 174 They cannot destroy you as long as you hold onto that. Reach out to me and we will get out of this unpleasant situation as we have all the others. Reach, Reza! To Lori: You are a woman of incredible inner strength. It has been tested time and again, both in this place and previously. It has never been found lacking. They cannot destroy your will, but they can kill you. Join us, Lori! And back to Carnadyne from Lori, through the haze of edacious pain: Skepticism. Why should I trust you? You must, Lorisameh. It is the only way out. After a moment's hesitation: Pos. Yes. Firm. I will. Carnadyne gathered herself, gathered the three together and gradually, carefully, she eased them through the twisted lines of force. It was far from easy even for her, for she had to move at ninety degree angles to the main flow of energy in order to escape the anomaly that surrounded the dark universe aspect of Mirayat. It was a roundabout course that prolonged the agony of the marooned trio. Each was subjected to continued sensory bombardment-and it was necessary. It was hardly easier for Carnadyne. Her movements on this plane were akin to swimming in a strong current . . . and now she was towing three bags of cement. It was a struggle for Carnadyne. And nightmare in triplicate for the three companions. They saw themselves as walking off precipices to fall into vast gulfs. They were attacked and stabbed and strangled; they were assaulted and assailed in an infinite variety of ways. And they fought with the only weapons they had: their minds. Their wills. Their inner strengths. Carnadyne reached the edge of the anomaly! With her she still had her three bags of cement Reza and Lorisameh and Rantanagar Ehm! Now she oriented herself along the more familiar lines of force. From there the way was clear to the dark universe

aspect of Iceworld. Home. 91 Three bedraggled former prisoners sat on the floor of Carnadyne's laboratory, dazed. Bewildered, drained of energy. Carnadyne attempted to explain what had happened to them. Randy had trouble even collecting his thoughts, much less grasping the complex theories the Iceworlder tried to explicate. "It's akin to the hypothetical matter transmitter that people have ever searched for," she said. "You were scrambled in one place and reassembled in another. The physics of it are extraordinarily complicated. It hinges on areas where there are interfaces between the normal and dark universes. Areas such as Iceworld and other places in the void where life could not exist without a dark universe extrusion. There should not be one on Mirayat, however. That is not a normal situation." "It's a pretty traumatic matter transmitter," Lori said. "I'll take the Tachyon Trail any day!" "Not only traumatic, but also highly inefficient in terms of energy," Carnadyne said. "To maintain that field for ten mins costs more in terms of energy than they could make in a century of piracy. It hardly seems practical." Rantanagar Ehm, nursing a headache, filed that mentally and left it alone. He asked, "How long were we within the field?" "Three tenths of a second. That's objective time, of course. It probably seemed longer. You-" "Years," Lorisameh said fervently. "You could have survived another tenth of a sec 175 176 before total and irretrievable dissemination of your molecular structure." Carnadyne made a casual gesture. "There was plenty of time." "I have a question," Reza said, while the others rolled their eyes. "What is it, Reza?" "Could you turn up the heat? You keep this lab far too cold!" Rantanagar moaned and almost grinned. If Reza was grouching again, things must be getting back to normal. He stood and stretched, trying not to think about the field's impracticality-why? He was exhausted. He was dirty. Right now what he wanted was a shower, some clean clothes, and rest. No thinking. "I'm going to get cleaned up," he said. Carnadyne's old-fashioned shower was never hot enough . . . and right now it looked like the Seventh Sekhari Heaven. He headed for it happily, stripping. The water was only lukewarm. It also felt wonderful. Lots of soap. Wash the old hair. Seemed he'd been in that rotten dome for years. Wearing the same clothing day after day offended his sense of neatness, not to mention his Outreachers sensibilities. No showers there, no way to get clean. Rantanagar Ehm closed his eyes and let the water pound him. Someone touched him. He jumped, grabbed for his stopper before he realized there wasn't anything in the stall to defend himself with but a bar of soap. He blinked the water out of his eyes and saw Lori looking in at him. "Damn, lady!" Randy said. "I almost nailed you." "With what?" Lori laughed. "With that?" She pointed to his erect penis. Randy flushed. "I guess I'm still a little jumpy," he said. "That's not all you are," she said. "Living up to your name, aren't you? Always randy Randy. Ready for anything." 177 She slipped through the curtain into the stall. "Room for two in there, fella?" There was room. Barely. It was a tight fit and neither of them minded. Not a bit. As Randy soaped Lori's back he realized that this was the first time that they'd been alone together and free. Nobody had them locked up. Nobody was watching them. He felt himself relax. He also realized something else. The soft curves of her back were seductive. His soapy hand slid over the slippery flesh. She pressed her bottom back against his crotch and wiggled. He grunted. Talk about being randy, he thought. I'm not the only-one. He reached around to soap her stomach and moved up to her breasts. Her nipples grew firm under his fingers. As he stroked her she made a soft sound deep in her throat and wiggled some more. She turned and soaped him until they were two wonderfully wet and slippery people. They slid together in the cramped stall, bumping elbows and hips against its walls. Touching, groping every place they could reach on each other's body. Tweaking, palpating, exciting each other. Relaxing each other even while arousing. The stall, Randy thought, was obviously too small for a tryst, for slicing. Lori didn't let up. Little urging was required. Their will found the way. With her back braced against one wall and her feet against the other-on either side of him-and her rearward cheeks in his hands, they managed. As a matter of fact,

they managed very damned well. Soap-slick, constantly wet, he slogged her up and down on his erection until they were both high on sex. Eventually, gasping and giggling, they got around to re-washing and drying each other. Randy wrapped a towel around his waist while Lori slipped into the robe Carnadyne had loaned her. "Not much taste in clothes," she observed, mock- 178 posing in a robe of alternating broad stripes of yellow and natural-with pink ruffles at neck and cuffs. "I like it," the man from Outreach said. "Very stylish." Seeing that he was serious, Lorisameh reserved comment. Outies! "On the other hand, she's pretty good at pulling our asses out of tight spots." "Umm. Speaking of asses and tight places . . . you ready for bed, sexy lady?" "Always randy Randy," she said with a laugh, and fondled his towel. Her eyebrows rose. "You really are, too!" "Glutton," he said, fondling the back of her robe. "Always wanting seconds. If it weren't for anticaloric enzymes, I'd be fat as a spig." Noting her questioning frown, he added, "An animal, on Outreach. Fat!" "Come on fats, let's go see your seconds. Not that I enjoy slicing my eyeballs loose with you, of course. . . . I just want to get out of this robe." "Sure." There was one bed and they shared it. It seemed almost odd, really, making love on a bed without Reza in the way or at least sneakily watching. They managed. As a matter of fact, they managed damned well. 24 Carnadyne and Randy commed Ratran Yao with an update on their progress. The report was lengthy and complicated. Ratran Yao's response was predictable. "I can't believe you two were right at the scene and didn't shut the operation down." "It is a most intricate situation," Carnadyne explained. "Even if we had been free to move around, it is unlikely we could have accomplished much with the facilities at hand." "Well, then, we'll send in a fleet, bombard them with everything we've got. Wipe them out." "While I cannot be certain, it is quite possible that the installation would detect such a host of incoming ships and transport them into the dark universe." "Shit! What do you suggest, then?" "I believe the solution lies with destroying the generators that interface with the dark universe. Even then there are problems. Since the prisoners and ships within the field were inserted through the dark universe, they must be extroverted very carefully or the entropy they have acquired will cause them to spring back like bombs. Very large bombs, Cougar. The force field would have to be externally supported and gradually reduced once the generators are destroyed." "Can you do it?" "It is a most interesting problem, with several absorbing ramifications. The support we supply would have to be drawn from the very fabric of the dark universe that they themselves are using. The timing would have to be 180 very close-exact, one might say. It is unlikely that the Mirese would stand still while this tampering was taking place. This is all complicated by the existing anomalies in the usual dark universe aspect surrounding the planet. Allowances would have to be made for that as well as other factors. A most interesting problem." Rattan was convinced that he'd never understand the bizarre Carnadyne. Couldn't she ever give a straight answer to a straight question? "We all agree it's an 'interesting' problem. But can you do it?" "As you know, I am a person of small ability. I fear greatly my meagre resources and limited mental powers would be only barely efficacious in producing a satisfactory conclusion." "Confound it. Is that a yes?" "You may find it possible to act on that presumption. I will do my utmost with my all too insignificant capabilities." "Let me know how many people you'll need for the assault on the dome," "Additional personnel would be a dubious benefit. The more people we have on the planet, the more chance there is that they will come to the attention of the Mirese. Often stealth is preferable to brute force. I have found it to be an effective method of attaining the desired end. Do you have any reason to doubt the abilities of any of the members of our crew? They are reasonably qualified and familiar with the terrain. If you have misgivings. . . ." "No, no. Do whatever you think is right, with all possible speed. Keep me informed." "Once we are within the dome, communication will not be possible. The generated force will shield all transmissions. That is why I could not contact them when they were imprisoned." "Right."

Rando?" "Yes?" "Keep a better eye on Camadyne, will you?" "I'll try," Rantanagar Ehm said, doubting that there 181 existed in all the universe an eye that would be able to keep track of the wily Carnadyne. Back home once again in her comfortable laboratory, Carnadyne was a contented whirlwind of activity. Here at last was a problem worthy of her brain and her talents. After careful deliberation, she decided that the best avenue of attack would be to construct a rheostatic device that would gradually lower the power of the generators the Mirese used to maintain the force field. It avoided having to destroy the generators outright, a procedure that was bound to draw undesired attention. Attaching the para-rheostat and timing the operation presented some tricky problems, but nothing that could not be solved. It took two days to produce a working model of the device, an unconscionably long time by her standards. Carnadyne needed to be reminded occasionally that some species-particularly humans-required rest at intervals. They also worked better if they ate once in a while, a habit they seemed to have picked up somewhere. (At least they had bathed, and washed and changed their clothing. Lori had found an old blue keemo she fancied and was wearing it with a makeshift yellow obi. Randy admired it. Nothing in Carnadyne's wardrobe pleased him. The selection was one extreme or the other: drab or ridiculous. He was glad he had some of his own clothes around. They were straightforwardly outrageous.) The device was huge. It would take twelve men even to lift it. Odd pieces of equipment hung at strange angles all around the machine. One end of the apparatus flickered disconcertingly in and out of the dark universe. Carnadyne assured them that this was only a prototype, intended to test her hypothesis. The actual mechanism would be considerably smaller. The static test was uneventful. Reza and the humans 182 were convinced it didn't work because nothing happened when Carnadyne actuated the machine. "Nothing is supposed to happen," Carnadyne said. "At least, nothing you would be able to perceive. Actually, quite a lot is happening in the dark universe. You really should see it." "No thanks," Randy said. "I've seen quite enough of the dark universe." "Suffice it to say that this test is a qualified success. Some minor modifications are going to be necessary. They are quite simple. You should find them no problem at all." He frowned. "Uh ... us, Carnadyne? Not 'we'? What about you?" Carnadyne sat down with a thump. She looked as unhappy as it was possible for her to be. "Someone has to return to Mirayat to determine the number and precise location of the generators. I don't suppose I could talk one of you into it?" "Not a chance," Reza said. "I'm not going back there until we have to." It became intensely interested in something across the room. Carnadyne nodded, unsurprised. Before Randy could speak, she said, "I have reluctantly reached the decision-after long and careful deliberation-that of necessity it must be I who returns to Mirayat. My system of camouflage is considerably more effective than yours and we cannot take the chance of being discovered. It is imperative that we know the exact location of the generators before we go any further." "Have a nice trip," Reza said sarcastically. "Better you than me." "Yes," Carnadyne said. "Better I than you." Things were unequivocally tense on Mirayat. Mirese leadership generally assumed that the four interlopers had been part of a plot to take over the hijacking organization. No thought was given to the possibility that they might not have been killed. Nonetheless a 183 careful watch was being kept for any who might follow them. It complicated Carnadyne's reconnaissance mission, but in no way made it impossible. She avoided Mirese where she could, infiltrated their minds when she could not. She carefully logged the patterns of the guards at the portal of the dome. The information would be useful when it came time to attach the para-rheostats. She determined the precise location of the five generators that maintained the dark universe-powered force field. She collected copious data relating to the assault. Some of it was tangential to the main problem. Some of it bothered her precise and orderly mind. In particular, the Mirese bothered her. It wasn't what they were doing that was so unsettling, but what they were not. The Mirese simply were incapable of the technology to construct either the dome or the weapons they used that drew

upon dark universe forces. They had no knowledge, as far as she had been able to ascertain, of the dark universe plane of existence at all. They simply had a tool-and used it-with no idea as to how it worked. How had this unusual tool come into their hands? It was an abstract question, one that had no practical bearing on the problem of shutting down the hijacking operation. It bothered Carnadyne nonetheless. As she deftly evaded the sensors surrounding Mirayat and headed her ship back to the laboratory, it preyed on her mind. Carnadyne hated facts that wouldn't fit into place. She disliked them so much that she spent more time sorting out hypotheses than she did complaining about how much she hated to leave her laboratory. Back on Iceworld, she was relieved to see that her "assistants" had made the specified modifications to the device. The subsequent trial proved satisfactory. Carnadyne proceeded to assemble the five units they would need. Lori and Randy had proven themselves quite adept at etching microcircuitry and other precise 184 electronic work. Carnadyne manipulated the dark universe aspect of the device. Reza . . . never mind. Reza was Reza. Soon it was finished. "Well, where are they?" Reza loftily demanded. Carnadyne produced five wafers about the size of poker chips. "That's it? Where's the rest of it? What happened to that huge machine?" Tentacles waved loosely, like airborne serpents. "The bulk of this mechanism extends into the dark universe," Carnadyne explained. "There was no need to make it large once I had decided on the basic design. These should be easier to transport to Mirayat than the prototype. I could have made them smaller, but I was afraid you might lose them." "Me? Us? Hold on a min! What about you?" "I have unfinished business to attend to. The anomaly that now disrupts the interspatial dark universe aspect of that area should be studied while it still exists. It is quite an interesting phenomenon, one that I have never encountered before. It is not likely to occur again. I must take measurements, compile data." She turned to Randy. "You know how to apply and control these para-rheostats. According to the schedule we have worked out with Ratran Yao, the deactivation of the dome won't begin for another forty-six-point-three hours. I shouldn't need more than twelve hours to take my measurements and make my observations. That should give us plenty of time. If I should be delayed, proceed on your own to Mirayat. If you use the approach pattern I gave you, there should be no problem in landing undetected. Infiltrate the dome and place the devices as I have outlined. Take cover anywhere. I will find you. Please try not to cause a commotion. It would complicate matters unduly." "What if you don't show up by the time we're supposed to start the deactivation?" 185 "If I have not joined you by that time, you may safely assume that I have fallen upon ill-fortune. I can foresee nothing short of my death and final dissolution that would keep me from our rendezvous. In that event proceed according to the scheduled plan. I fully intend to return, however, within twelve hours." "Ratran isn't going to like you running off at the last minute," Randy said. "Carnadyne . . . maybe I'd better be with you." "Impossible. He would understand if I had the time to explain fully the intricacies of the anomaly. It is perfectly obvious to anyone with a dark universe extrusion." Not having a dark universe extrusion, Randy couldn't dispute Carnadyne's statement. That didn't stop him from doubting it. From her vantage point a discreet distance from Mirayat, Carnadyne looked with awe upon the forces interacting in the area. Spawned and perpetrated by immense powers, it was truly a unique situation. Carnadyne's view of the universe was predicated on her physiological makeup. Since she could not have survived without a dark universe aspect, it was an integral and indispensable part of her existence. The overlapping universes were as one to her. Right now what she saw intrigued her as few things had in her lifetime. Upon close inspection, the anomaly was more extensive than she had realized. Like dark, malicious threads the twisted lines of disrupted energy spread away from the Mirayat system with the crazed intricacy of a spider web gone wild. Through the vastness out along the spaceways the incongruities bent and warped the fabric of the universe. One line in particular stood out above the rest. It was distinctive, by far more powerful than the others. Naturally,

Carnadyne followed it. Into the void. As she proceeded, her normal vision superimposed 186 the normal and dark universes alongside each other. Passing from the remote edge of her own region, she entered what would appear as an immense emptiness to an observer restricted to (what Carnadyne considered the tunnel) vision of an exclusively normal universe being. But what was soul-wrenching emptiness to such a person looked quite the opposite to Carnadyne. The dark universe aspect of the space was positively cluttered. Interlocking and opposing lines of force filled and crowded it. The path she was following stood out like a beacon in its uniqueness and grew more distinct with each lightyear that slipped by her. By the growth intensity of the deviant line of force, Carnadyne suddenly realized that what she was doing was backtracking from Mirayat to the original source of the disruption. She was unsure as to what this meant, but it was bound to be a matter of extreme interest. Possibly an item of some importance, she thought with the helpless delight of a scholar. Soon the primary focus came into sight and Carnadyne was astounded. It took a lot to astonish Carnadyne, but this phenomenon succeeded in doing it. The lines led to a wanderer, a near-dead star drifting in the vastness of the parsec abyss. As she came closer she saw that the convergence point was a small planet-no more than an asteroid, really-being dragged in the wake of the spiritless star. Even as she saw this, she realized one other fact. Too late. She had made a dreadful mistake. The anomaly she had been following was not the result of a natural system! It had been artificially created by sentient beings. In her haste to investigate the phenomenon she had overlooked such a possibility. Her ship was seized by a force that dwarfed even the incredible energies that supplied the dome. Carnadyne resisted with all the faculties at her disposal . . . and was snatched from space as effortlessly as she might have captured an insect. She was deposited on the bleak 187 planetoid, torn from her ship and immobilized. Just as she might have placed an insect on a slide. . . . Three grotesque creatures loomed over her helpless body. They resembled nothing she had ever seen or heard of. She knew they held power, great power. She was in deep trouble, and helpless. Carnadyne did not like being helpless. 25 Her captors were ghastly beings, fully four meters tall with thin, multijointed arms and legs. The insectoid appearance of their chitinous bodies was accentuated by clashing mandibles and bulging eyes that protruded from either side of their sharply angular heads. Imbedded in their chests were millions of tiny jewel-like crystals that glowed opalescent with an inner light, scintillant in the cold darkness of the inert planetoid. Twin feelers sprouted from a ridged crest that split their foreheads. They wavered and blurred-constantly slipping in and out of the dark universe. As hideous as her captors were physically, mentally they were a thousand times worse. One of the first moves Carnadyne tried was to infiltrate their minds. She had drawn instantly back in horror. They were mentally aswarm with an unregenerate malignancy of an incredible, even monstrous degree. Never had Carnadyne encountered such concentrated evil-uncaring maleficence. At the same time, she felt her own mind being probed. There was nothing subtle in the way her captors went about it. She was laid mentally bare, torn apart by the hellish creatures. With complete unconcern, they trampled through Carnadyne's most inner being. Her mentality was dissected, examined with rough, uncaring forcefulness. She felt like an object of study, skewered on a pin. There was nothing she could do. She realized that what they were doing to her psyche 188 189 was nothing in comparison to what they were capable of doing to her already-tortured body. They withdrew so abruptly that Carnadyne involuntarily flinched. A shudder ran through her. Two of the creatures departed. The third stayed with her. ' 'You are a marginally interesting life form,' ' it said in a voice devoid of emotions. "You have provided the Mind with a few seconds of entertainment. It has been a long time since such a diversion was obtainable." "If you have satisfied your curiosity, why not release me? Surely you must realize that the reasons for my presence here are purely scientific. I mean you no harm." She attempted a mental touch that was once again thrown

back. "It is impossible for you to harm us even if you so desired-which, of course, you do. Your comings and goings are beneath our notice, except for one small factor." "The Mirese," Carnadyne said. "Correct. The Mind has determined that if you were free to go you might interfere with our entertainment in that sector of the universe. That cannot be allowed." "I would hardly call putting such a powerful force in the hands of unqualified people an entertainment!" "It amuses us. We are curious to see what will happen. If your friends proceed in the direction they are headed, the results should be quite interesting." "You have a strange concept of what is amusing." "We are an old race and have nearly exhausted all the varieties of experience. Only novelty remains and even that has paled for us over the eons. We see life as only minor variations on a few basic and simple themes. When it suits our purposes, we introduce variables into the system to observe the result." "The force you have given them is more powerful than they imagine. It could cause untold damage." "We hardly see that as a matter of concern. It will be a somewhat interesting experience to us, though not unlike similar ones we have undertaken in the past. There is very little in the universe that we have not seen or done many times over. About all we have not felt in the past few centuries is the sensation of our own personal deaths, though we have vicariously sampled this from a variety of other species." "Do you mean to say you're immortal?" In spite of her dreadful situation, Carnadyne maintained her insatiable thirst for facts. / might turn up some useful information. I could use some of that! The creature waved a clawed hand across its jewel-studded chest. "This is our immortality," it said. "Each of these contains the life force of one of our people. You would perhaps call it a soul, or mind. Countless centuries ago we discovered the process that would distill this essence and preserve it for all eternity. The three of us contain the entire civilization of our people from that point. As one, we experience the same sensations, think the same thoughts. The physical entity you see as my body is simply the vessel for the Mind, the sum total of our race." "It seems a stagnate system to me," Carnadyne said. "You gave up dying for an eternity of boredom. I'm not sure that I-even with my extensive inquisitiveness:- would make such a choice." "You expound upon a hypothetical supposition. We imagine you would think differently if the option were truly offered. Consider: We have endless time for whatever we choose to do. We have had centuries upon centuries to develop, to experiment, to grow more powerful. It has not been wasted. You underestimate the supreme power of our situation. We manipulate star systems as you would use a small tool. The energy of dead stars-collapstars-is like a paintbrush to us. Interstellar space our canvas! As the Mind, we can tap into the dark universe as easily as you would cross a room. We have converted this planetoid into a convenient base of operations. Had you not been so occupied 191 as you arrived, you might have noticed the multitude of small satellites circling this place. They aid us in observing our little experiments." "I never doubted your strength in that direction," Carnadyne said. "Try another direction, then. Do seek to expand your limited mental facility. Observation and deduction. I will give you a small hint. There are ramifications in your little plan on Mirayat that you have not considered. You have all the factual data. Deduce!" With that the creature abruptly turned and left her. First Carnadyne tried her bonds. They were as tight as ever, both in the normal and dark universes. Next she tried a mindcomm transmission to Rantanagar. She was not surprised when that failed. The dark universe activity was intense around the planetoid. Mind-comming was plainly out of the question. Since there seemed to be very little she could do to improve her situation at the moment, she pondered the puzzle the creature had left her with. It obviously concerned Mirayat and the force field. Just as it was obviously related to what Randy and his crew should be-at this very moment-embarking on. She relaxed her body and let her mind trip freely over the relationships between these two sets of information. If there were unseen ramifications they would, out of necessity, arise from information she had picked up after departing Ice world the last time. In her orderly mind it was

not possible that she had overlooked anything previous to that. In a few moments it came to her with numbing certainty. The lines of disruptive force that spread from Mirayat are not random, as I originally supposed! The pattern was not easily apparent, but Carnadyne's photographic memory and total recall gathered its threads, dragged them together into a coherent fabric. The lines were a pattern and that planet was the key, the touchstone. The generators that she had sent the others to deactivate 192 were more than mere pieces of equipment shaping the dome. They were crucial interfaces between the normal and dark universe. Tampering with them in any way would be fatal. Fatal not just for the people on Mirayat or in its vicinity; fatal for everything. Everything! For the disruption would spread instantly throughout the dark universe, wreaking havoc at every touchpoint, spilling simultaneously into the physical plane of the normal universe. It would rend the base fabric of the cosmos, tear it asunder. Carnadyne applied her intuitive grasp of geometric analogies to double-check her first approximation. She reviewed ordered quadrangles as a point in fourth dimensional space. The locus of points lined up in her mind, giving the nongraphable graph of the function $y = h(u, v, w)$ which was equally applicable to the general case of n-dimensional space. It played out the same. The entire universe would be destroyed. Nothing would remain. She realized that her captors were aware of this and it was of little or no concern to them. Perhaps it was only a game to them. A game with the highest stakes of all. It looked as if they might be about to experience that sensation they had lacked for so long—that of their personal deaths! They would share that moment with every other living entity in the universe. Carnadyne struggled with the bonds that held her. It was futile. Randy loaded the last of their equipment into the ship in preparation for the assault on Mirayat. Ratran Yao had been understandably upset that Carnadyne hadn't returned. There was nothing Rantanagar Ehm could do about that. Nor Ratran either, for that matter. Carnadyne was unreachable, so she must be flitting around in the dark universe somewhere. She was probably so involved in her "research" that she had lost all track of time and place. At any rate, Randy's instructions were clear: proceed according to plan. As Lori and Reza boarded the small ship, he did just that. 26 Rantagar Ehm brought the ship in on Mirayat's dark side and set it down, unmolested and unchallenged, not far from the dome. Carnadyne's instructions for evading the Mirese sensors had been precise—and accurate, obviously. Randy had fed every scrap of it into SIPACUM and their approach to the planet had been flawless. "The incredible incompetent dummies," he muttered, and shut down. He anticipated Carnadyne's arrival at any moment. A last-min arrival would be just like her. Even as prone to distractions as she is, it seems unlikely the genius-weirdo would miss the grand finale she so carefully set up! The possibility of her having run into misfortune or foul play was so remote as to be almost unthinkable. Carnadyne was able to handle herself. She's as stable as the universe itself, he mused, and looked at his companions. "Anyone feel like taking a walk?" he asked, imitating Carnadyne's ever-equable tone. "Let's go get the futhermuckers!" Reza said savagely. It was a nice way to begin—with Randy and Lori smiling. The weight of his stopper felt good to Rantagar. The way Lori carried hers showed she'd had experience with the cylindrical weapons, as he'd suspected. Reza, too, bore one-set and locked on Two. It wasn't that they didn't trust the igor. It was just—to state it lightly—194 195 that it occasionally exhibited poor judgment. Its weapon could stun, only. No setting Three-to-kill, for Reza. A change of clothing helped the Outie more than he admitted. He liked to dress well. It made him feel more in control. Carnadyne considered his concern for attire to be a human failing. Lori considered it part of his Outreacher's personality. Randy shrugged. He just liked to dress well, that was all. That meant this bright magenta jacket with the fringe along the shoulders and arms. More fringe ran down the legs of his pink trousers. A belt, with his favorite belt buckle—huge—held them up, and his favorite scarf—puce—encircled his neck. It all felt good. He felt good. Lori wore her old blue jumpsuit. The same one

she'd worn throughout her months-long imprisonment. Liked it, she said. Comfortable old friend, she called it. She had cleaned it and patched the rips and tears. (Rantanagar hated to see those tears go. He had appreciated the view they afforded.) Reza had almost forced Carnadyne to assist it in duplicating Randy's attire. Its clothing came right out of a vat. Duplicated exactly that of Rantanagar Ehm. Ghastly. The three invaders made their way through the darkness to the dome. Finding cover within sight of the portal, they waited for the guards' change of shift that (Carnadyne assured them) would take place minutes from now. On the last night shift she had observed that only two guards remained. One outside the portal, one just within. Too bad she wasn't along to fog the guards' minds so they could all simply walk in, Reza pointed out grumpily. "Uh-huh. Well, without her it'll be just a shade more difficult. Force will undoubtedly be necessary." Randy grinned. "I'm going to enjoy that." He checked his stopper. It was set on Three: Poof. Immediate disintegration of anything living. That was vicious, sensible, and gratifying. Compared with these slime, pirates such as Corundum were pussy cats. (Had 196 been, Rantanagar Ehm mentally corrected. Corundum was gone, gone. And unlamented.) "We're in position," he muttered to Ratran Yao, who co-commanded a small but extraordinarily fast, inordinately heavily-armed strike force well outside detector range-parsecs away. Once the dome was destroyed, the ships would move in to mop up. TGO, TGW, and selected personnel from T-SP. They had it coming, being in on this assault on the hijackers of so many Tri-System Accord spacers. "You're right on schedule," Yao replied. "Any word from Carnadyne?" "Neg. Maybe she'll meet us just inside the dome. The shift change is in progress. Carnadyne was right-only two guards. Last chance to comm, Cougar. All synchronized?" "Firm. We wait for you to blow Target One." "Firm, then. We're moving in." He motioned to Lori and Reza. "Good luck, Rando. Oh-be careful." "Uh-huh." Rantagar Ehm broke off communication as he moved forward. It felt good to be back onplanet again, this time with a stopper, as attacker. No prisoner at the mercy of whims and cruelties of his captors, this time. This time he was in control. There was danger here, no denying that. Danger-and pride. The pride only one of us can know, he mused. Shit-I'm one of those dedicated idiots! Who was that jerk in the hospital saying he was me, anyhow? He left-handed the back of his thigh and his companions squatted. He stepped out of concealment. Stopper comfortable in his hand. An old friend, like Lori's worn suit. He said, "Pssst!" The Mirese guard glanced his way, swung with widening eyes, brought up his longstick, seemed to shimmer as Randy squeezed his own weapon, and vanished with a little implosive pop. Rantanagar nodded. Now 197 all that remained was the guard inside. Of course that was the tricky part. He reset his stopper to Two and stepped up to the portal. Up close, the dome looked as menacing as ever. It housed the same horrors. Even the clasp Carnadyne had provided failed to reassure in the face of such awesome power. Still, there was only one thing to do, and he took a deep breath and did it. He stepped boldly through the portal, squeezing his stopper's grip as he moved. He emerged inside to find the guard exactly where Carnadyne had said he would be. Hit by the stopper's stunning beam, he never so much as saw his attacker. He merely crumpled for a nice nap. And here came Lori and Reza. Soundlessly, the trio melted into the familiar rubble-strewn landscape. Carnadyne had been left alone since her single encounter with her captors. Obviously the creatures considered her beneath notice. Once they had plumbed her entertainment value, they ignored her. That was no blow to Carnadyne's ego; it allowed her to concentrate her full mental and physical capacities in the direction of escape. Their lack of concern with her also permitted a small infiltration of their minds. She was extremely careful, shielding her presence from their awareness. That she was able to do so proved they were not nearly so omnipotent as they thought they were. Or claimed. Their minds were a strange dichotomy, a mixture of unity and diversity. In a way it was like trying to read a billion minds at once. In another way it was akin to reading a single thought. They had traded individuality for immortality. An interesting situation, she thought, one

that-well, given the opportunity, she would like to examine more closely. Presently she must have only one focus: escape. Her physical bonds would be no problem, but her 198 dark universe restraints were formidable. She found a small possibility of a weak spot, and she was waiting for it. The restraints were controlled by a satellite that projected a force field similar to the dome's. By a combination of observation and a delving into the creature's mind, Carnadyne had discovered that the satellite was occluded by the nearer moon every twelve-point-three-seven-six hours for oh-point-two seconds. It would have to be long enough. She had no other choice, or chance. Carnadyne could do nothing now save wait. She was not cursed with human feelings/failings of impatience or anxiety. It was not possible to change the parameters of this situation. The moon would be there at its appointed time. She would attempt to escape and either succeed or fail. It would be very, very close, but nothing could be done about that either. Carnadyne set her mind to mathematical puzzles while she waited. Randy adjusted the last of the para-rheostat devices he had attached to the generator. He rotated the small chip until the central glowspot changed from red to green, in indication that it was properly aligned with the energy field. He let out his breath. It was finished-this part was finished. He crept back to the rusted hulk where Lori and Reza kept watch. "All done," he whispered. Lori handed him the control box. Her fingers lingered on his. The device bore an actuating toggle and a single dial, in accord with Carnadyne's preference for keeping things simple. All they had to do was throw the switch and gradually twist the dial. That would shut down the generators. "I wish Carnadyne were here," Reza whined. 199 "We all wish she were here," Lorisameh murmured. "But she isn't." The matter they would not speak of aloud was Carnadyne's partial statement; only death, she had said, could prevent her being with them. That didn't stop them from thinking about it. Each felt a growing sense of loss. "I had to Poof two more of them while you were setting that last rheo," Lori said in a casual voice. She patted the stopper strapped to her hip. "Can't say as how it bothered me at all." Randy nodded. He knew just how she felt. On second thought, he patted her hip. Pos-she felt good, all right. "H-" Reza never got past the aspiration; Randy clapped a hand over its mouth and showed his companions a warning face. Had he heard a little clink?-a footstep? "Over here someplace, Snarg," a voice came. Suddenly Rantanagar Ehm was grinning. As he started to rise, Lori's hand tugged at his arm. He turned on her a cold stare and watched her eyes widen as she saw the violence in his; the hatred. His lips moved. No sound emerged, but she read the word: Snarg. Rising slowly, Randy reset his stopper on One. "-don't see a drobing thing," Snarg was saying, snarling. "Now you do, sweetheart," Randy said, stepping out of concealment to face the leader of their captors, their torturemasters. Snarg stared. So did the Mir with him. The one with the longstick. After a moment of shock at Randy's sudden appearance, the fellow started bringing that weapon up. Randy gave him a jolt with the stopper's first setting, which froze the fellow all aquiver. At the same time, Randy brought his foot driving up between Snarg's legs. High between his legs. 200 "Here's a little something for your balls, Snarg, if you have one!" Snarg had. Rantanagar's booted toe connected with the area he specified with sufficient force to lift the Mirese onto his toes. Randy's foot dropped and so did Snarg. Rather than turn even grayer, Snarg went pale, then bluish, while he bent in the usual position, doubling and trying to grasp himself. Glancing at the other Mir, Randy readjusted his aim to hold him, and swung his leg up again. This time his boot's reinforced toe came up under the forward-bent Snarg's chin. Snarg straightened up with an enforced jerk, head snapping back. Snapping, yes. Audibly. Snarg collapsed. "Oh, gracious me," Rantanagar Ehm muttered between his teeth, "I think I just broke poor Snarg's neck. What a shame-'way too quick a death for the torturing swine!" Then he became aware that the other Mirese had stumbled out of his stopper beam, and was bringing his longstick to bear. Hurriedly Randy twitched his arm to freeze him again. He was surprised to see the man twitch, shimmer, and vanish.

Pop. Randy glanced around in time to see that Lori had let herself fall out of cover in a lunge. Her stopper was not set on One. Or Two. "That one," she said, "is the cess-eatin' slug who was also the head nipple-pincher." "How'd you know?" Reza wanted to know. "All these weird-looking creatures look alike to me!" The igor's companions stared-and grinned. Lori had to slap her hand over her mouth to still her laughter. "Glad I saved him for you," Rantanagar Ehm said innocently. "Sure," she said, and winked, and then smiled. "Feels good, doesn't it? Goodole personal vengeance!" "It feels very good indeed," Rantanagar Ehm said. "Definitely a weakness of us humans, Reza." 201 "Uh ... but I wish you'd saved me one!" Again they stilled their laughter. After dragging Snarg into hiding, they resumed waiting. After a minute or two that seemed hours, Reza asked, "How much longer?" Randy checked his chron. "A very few more minutes. Not long." He wrapped an arm about Lori's shoulders and saw that she was patting Reza reassuringly. Squatting in darkness, they waited uneasily. Carnadyne counted down the seconds in her head. Her three captors were totally involved in their monitoring of the situation on Mirayat. She had disappeared from their thoughts altogether, and knew it. Gratefully. When the instant came, she acted. Carnadyne slipped free of her dark universe restraints with sixteen milliseconds to spare. The physical bonds required even less time. She gallumphed across the barren terrain to her ship. The three creatures were so immersed in their grandiose plan for magnificent destruction that they didn't even notice the ship's lifting off their planetoid. Or perhaps they felt it was so insignificant as to be beneath the consideration of such lofty beings. Carnadyne pressed her craft to its limits. G-force sought to crush her and she endured. And muttered aloud, not without difficulty: "I've got to reach Randy before he throws that switch!" On Mirayat, the seconds winked redly down. Ran-tanagar Ehm took a deep breath and held it. "Two," he muttered. "One. Zero-" He threw the switch. 27 Even as she rushed toward Mirayat, Carnadyne realized that she was too late, the shock wave from the disrupted lines of force hit her like the superheated flash preceding the blast of a nuclear explosion. Instantly her extraordinary brain considered and discarded all but one means to save herself-a desperate, last-ditch maneuver. Carnadyne abandoned her normal universe self altogether, redshifting her ship an instant before it was blasted into oblivion. In other words Carnadyne went Forty Percent City. Again. This time deliberately. With wrenching haste, she entered the dark universe. Again. She found it in a state of chaos. Equilibria that had taken eons to establish were ripped apart in one flashing moment. Unbelievably powerful forces tore at the bonding fabric of the universe. Deadly impulses gathered momentum to become colossal tidal waves that threatened to topple the pillars of all existence. Carnadyne became one with the universes she was trying to save. With a strange dualism, she became infinite in mass while at the same time having no mass at all. She stretched to all corners of the universe, and she was nowhere at all. She saw all; she was all. To save all, she went to work. By bending the forces back on each other, she used the same energy of destruction for salvation. She fought maelstroms of brute power with waves of serenity. Punch for punch, she matched balance against imbalance. 202 203 She fought with a fury that was fully the equal of the unleashed vehemence. She pushed. She wrested and shoved. She fought disorder with order. And she made gains! Slowly her victories grew in number and magnitude. Force surged and swirled, shimmered and shivered . . . faltered. Carnadyne never faltered and, as she acquired impetus, the balance of power commenced to change. She sought it, reached for it, used her very self against incredible power. . . . In need of a sort of transducing source from the normal universe for use against that of the dark, she found it, twofold. A fulcrum, from "home!" Almost Carnadyne smiled as she made use of those two ships of the normal universe, adrift here in its dark counterpart as a result of their having gone Forty Percent City . . . sometime. Last week, or yesterday, or an hour or ten years ago; or a century or three ago. She had no way of knowing, but she made use of them, and almost she smiled. Almost. Used as her fulcrum for focusing force, the two spacers were swept back into their

own universe. Perhaps someone onboard wondered; maybe no one knew. Perhaps both ships were crewed only with corpses or skeletons. One was a strange-looking craft, and the other was not. The first bore no name that she saw, while on the hull of the second she caught a fleeting glimpse of the name Firedancer as it flashed back into its own precincts. That was incidental and ancillary. The point was that the two ships, along with a few motes of space dust from the normal universe, served the purpose of Carnadyne. The balance of power rushed to her side. The mighty force of chaos retreated before her enforced advance of equilibrium, of order. Gradually the tapestry of the universe(s) wove itself back into the complex design so familiar to her. Except for one strand. 204 One line of the chaotic force was too powerful for Carnadyne to handle. It was the very trunk line of destruction. The main source, surely. It ran straight and enormously powerful from Mirayat to the planetoid of the insectoids; of the Mind. Carnadyne was powerless to prevent what happened-and in truth she could not bring herself to care. While she watched, released entropy snapped back along that inflexible line of enormous force. She had done all she could. She could not stop it. The wanderer-star and the planetoid were instantly vaporized. They left only ripples in the dark universe as evidence that they had ever existed. The instigators of near-calamity had at last gained the opportunity to savor that most unique of experiences- their own personal deaths. Carnadyne reflected that most likely it had happened too swiftly for them to appreciate it properly. Too bad. Gathering her dark universe aspect, she prepared to re-extrude herself into the normal universe. Never mind the two ships she had used so well, and accidentally returned. Since the location of her appearance was by choice, she naturally chose Mirayat. She was certain that no one any longer had the "force-field" dome to worry about! Out of curiosity, she calculated the length of time the titanic battle had raged-and was surprised to realize that it had taken five nanoseconds. It hardly seemed so long, she mused. Nanoseconds were hardly measurable by a mere human without the most delicate of instruments. Thus to Rantanagar Ehm it seemed that Carnadyne appeared at the same instant he pushed the switch. He grinned, more than relieved to see her. His voice was very, very quiet: "Nice to see you, Carnadyne. Is this going to work?" "It already has," Carnadyne told him. 28 Ratran Yao himself arrived to direct the mopping up operation. t. He found little to do. His combat suit was unnecessary. With the collapse of the great dome and resultant release of so many prisoners, the Mirese had simply given up the fight. Yao showed his disappointment. He had expected a minor skirmish at the very least. Besides, he had expended vast funds and promised no fewer than three favors to bring this force out here. For nothing. Rantanagar Ehm had done it all. With, of course, the aid of the Iceworld Connection. "Glad to see you could make it," he told her while he watched his force round up the listless Mirese. "I thought you were going to miss this one. It would have been a shame after all that work." "I was occupied, Cougar," Carnadyne said. "Certain minor details required my attention and what meagre talent I could provide." How could any human accept the enormity of the threat she had averted, she had asked herself, and the enormity of what she had done? She had pondered that question for all of five nanoseconds, coincidentally, before reaching her decision: no human could. Therefore she would not mention it. "You're too easily distracted, Carnadyne," Ratran told her. "I can't understand how you get anything done." "As usual you are correct. My interests are many 205 206 and stumble over each other, so that my accomplishments are few and trivial." He did not look at her and did not answer. What she had said was not true and he knew it. Carnadyne was Carnadyne, and that was all that could be said. Then two approaching figures attracted his attention and Carnadyne quite left Yao's mind. Rantanagar Ehm approached, walking with an easy relaxed gait. His arm was around the waist of a woman in what had been a blue jumpsuit. A busty one, Ratran Yao noted. The two seemed comfortable together. Very comfortable. That's more like it, Yao thought. We'll have him in shape yet. "You're looking well," he said, "if not good." "Feeling well and good

both, Sinchung," Randy said, almost automatically using one of Ratran Yao's several aliases in front of Lori. "This is Lo-Captain Lorisameh. Good woman. Good scrapper. Lori-Sinchung Sin." "So I've heard," Ratran said to Lori. "Carnadyne's been telling me about you." Lori laughed, looking at this man in a bulky combat suit whose helmet partially obscured his face and which bore T-SP insignia. She was sure that Carnadyne understood her about as well as she understood Carnadyne. She tightened her hold on Randy, gave him a light squeeze. Since he had mentioned no rank for this man, she assumed that it must be a secret. She merely nodded. "I suppose you'll reclaim your ship from this mess and move on now, Captain Lorisameh," he said. "I suppose." She didn't look happy about it. "Is your ship badly damaged?" "It can be fixed," she said tersely. He misread her reluctance to quit the present-and Rantanagar Ehm-and face an uncertain future. "We owe you, Captain. The expense of making your ship perfect again will be ours." And he added, "Tri-System Accord, I mean." 207 She glanced at Rantanagar, back at "Sinchung Sin." She nodded. "I'll accept that. A perfect ship is a lot easier to sell." "Sell," Ratran Yao said, in a flat voice, but it was a question. "She's got a place on Mirjam," Randy said. "Going to start a small business. Shipping. She's trying to go independent. She could use some help. I was thinking-" "I wouldn't make any detailed plans if I were you," Ratran said, his dark eyes expressionless. "You've got a job to do, too. Another mission is just waiting for-" While Randy tensed, ready to blast his protest, Carnadyne interrupted. "I fear that will not be possible, ah ... Sinchung Sin," she said. "I, also, have a small project for Rantanagar. Perhaps you would consider extending the loan of him and his capabilities to me. It is a minor project, but one which interests me. It should not take long. Five years should suffice. Possibly ten. Surely you can spare him for that short period in the endless history of the galaxy-and your . . . organization." Lord, lord, Rantanagar Ehm thought. They're fighting over me! Another mission for Rat and TGO. Ten years doin' Theba-knows-what for this freaky woman or "woman." And what I want is Lori! Ratran Yao recognized the hint of blackmail, but argued with Carnadyne nonetheless. His heart was hardly in it. Arguing with Carnadyne was wasted effort. The creature was so maddeningly logical. Besides, there was the prime directive concerning her: Keep the Iceworld Connection satisfied at all costs. At last he turned to Randy. "Firm then, Rando," he said. "You are at Carnadyne's disposal for so long as she requires your services." "I-" Rantanagar Ehm clamped his mouth. Not now, he told himself. He'd have it out with Carnadyne later. Sabotage her freakin' lab if necessary, to get the vug away from her! Meanwhile Ratran Yao was having his own thoughts: 208 There goes another good agent. Damn, damn! And I really wanted him to go out to Nevermind for me! Reza destroyed all thoughts by rushing up to the little group, all six arms waving wildly. "Can we go now? I want to get out of here, Carnadyne! I really do." "I would like to get back to the laboratory," Carnadyne said. "There are several experiments that I have, out of necessity, held in abeyance of late." "Well, let's go then! My nest awaits!" "We shall have to take the ship you used to come here," Carnadyne said almost offhandedly. "I seem to have misplaced my own." Yao wheeled to stare at her. "You what?!" "I lost my ship," Carnadyne said in that same matter-of-fact way. "An unfortunate occurrence. It was a most satisfactory craft and now I shall have to replace it. I begrudge the time that will take." "You begrudge-" Ratran couldn't believe it. "A ship? You lost a whole flainin' ship?" "These things do seem to happen to me," Carnadyne said with a shrug of her shoulders, her edges blurring. "I do regret it." And she turned to leave with Reza. Without another word Ratran Yao wheeled and strode away. He had to remind himself that he could write "conclusion" to the hijacking business. Meanwhile, he had lost a damned good agent, three favors owed on request, and megastells and megastells worth of superbly equipped spacecraft. If he remained here a moment longer he'd begin yelling and blow the Ice world Connection, along with his cool, his career, and probably his head. "Hold on a min," Rantanagar Ehm said, and not to his superior. Or former superior. Stuck for ten years with this monster and nothing to say about it?

He was about to say plenty! Carnadyne paused, glanced back. "Yes, Rantanagar?" "What in Theba's death is this project you want me for-for ten years?" 209 "Oh that," Carnadyne said equably. "I suppose I should have mentioned it to you earlier. I have been planning to have someone collect long-term sociocultu-ral observations for me, on a specific planet. It might take as many as fifteen years." "Fif-what planet?" "Mirjam," Carnadyne said, and blurred briefly. Just around the edges. "You do seem just the person for that task. Perhaps you could find yourself a local contact there, to assist you . . . perhaps provide living quarters." Lori and Randy stared at each other. A full second passed, another. . . . Then they positively lunged to throw their arms about each other. Laughing, he pulled her to him. Laughing, she pulled him to her. Both were leaking tears. (Watching, Reza and Carnadyne shook their heads. One of them blurred a bit, here and there.) Not only did Carnadyne not seem so bad anymore to the embracing couple, she was heroic. She seemed almost . . . human. Almost.

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