

GUEST LAW  
by John C. Wright

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The night of deep space is endless and empty and dark. There is nothing behind which to hide. But ships can be silent, if they are slow.

The noble ship Procrustes was silent as a ghost. She was black-hulled, and ran without beacons or lights. She was made of anti-radar alloys and smooth ceramics, shark-finned with panels meant to diffuse waste-heat slowly, and tiger-striped with electronic webs meant to guide certain frequencies around the hull without rebounding.

If she ever were seen, a glance would show that she was meant to be slow. Her drive was fitted with baffle upon baffle, cooling the exhaust before it was expelled, a dark drive, non-radioactive, silent as sprayed mist. Low energy in the drive implied low thrust. Further, she had no centrifuge section, nor did she spin. This meant that her crew were lightweights, their blood and bones degenerated or adapted to microgravity, not the sort who could tolerate high boosts.

This did not mean Procrustes was not a noble ship. Warships can be slow; only their missiles need speed.

And so it was silently, slowly, that Procrustes approached the stranger's cold vessel.

"We are gathered, my gentlemen, to debate whether this new ship here viewed is noble, or whether she is unarmed; and, if so, whether and how the guest law applies. It pleases us to hear you employ the second level of speech; for this is a semi-informal occasion, and briefer honorifics we permit."

The captain, as beautiful and terrifying as something from a children's Earth-story, floated nude before the viewing well. The bridge was a cylinder of gloom, with only control-lights winking like constellations, the viewing well shining like a full moon.

The captain made a gesture with her fan toward Smith and spoke: "Engineer, you do filth-work . . ." (by which she meant manual labor) "... which makes you familiar with machines." (She used the term "familiar" because it simply was not done to say a lowlife had "knowledge" or "expertise.") "It would amuse us to hear your conclusions touching and concerning the stranger's ship."

Smith was never allowed high and fore to the bridge, except when he was compelled to go, as he was now. His hands had been turned off at the wrists, since lowlives should not touch controls.

Smith was in terror of the captain, but loved her too, since she was the only highlife who called smiths by their old title. The captain was always polite, even to tinkers or drifters or bondsman.

She had not even seemed to notice when Smith had hooked one elbow around one of the many guy-wires that webbed the dark long cylinder of the bridge. Some of the officers and knights who floated near the captain had turned away or snorted with disgust when he had clasped that rope. It was a foot-rope, meant for toes, not a hand rope. But Smith's toes were not well formed, not coordinated. He had not been born a lightweight.

Smith was as drab as a hairless monkey next to the captain's vavasors and carls, splendid in their head-to-toe tattoos which displayed heraldries and

victory-emblems. These nobles all kept their heads pointed along the captain's axis (an old saying ran: "the captain's head is always up!"), whereas Smith was offset 90 degrees clockwise, legs straight, presenting a broad target. (This he did for the same reason a man under acceleration would bow or kneel; a posture where one could not move well to defend oneself showed submission.) Smith could see the stranger's ship in the viewing well. She was a slim and handsome craft, built along classical lines, an old, a very old design, of such craftsmanship as was rarely seen today. She was sturdy: built for high accelerations, and proudly bearing long thin structures forward of antennae of a type that indicated fearlessly loud and long-range radar. The engine block was far aft on a very long and graceful insulation shaft. The craft had evidently been made in days when the safety of the engine serfs still was a concern.

Her lines were sleek. (Not, Smith thought secretly, like Procrustes, whose low speed and lack of spin allowed her to grow many modules, ugly extrusions, and asymmetric protuberances.)

But the stranger's ship was old. Rust, and ice from frozen oxygen, stained the hull where seals had failed.

Yet she still emitted, on radio, the cheerful welcome-code. Merry green-and-red running lights were still lit. Microwave detectors showed radiations from the aft section of her hull, which might still be inhabited, even though the fore sections were cold and silent. Numbers and pictographs flickered on a small screen to one side of the main image, showing telemetry and specific readings.

Smith studied the cylinder's radius and rate of spin. He calculated, and then he said, "Glorious Captain, the lowest deck of the stranger ship has centrifugal acceleration of exactly 32 feet per second per second."

The officers looked eye to eye, hissing with surprise.

The chancellor nodded the gaudy plume that grew from his hair and eyebrows.

"This number has ancient significance! Some of the older orders of eremites still use it. They claim that it provides the best weight for our bones.

Perhaps this is a religious ship."

One of the younger knights, a thin, dapple-bellied piebald wearing silk speed-wings running from his wrists to ankles, now spoke up: "Great Captain, perhaps she is an Earth ship, inhabited by machine intelligences ... or ghosts!"

The other nobles opened their fans, and held them in front of their faces. If no derisive smiles were seen, then there was no legal cause for duel. The young knight might be illiterate, true, most young knights were, but the long kick-talons he wore on his calves had famous names.

The captain said, "We are more concerned for the stranger's nobility, than her ... ah ... origin." There were a few smirks at that. A ship from Earth, indeed! All the old horror-tales made it clear that nothing properly called human was left on Earth, except, perhaps, as pets or specimens of the machines. The Earthmind had never had much interest in space.

The chancellor said, "Those racks forward ..." (he pointed at what were obviously antennae) "... may house weaponry, great Captain, or particle beam weapons, if the stranger has force enough in her drive core to sustain a weapon-grade power flow."

The captain looked toward Smith, "Concerning this ship's energy architecture, Engineer, have you any feelings or intuitions?" She would not ask him for "deductions" or "conclusions," of course.

Smith felt grateful that she had not asked him directly to answer the question; he was not obligated to contradict the chancellor's idiotic assertions. Particle beam indeed! The man had been pointing at a radio dish. Very polite, the captain, very proper. Politeness was critically important aboard a crowded ship.

The captain was an hermaphrodite. An ancient law forbade captains to marry (or to take lowlife concubines) from crew aboard. The Captain's Wife must be from off-ship, either as gift or conquest or to cement a friendly alliance.

But neither was it proper for the highest of the highlife to go without sexual pleasure, so the captain's body was modi-fied to allow her to pleasure herself.

Her breasts were beautiful—larger, by law, than any woman's aboard—and her skin was adjusted to a royal purple melanin, opaque to certain dangerous radiations. Parallel rows of her skin cells, down her belly and back, had been adjusted to become ornaments of nacre and pearl. Her long legs ended in a second pair of hands, nails worn long to show that she was above manual work. On her wrists and on her calves were the sheaths of her gem-studded blades, and she could fight with all four blades at once.

"Permission to speak to your handmaidens, Glorious Captain?"

"Granted. We will be amused by your antics."

The handmaidens were tied by their hair to the control boards (this was no discomfort in weightlessness, and left their fingers and toes free to manipulate the controls). Some controls were only a few inches from the captain's hand, but she would not touch controls, of course. That was what hand-maidens were for.

Smith diffidently suggested to the handmaidens that they focus analytical cameras on several bright stars aft of the motionless ship, and then, as Procrustes approached a point where those same stars were eclipsed by the emission trail behind the stranger's drive, a spectographic comparison would give clues as to the nature of the exhaust, and hence of the engine structure. Such a scan, being passive, would not betray Procrustes' location.

When the analysis had been done as Smith suggested, the result showed an usually high number of parts per billion of hard gamma radiation, as well as traces of high overall elec-tric charge. Smith gave his report, and concluded:

"The high numbers of antiprotons through the plume points to a matter-antimatter reaction drive. In properly tuned drives, however, the antiprotons should have been completely consumed, so that their radiation pressure could add to the thrust. Particle decay in the plume indicates many gigaseconds have passed since the main expulsions. There is a cloud of different geom-etry condensed closer to the drive itself, indicating that the starship has been drifting on low power, her engines idling. But the engines are still active, Glorious Captain. She is not a hulk. She lives."

Smith was smiling when he gave this report, surprised by his own calm lightheartedness. He did not recognize the mood, at first.

It was hope. Often the guest law required the captain to display great munificence. And here was a ship clearly in need of repair, in need of a good smith.

Perhaps the captain would sell his contract to these new people; perhaps there was hope that he could leave Procrustes, perhaps find masters less cruel, duties less ardu-ous. (Freedom, a home, a wife, a woman to touch, babies born with his name, a name of his own—these he did not even dream of, anymore.) With a new ship, anything might happen. And even if Smith weren't given away, at least there would be news, new faces, and a banquet. Guest law made such chance meetings a time of celebration.

The captain waved her fan to rotate herself to face her gathered officers.

"Opinions, my gentlemen?"

The chancellor said, "With respect, great Captain, we must assume she is of the noble class. If she carries antimatter, she must be armed. She may be a religious ship, perhaps a holy order on errantry or antimachine crusade. In either case, it would be against the guest law not to answer her hail. As the poet says: 'Ships are few and far in the wide expanse of night; shared cheer, shared news, shared goods, all increase our might.'"

The winged knight said: "With respect, great Captain! If this is a religious ship, then let God or His Wife Gaia look after her! Why should a ship with such potent drives be hang-ing idle and adrift? No natural reason! There may be plagues aboard, or bad spirits, or machines from Earth. I say pass this one by. The guest law does not require we give hospitality and aid to such unchancy vessels, or ships under curse. Does not the poet also say: 'Beware

the strangeness of the stranger. Unknown things bring unknown danger'?"

A seneschal whose teeth had been grown into jewels spoke next, "Great Captain, with respect. The guest law allows us to live in the Void. Don't we share air and water and wine? Don't we swap crews and news when we meet? This is a ship unknown, too true, and a strange design. But every ship we meet is new! Einstein makes certain time will age us for-ever away from any future meetings with any other ship's crew. None of that matters. Captain, my peers, honored officers, listen: either that ship is noble, or she is unarmed. If she is unarmed, she owes us one tenth of her cargo and air and crew. Isn't that fair? Don't we keep the Void clear of pirates and rogues when we find them? But if she is noble, either she has survivors, or she has not. If there are no survivors, then she is a rich prize, and ours by salvage law. Look at the soundness of her structure: her center hull would make a fine new high keep; she is leaking oxygen, she must have air to spare; and the grease-monkey here says she has a drive of great power! Driven by antimatter!"

The vavasors and knights were gazing now with greedy eyes at the image in the viewing well. Antimatter, particularly anti-iron, was the only standard barter metal used throughout the Expanse. Like gold, it was always in demand; unlike radioactives, it did not decay; it was easily identifiable, it was homogenous, it was portable. It was the universal coin, because everyone needed energy. The seneschal said, "But if she has survivors, great Captain, they must be very weak. And weak ships are often more generous than the guest law requires! More generous than any living man wants to be!"

A ripple of hissing laughter echoed from the circle of nobles. Some of them fondly touched their knives and anchorhooks.

The captain looked as if she were about to chide them for their evil thoughts, but then a sort of cruel masculine look came to her features. Smith was reminded that the womanly parts of her hermaphrodite's body were only present to serve the pleasure of the manly parts.

The captain said, "Good my gentlemen, might there be a noble woman aboard, among the survivors?"

The ship's doctor, an old, wiry man with thin hands and goggle-adapted eyes, laughed breathlessly: "Aye! Captain's in rut and high time she were married, says I! Sad when we had to choke that concubine, back last megasecond when the air-stock got low. Don't you worry, Capt'n! If there be anyone aboard that ship, whatever they is now, I'll make 'em into a woman for you! Make 'em! Even boys get to like it, you know, after you dock 'em a few times, if you got their wombs wired up right to the pleasure center of their brains!"

There was some snickering at that, but the laughter froze when the captain said in her mildest voice: "Good my ship's Surgeon, we are most pleased by your counsel, though it is not called for at this time. We remind you that an officer and a gentleman does not indulge in waggish humor or display."

Then she snapped her right fan open and held it overhead for attention. "My herald, radio to the stranger ship with my compliments and tell her to prepare for docking under the guest-law protocols. Fire-control, ready your weapons in case she answers in an ignoble or inhospitable fashion, or if she turns pirate. Quartermaster, ready ample cubic space to take on full supplies."

The nobles looked eye to eye, smiling, hands caressing weapon-hilts, nostrils dilated, smiling with blood-lust at the prospect.

The captain said with mild irony: "The stranger is weak, after all, and may be more generous than guest law or prudence requires. Go, my gentlemen, prepare your battle-dress! Look as haughty as hawks and as proud as peacocks for our guests!"

Their laughter sounded horrid to Smith's ears. He thought of the guest law, and of his hopes, and felt sick.

The captain, as an afterthought, motioned with her fan toward Smith, saying to her handmaid, "And shut down the engineer. We may have need of his aptitudes soon, and we need no loose talk belowdecks the while."

A handmaiden raised a control box and pointed it at Smith, and, before he could summon the courage to plead, a circuit the ship's doctor had put in his spine and brain stem shut off his sensory nerves and motor-control. Smith wished he had had the chance to beg for his sleep center to be turned on. He hated the hallucinations sensory deprivation brought. Numb, blind, wrapped in a gray void, Smith tried to sleep.

When Smith slept, he dreamed of home, of his father and mother and many brothers. His native habitat was built up around the resting hulk of the exile-ship Never Return, in geosynchronous orbit above an ancient storm system rippling the face of a vast gas giant in the Tau Ceti system. The habitat had a skyhook made of materials no modern man could reproduce, lowered into the trailing edge of the storm. Here the pressure caused a standing wave, larger than the surface area of most planets, which churned up pressurized metallic hydrogen from the lower atmospheres. The colonists had mined the wave for fuel for passing starships for generations. In the time of Smith's great-grandfather, the multimillion-year-old storm began to die out. As fuel production failed, the colony grew weak, and the Nevermen were subject to raids. Some came from Oort-cloud nomads, but most were from the inner-system colonists who inhabited the asteroidal belts their ancestors had made by pulverizing the subterrestrial planets. Smith's mother and father had been killed in the raids. There was no law, no government, to appeal to for aid. Even on old Earth, before the machines, no single government had ever managed to control the many peoples of that one small planet. To dream of government across the Expanse was madness: the madness of sending a petition to a ruler so distant that only your remote descendants would hear a reply. And it was too easy for anyone who wished to escape the jurisdiction of any prospective government; they need only shut down their radio and alter their orbit by a few degrees. Space is vast, and human habitats were small and silent.

(Planets? No one lived on the surface of those vulnerable rocks, suited against atmospheres humans could not endure, at gravities that they could not, by adjusting spin, control. Legends said that Earth was a world where unsuited men could walk abroad. The chances of finding a perfect twin—and the match must be perfect, for humans were evolved for only one environment—made certain that the legend would remain a legend. In the meantime, mankind lived on ships and habitats.)

After the destruction of his home, Smith himself had been sold into slavery. Slavery? Why not slavery? It was not economically feasible in a technological society, true. But then again, slavery had never been economically feasible, even back on Old Earth. The impracticality of slavery had not abolished it. History's only period without slavery, back on Earth, happened when the civilized Western nations, led by Britain, brought the pressure of world opinion (or open war) against the nations that practiced it. The Abolitionist Movements and their ideals reached to all continents. But, on Earth, it did not take years and generations for nearest neighbors to take note of what their neighbors did.

Endless space meant endless lawlessness.

There was, however, custom.

Radio traffic was easier to send than ships from star to star, and there was no danger in listening to it. Radio-men and scholars in every system had to keep ancient languages alive, or else the lore of the talking universe would be closed to them. Common language permitted the possibility of common custom.

Furthermore, systems that did not maintain the ancient protocols for approaching starships could not tempt captains to spend the time and fuel to decelerate. If colonists wanted news and gifts and emigrants and air, they had to announce their readiness to obey the guest law.

And, of course, there were rumors and horrid myths of supernatural retributions visited on those who broke the guest law. Smith thought that the mere existence of such rumors proved that the guest law was not, and could never be, enforced.

Smith was not awake when the heralds exchanged radio-calls and conducted negotiations between the ships.

But when the seneschal ordered him alert again, he saw the looks of guilt and fear on the faces of the highlife officers, the too-nervous laughter, too-quickly smothered.

The seneschal's cabin was sparsely decorated, merely a sphere divided by guy-ropes, without bead-webs or battle-flags or religious plant-balls growing on their tiny globules of earth. However, every other panel of the sphere was covered with a fragile screen of hemp-paper inked with iconography or calligraphy. (It was a credit to the seneschal's high-born agility that none of the hemp-paper screens were torn. When he practiced the grapples, thrusts, and slash-rebounds of zero-gravity fencing, he apparently judged his trajectories so well that he never spun or kicked into one. "Always kept his feet on the floor," as the old saying went.)

The seneschal was giving Smith instructions for a work detail. A party was to go EVA (still called "hanging" even though the ship lacked spin) to prepare a section of hull to receive sections from the stranger's ship, once it had been can-nibalized. (Smith was secretly agonized to hear the seneschal call the beautiful strange craft "it" instead of "she," as if the ship were a piece of machinery, already dead, and no longer a liv-ing vessel.)

They were interrupted by the attention claxon in the cer-emonial imperative mode. The seneschal reached out with both feet, and gracefully drew open a panel hidden behind the hemp-paper screens, to reveal a private viewing well beneath.

Shining in the image was a scene from the huge forward cargo lock. The main clamshell radiation-shockwave shields had been folded back, and the wide circle of the inner lock's docking ring glittered black in the light of many floating lanterns.

Beyond was a glimpse of the stranger ship. Here was an archaic lock, both doors open in a sign of trust. Controls of ancient fashion glinted silvery in an otherwise black axis, which opened like a dark well filled with gloom and frost, ripped guy-lines trembling like cobwebs in the gusts from irregular ventilators.

A figure came out from the gloom. He passed the lock, and slowed himself with a squirt from an antique leg-jet, rais-ing his foot to his center of mass and spraying a cloud before him. He hovered in the center of the black ring, while the squirt of mist that hid him slowly dissipated.

The seneschal said in a voice of curiosity and fear: "It's true, then. He has no entourage! What happened to his crew?" He had apparently forgotten who was in his cabin, for he spoke in the conversational register.

"Request permission to come aboard," the stranger was calling in Anglatin. Smith stared in wonder. The stranger was very short, even for a heavyweight. The skin of his head and hands was normal, albeit blank and untattooed, but the rest of his body was loose, wrinkled, and folded, as if his skin were contami-nated with some horrible epidermal disease. Apparently he was a eunuch; there were no sex organs visible between his legs. His hair was white, and had been programmed to grow, for some reason, only on the top, back, and sides of his skull (Smith had seen religious orders modify their hair to this design, claiming such ugliness was ancient tradition).

Suddenly Smith realized that the blue material of the stranger's skin was not skin, but fabric, as if he were suited (with gauntlets and helm removed) from some suit too thin to protect a man from vacuum; or as if he wore a lowlifer's work-smock without pockets or adhesive pads.

"Garb," said the seneschal, obviously wondering along the same lines Smith had

been. "The old word for outer skins is garb. It is used to retain heat close to the body, without the energy cost of heating the whole cabin. He must have lost environmental control long ago. That weapon at his hip is also an antique. It is called a kiri-su-gama. Very difficult to control. One must spin the ball-and-chain counter-opposite from the hook or else one rotates wildly during combat. Either the hook or the ball can be used to snare the opponent to prevent blow-rebounds. But what arrogance to carry such an antique! Back in the times when ships had large interior spaces, perhaps, perhaps! But now? Knives and cestuses are better for fighting in cabins and crawltubes. Arrogance! Arrogance! And, ugh! He wears foot-mittens instead of foot-gloves; nor do I blame him. See how his toes are deformed! Has he been walking on them? Ghastly!"

But the stranger was obviously the foreign captain. The emblems on his epaulettes were the same as those that the Procrustes' captain had growing from modified areas of her shoulder cells. His blue "garb" was the same color, nearly, as her pigments.

She was speaking now, granting his permission to come aboard with the words and gestures of the ancient boarding ceremony. She concluded with: "And by what title is it proper to call our honored guest?" And her flute-dwarf gave a three-tone flourish with his pipes so that the ritual music ended as her words did.

"Call me Descender. My ship is the noble Olympian Vendetta. And by what title is it proper to call my generous hostess?"

"Call me Ereshkigal, captain of the noble ship Pro-crustes. "

"Noble fellow-Captain, because mankind is so widely flown, and many years and light-years separate brother from brother, tell me, before I board your craft, whether my understanding of the guest law is sufficient, and whether it accords with yours at every point? Excuse this question if it seems impertinent or suspicious; nothing of the sort is meant or should be inferred; I merely wish to ensure I give no unwitting offense or that I make no unfounded assumptions. For, as the poet says, The wise man calculates each maneuver as he goes; ignorance and inattention feed the seeds from which all danger grows.'"

"Noble fellow-Captain, you speak well and gentle-manly," said the captain, visibly impressed with the other's humble eloquence. "No offense is taken, nor do I permit offense to be taken by my men. As the poet says, 'A gentleman learns five things to do aright: to fly, to fence, to tell the truth, to know no fear, to be polite.' And politely you have spoken, sir."

But her quote was not quite as apt as, nor did it display the learning of, the stranger's.

She called for her chancellor, who, without any show of impatience, recited the whole body of the guest law, phrase by phrase, and answered with grave care when the stranger politely asked for definitions of ambiguous wording. There were customary rules mentioned that Smith had never heard before, or had not heard in detail, but every-thing seemed to be based on common sense and common politeness: Aid to be given to fellow ships met in the void, not to exceed one-tenth of total value of ships and crew; more to be exchanged if mutually agreeable; navigational data to be shared without reservation; standardized proto-cols for swapping air and supplies to ships in need; all maneuvering before and after docking to be determined by formula based on mass and vector, the lighter ships going farther to match velocities with the heavier, so that the total fuel expenditures were roughly equal; guests to bring their own air, plus a tithe for the host plants; common forms of politeness to be used; disembarking to be done at will after due warning; no departure from the guest-ship to be interpreted as constituting any abandonment; the code of duels to be suspended; any disagreements as to valuations of goods exchanged or veracity of informations shared to be determined by such arbitrators as shall be mutually agreed-upon. And so on. Smith, through the viewing well, could see the gathered nobles growing uneasy, not meeting each other's eyes. Looks of sullen guilt darkened on their

tattooed faces as they heard each phrase and lofty sentiment of the laws they intended to violate.

When the recitation of the law was done, Captain Descender and Captain Ereshkigal bound themselves by formidable oaths to abide by every aspect of this law. They exchanged grave and serious assurances of their honesty and good intent.

Smith, listening, felt cold.

The oathtaking concluded with Captain Ereshkigal say-ing: "... and if I am forsworn, let devils and ghosts consume me in Gaia's Wasteland, in God's Hell, and may I suffer the vengeance of the Machines of Earth."

"Exactly so," said Captain Descender, smiling.

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The feast-hall of the Procrustes was aft of the bridge, but for-ward of the drive core, along the axis, where it was protected by (and inward of) all lower decks. The Officers' Mess (to use the old poet's term for it) was the highest of the high country, a place of ceremony and rare delight.

Banners of translucent fabric, colored, or luminous with fantastic heraldries, ran from point to point throughout the cylinder. The fabric was meant to absorb escaping food crumbs or particles of flying wine from the air, but it also muted and colored the lights shining from the bulkheads.

For drinks (or drinkers) of low esteem, there were wine-skins. But the ship's cook had outdone himself for the high wines: pleasing to the eye, the globules of high wine or wine-jelly gleamed and glittered, held only in skins of fishnet web. The interstices of the web were small enough to keep the wine englobed by its own surface tension. Nobles had to drink from such webs with a delicate and graceful touch, lest a sud-den maneuver allow wine to splatter through the webbing.

Here was the captain, floating at the focal point of an array of banners so that she looked like a Boddhisattva of Gaia in the center of a celestial rose. She was in the Reserved Regard position; that is, right foot folded on her lap, left foot extended, foot-spoon held lightly between her toes, left hand holding an open fan, right hand overhead in graceful gesture, wearing an eating glove with different spices crusting the fin-ger-nails. As tradition required, she held a napkin in her right foot folded in a complex origami pattern. It was considered a crime against elegance to have to actually use the napkin.

Her hair was arrayed in the coiffure called Welcome Dish, braided at the ends and electrostatically charged so that it made an evenly swirled disk above and behind her head and shoulders, like a halo.

Her feast was arranged in a circle around her, little col-orable moons of ripe fruit, balls of wine-jelly, spheres of lacy bread, meatballs or sausages tumbling end-over-end. As the feast progressed, she would rotate slowly clockwise, to let one delicacy after another come within reach of hand and foot (toe-foods for the foot, finger-foods for the hand) and the order of the orbiting food around her was organized by tradi-tional culinary theory. Since the captain's head was always "up," the feasters must be attentive, and match their rotations to the captain, eating neither too swiftly nor too slowly, nor grabbing for any favored food out of order.

Descender was the last to be escorted in. The feasting nobles formed a rough cylinder, with Captain Ereshkigal at one end and Descender's place at the other.

Smith was hovering behind Captain Ereshkigal, not to eat, of course, but to answer any technical questions the cap-tain might demand. He had a towel wrapped around his right foot and left hand, to capture any grease that might float from the Captain's lips. He also held her charging-brush, to act as hair-page, in case any haphazard event should interfere with the flow of her locks.

Smith noticed with some surprise that there was no page near Descender's



mess-station; nor were there any guy-ropes very near reach. When Descender entered, he flew using a rotate-and-thrust technique, shifting the attitude of his body with spins of the weighted tail of his sash, then moving with wasteful spurts of jet. It was an awkward and very old-fashioned method of maneuvering, not at all like the graceful, silent glides of nobles using fans, their moves full of subtle curves and changes, deceptive to an enemy in combat. It was easy to guess the tra-jectories of a man using rotate-and-thrust; easy for a fighter with a knife to kill him. Smith felt the same embarrassment for the man as someone in gravity might feel seeing a grown man crawl.

When Descender took his position, he paused, blinking, evidently puzzled by the lack of a convenient anchor nearby, the lack of service.

Smith noticed that the lights facing in that direction were focused without banners to block direct glare. Another over-sight.

All the nobles watched Descender with careful sidelong looks. Some vague pleasantries were exchanged; grace was said; the meal began.

One knight loudly called: "Look here, mate, at what a fine dish we have: we'll suck this marrow dry!" And he tossed a leg of mutton lightly across the axis to the chancellor at the captain's right.

There was a slight silence. It was considered boorish to allow any food to pass between another feaster and the cap-tain; the leg of lamb was centered just where it would block Descender's view.

The chancellor reached out with a leg-fork and hooked the meat, kicking trembling bits of grease in Descender's direction. "Aye. At least a sheep has good sense enough to know when it is due for the slaughter-pump house!"

No one laughed.

Descender turned his head. The doors behind him had been shut, and now two shipcarls were there, arms folded, legs in a position called Deadly Lotus, where fingers and toes could touch the hilts of sheathed blades. Unlike where Descender was, the shipcarls were surrounded by a web of guy-wires, and had surfaces near to kick off from.

It was with a sinking feeling that Smith saw Descender look up and down at the food-ring they had prepared for him. All the meats and fruits in the arc nearest his head were toe-foods; finger-foods were along the lower half of the circle; he must either grab for food out of turn, or eat uncouthly.

He looked as if he wanted to say something. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Perhaps a hint of nagging fear began to show on Descender's features. The captain herself looked a little sad. She took up the salt-ball, but instead of pushing it along the axis to the other captain (showing that he was next in priority), she took a nail-full of salt and brushed the ball toward the seneschal on her right upper.

He grinned at Descender, took a fingernail's worth of salt, but then tossed it to his left. All the knights were served before the salt-ball came to Descender. The last knight to touch it looked carefully at Descender, licked the salt-ball with his tongue, and threw it toward Descender with a jerk of his jaw.

Descender's face, by now, was an impassive mask, but his jaw was clenched. A bead of sweat floated from his fore-head. He did not reach for the insulting salt-ball, but let it fly past his shoulder toward the bulk-head behind. All the nobles had their hands near their weapons. The chamber was utterly silent.

There was something sad in Descender's eye when he smiled a weak smile and reached up for a foot-peach near his head. "I compliment my noble fellow-captain for her bounti-ful feast," he said, and took a bite.

There was some snickering. It was like seeing a man under acceleration eating off what, in the old times, they would have called the floor.

One of the shipcarls behind Descender opened the venti-lator, so that the breezes began to slowly scatter his food. Descender paused; he grabbed one or two pieces of fruit and stuck them under his elbow to hang onto them.

It looked absurd. But nobody laughed.

It was hard to say whether or not Descender actually was frightened. His face showed no emotion. But he certainly acted like a frightened man.

He said, "I thank you for your hospitality. I wish now to return to my ship." The chancellor said, "But we are not done with you. That ship of yours; it is a nice one, isn't it? We would be happy to accept its drives and main hulls sections as gifts. Or perhaps we can simply claim it as salvage. There's no one aboard it right now."

Descender curled his legs, and put his hands near his kiri-su-gama. He spoke softly: "She. It's more polite, good sir, to address those crafts who sustain our lives as 'her' and 'she.'"

The winged knight said loudly, "Those who carry arms are required, when honor commands, to use them. Those false lowlife debris and pokeboys who scrounge the weapons off their betters deserve a looter's air-lock. But who says a thief has any care for honor? It is to honor, gentlemen, that I propose a toast! To the honor and to the air that sustains us! Let those who will not drink be deprived of both. But look! You have no page, you who call yourself a captain! Hoy! Smith! Grease-monkey! Hand our guest his last draught of wine; your hands are the only ones fit to hand it to him!" And he took from his pouch a plastic bag from the medical stores, filled with liquid waste. The knight threw it to Smith, who caught it with trembling fingers.

This was a mortal insult. If Smith passed the bag to him, Descender could neither drink, nor could he refuse the toast, with honor. The carefully planned program of insults that had gone before, Smith guessed, had only been to see how much Descender would stomach. If he had any hidden weapons, tricks, or traps, now he would show them; Captain Ereshkigal would only lose one lesser knight; Ereshkigal could repudiate the rash young knight once he was killed, apologize, blame him; polite words and polite pretense could keep a bit of honor intact during such retreat.

That is, if he had some hidden weapon. If not...

Anger made Smith forget all caution. He threw down the heavy charging-brush and the sloshing bag of medical waste, so that he drifted away from the captain and out of her immediate knife-reach. "Here's a poor man, innocent as innocence, and you're going to strangle him up and eat his fine ship! He's done no wrong, and answered all your slurs with kind words! Why can't you let him be?! Why can't you let him be?!"

The captain spoke without turning her head: "Engineer, you are insubordinate. Your air ration is hereby decreased to zero. If you report to the medical house for euthanasia, your going will be pleasant, and note will be made of your obedience in the ship's log. If you continue your insubordination, however, your name will be blotted out. I have no wish to dishonor you; go quietly."

Descender spoke in a strange and distant tone of voice: "Captain, your order is not lawful. At feast times, the code of subordination is relaxed, and free speech allowed, at least among those civilized peoples who recognize the guest law ..." He turned and looked at Smith, addressing him directly, "Engineer, what, pray tell, is your name? Tell it to me, and I shall preserve it in my ship's log, my book of life, and it may endure longer than any record of this age."

But Smith's courage deserted him then, and he did not answer. He flapped the napkin he held as a fan, moving back to the bulkhead, where he crouched, looking each way with wide, wild eyes, ready to spring off in any direction. Yet no one paid much heed to him. The nobles were still concentrating on Descender. There was silence in the chamber.

The gentlemen were each stealing quick glances at their neighbors. Each crouched and ready. But no one was prepared to take the final swoop to make their threats and hints come true. Perhaps there was something hard about killing a man who had not drawn his weapon; perhaps they were each thinking that now, even now, it still was not too late to back away...

Then the young piebald knight with the racing-wings spoke up, kicking the sheaths off his blades, displaying steel. Now it was too late. His voice rang

out, high-pitched and over-loud: "What is more hateful in the sight of God than cowardice? By Gaia, how I hate the thing (I will not call him a man) who takes a blow without a show of spleen! He smiles with his beggar's smile, his shoulders hunched, his eye wet, a tremble in his whining voice. Hatred, gentleman, hatred and disgust is what we ought to feel for those we hurt! Weakness is loathsome! And any man who will not fight deserves to die! A lowlife heart should not dare to hide inside what seems a captain's chest. I say we cut the false heart out!"

Descender's face was stiff and expressionless. His voice was tense and even. His eyes were filled with dreadful calm: "You are angry because you have no good excuse for anger, have you? It would be easier to do the deed if I had given some offense, wouldn't it? Or if I somehow seemed less human? Noble fellow-Captain Ereshkigal! There is no need for this. What I can spare from my ship, I will freely give. Let us avoid a scene of horror. You conduct yourself as one who honors honorable conduct. Let not this feast end in tragic death!" The young knight shouted, "Beg and beg! Must we hear the beggar mewl!? Cut his throat and silence this shrill noise!" He kicked his legs to clash his blades together, a bright crash of metallic noise.

But Captain Ereshkigal held open her fan for silence. "My brother captain asks, with dignity, that we not pretend that this is other than it is. We will not mask our deed under the code of duels. Let it openly be named: Murder, then, mur-der and piracy!"

There was a slight noise all around the chamber, sighs and hisses from the gentlemen. Some looked angry, or sad-dened, or surprised; most were stony-faced; but each face, somehow, still was dark with cruelty.

The captain continued: "But you have brought it on yourself, brother captain! How dare you have a fine hull, fine drives, and air, when we are many, and you are only one?"

"The property is mine, by right."

"And when you die, it shall be ours, by right or wrong."

"You have no need."

"But we want."

"Captain, I beg you—"

"We wish to hear no more of begging!"

"So . . . ? Is this the rule by which you wish also to be judged? Then no plea for mercy will be heard when your own time comes."

"Judged? How dare you speak defiance to us?"

"You condemn me when I apologize, and then equally when I do not. What if I say, take my ship, but spare my life?"

"We will not even spare an ounce of air!"

"Hah! I will be more generous than you, Ereshkigal. I will spare one life; perhaps that of the scared little Smith there. He has done me no harm, and I think that he begins to suspect what I am. Yes; one person should survive to spread the tale, otherwise the exercise is useless."

"Do you think to frighten us with superstitious hints and lies? Englobe him, my gentlemen! Steward, close the ducts! We must have our drapes sop up the blood-cloud so no drops foul our air system."

Descender spoke softly while the bejeweled, beribboned, and tattooed knights and vavasors, glittering, smiling, fans waving, drew their snaring-hooks and dirks and slowly cir-cled him.

He spoke in a voice of Jovian calm: "Who else but a machine intelligence has so long a life that it can intend to bring law and order to the Void, and yet expect to see the slow results? Civilization, gentlemen, is when all men surrender their natural habits of violence, because they fear the retribution of some power sufficient to terrify and awe them into obedience. To civilize a wilderness is long effort; and when the wilderness is astronomically vast, the terror must be vast as well."

Captain Ereshkigal, her eyes wide with growing panic, made a clumsy gesture with her fan, shrieking, "Kill him! Kill!"

Steel glittered in their hands as the shouting knights and nobles kicked off

the walls and dove. With hardly any sur-prise at all, Smith saw the stranger beginning to shine with supernatural light, and saw him reach up with flaming fingers to pull aside what turned out to be, after all, a mask.

-end-

About the author:

John C. Wright is a new writer with a future, judging by this story. He trained in law, but dropped out of the workforce to write, and has sold a few stories only to Asimov's, while working on novels not yet published. This story struck me as strong, individual, and unusual right away. It has some of the submerged just anger of Cordwainer Smith, and some of his poetics. It also has some of the feel of Donald M. Kingsbury's fiction, just a bit wonderfully inhuman in its future. It has a bit of the feel of cyberspace. But primarily it has the feel of tradi-tional SF, of great issues raised by titanic beings in the distant future, against a backdrop of uncountable stars. All in all it is the work of a strong new talent.