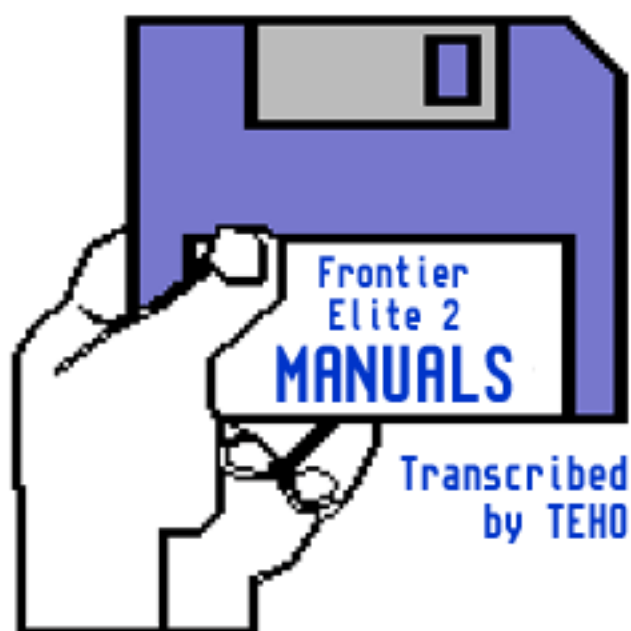


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STORIES OF LIFE ON THE FRONTIER

David Massey • Moira Sheehan • Kathy Dickinson

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A New Start

David Massey



DEREK FLAGGHERTY RAN, cursing, down the main corridor. Harsh white lights from the overheads cast fierce gold reflections from the buttons and braid of his uniform as he struggled to do up the few remaining fastenings while running pell mell towards the hall. His gait was forced and crabbing, as his ceremonial dress sword did its best to trip him headlong onto the floor.

“I hate swords, I hate buttons,” he mumbled while his belt harness made a final effort to send him head over heels to the ground. “We’ve had zipupps for centuries, but still these beggared uniforms insist on beggared buttons.”

As he got control of his uniform, the targets for his vehemence changed to his roommates who had left him in this fix. It was all very well to cover for a person when they’re hung over and need an extra few minutes sleep, but to leave them sleeping on this day of days, that was cruel. Derek executed a skidding turn as his left boot threatened to slip off, and hopping on one foot while securing his boot, he emerged into the open sky of the courtyard.

The sky glowed rosy and bright above, the product of weather control on a terraformed world. Naturally, the day would be blissful, as it always was on ceremonial and special occasions. Up ahead he could see other students heading for the main hall. Gathering his wits, and jamming his reluctant sword into its proper place against his hip, Derek assumed a more nonchalant pace towards the main entrance.

“Calm, calm, breathe deep, it’s only the entire rest of your life that you’re coming to,” he muttered to himself. His heart began to beat faster and all the lessons in self control and bio-regulation seemed to have very little effect at all as he passed through the imposing doorways. He merged with the other latecomers, exchanged sheepish glances. With a studied casualness, as if it was not the most important thing in the universe, he glanced towards the giant display boards at the far end of the vast room.

As he glanced down the rows of names, he felt his pulse begin to beat faster and a tightening in his chest and throat. He realised that he might have done poorly in some of the tasks, but surely he was in the top quarter of the class? Secret assessment had been the watchword throughout the five year training, but none of his instructors had ever hinted that his performance was ever less than good. But where was his beggared name?

As his eyes travelled to the bottom of the fourth column, his spirits sank further. There were three hundred students in this year’s graduation, this sector’s contribution to the Federation navy. A student’s final grade determined his or her initial posting and options for future specializing. As his eyes frantically scanned the columns of positions, a dawning fear that he would begin (and probably remain) a skunk-run deck-loader between Enethze and Andwafa. He couldn’t take it anymore. Enough of this torture! He was down to the last column and still no sign of Flaggherty in the lists. At this rate it wouldn’t be worth accepting his commission.

Reluctantly he turned away from the boards and made his way towards the cafeteria, his feet dragging and scuffing his shiny black boots in a way which would have a drill sergeant wincing and bellowing in seconds. Nobody noticed. The throng of bodies in the hall made a hubbub which drowned out his thoughts and the jostling bodies only accentuated his loneliness. In numb shock he sank into a vacant seat in the cafeteria.

With automatic motions he punched in for a coffee, the harsh navy brew, reputedly grown from Carborundum rich plants on far off Gretiwa. Three cups of navy coffee and your intestines were scoured raw, or so went the standard joke. Derek thought that now would be a good time to try for five. As he sat, his spirits began the usual bounce back to normality. Maybe his father had always been right. There was still a place for Derek on the farm back on Topaz in Ackandso. Somehow the very thought of such a thing brought the panic back full force. Where had he gone wrong?

With suicidal thoughts raging races through his mind, Derek punched up his third cup of coffee. The noise from the hall was decreasing now, as everyone adjusted to the fact that at last they had graduated. Surprised, elated or dejected, they each went their ways towards refreshment. Drinking contests began here and there as small clumps of graduates began celebrations. Derek sank further into his chair and laid his head in his arms.

“Derek, where the hell have you been?” A sudden crushing weight on his shoulder informed Derek that he’d been spotted by Jungle-boy, and the full bass roar of the huge man’s voice only confirmed the matter.

“Leave me alone can’t you?” moaned Derek, beginning to suffer from three cups of navy coffee in quick succession as well as from his disappointment.

“Hey, cummon chum, you’ll miss the celebrations – you’re the star of the show.”

There was no refusing the insistent pull of Jungle-boy when he wanted someone’s attention, reflected Flaggherty. His shoulder threatened to come out of its socket as the man from Cooperworld in Aymia pulled him from his seat. For a moment his sword refused to budge, caught against a chair leg, but with a frustrated jerk he wrenched it free.

“What’s this all about? Why can’t you leave me alone? My name’s not even on the boards,” wailed Flaggherty. He struggled futilely to release Jungle-boy’s vice like grip.

The sudden release of the grip on his shoulder sent Derek sprawling away in surprise. Angrily he looked round to see a quizzical look on Jungle-boy’s face.

“You mean you don’t know? Oh man, that’s great, that’s really great.” A peculiar jerking began in Jungle-boy’s shoulders, travelling down to his belly and back up to his head. He threw back his head and began to laugh. Nothing about Jungle-boy was small scale, and his bellowing cries caused heads to turn from all parts of the hall. Derek felt his face flush and a quiet anger filled him.

“What’s up? What do you mean? You’d better tell me, man – “ Knowing it was another suicidal instinct at work, Derek drew his hand back in a fist to strike Jungle-boy, but as he did so, his friend recovered some composure and lifted one arm to point at a small display board erected to the left of the main screens.

“Look.” He said, before another spate of laughter took control.

Derek turned and read the board. There were only fifteen names on the list and his came sixth from the top. A numb sensation began to spread through his body as his brain read the rest of the board. Fifteen top scorers were being awarded the position of ‘top gun’. Fifteen top scorers were going to Earth for graduation. Fifteen top scorers were being taken from each of the four main Federation training camps to an anniversary graduation ceremony on Old Earth and he was one of them!

In an instant his depression had vanished and he felt a surge of elation. He felt that he could jump straight to Earth without a ship! His friend was still guffawing and as the tension fled he felt laughter welling in his own throat. The two young men collapsed against each other, tears seeping into Flaggherty’s eyes. He wouldn’t have to return to that wretched farm after all! Wiping his eyes on his sleeve, Derek looked Jungle-boy up and down.

“Okaaay then,” he drawled. “Where’s this party?” Derek paused to gasp in a breath, then he couldn’t resist adding: “By the way, your sword’s on wrong.”

Four weeks later, Derek was fretting inside his dress uniform once again. Sitting in an auditorium surrounded by the other fifty-nine top gun students he shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. His collar chafed as he turned his head to look down the rows at his fellow 'gunners'. He wondered if any of them felt as out of place as he did amongst the pomp and ceremony of the occasion.

"Stupid collar," he muttered, wishing he could run a finger around his neck and loosen it. Everyone seemed to be sitting rigidly in place and Flaggherty felt an almost irresistible desire to cough. The speeches had been going on for what seemed like hours now, and there seemed to be a growing agitation amongst the young men and women in the hall.

Derek looked along the line of ranking officers sitting on the raised podium where each student would receive his or her commission towards the end of the ceremony. Each one was relaxed and seemingly indifferent to the endless stream of words coming from the current speaker. Derek wondered if tolerance to hot air grew with age, or whether you were born with it. He hoped it was an ability which developed, otherwise he would never come to terms with the rituals of high rank.

Flaggherty turned a furtive glance down the row of seats and met the eyes of Jungle-boy. Jungle-boy rolled his eyes towards the ceiling in a theatrical gesture, and Derek barely managed to suppress a laugh. He nodded briefly and turned back towards the front. The Admiral at the left of centre seemed to have fallen asleep. His eyes were open but they were focussed somewhere far beyond the room. Flaggherty was vaguely offended by this. It was all very well to be bored by ceremonies when you were young, but didn't the Admiral know he had a responsibility here?

Derek turned his attention to the events planned for after the show. He should be meeting Sophie again tonight and they would probably leave the others after a couple of drinks in a favourite bar, then on to a restaurant and possibly a show. He felt a glow of pride that he had managed to find a girl like Sophie just a week into planetfall.

The first week of their stay on Earth had been spent like any other tourists, soaking up the atmosphere and visiting all the normal tourist traps. London City seemed to be made up entirely of hotels, bars and souvenir shops, with a few looming office buildings breaking up the skyline but having nothing to do with the tides of humanity swirling through the streets. Jungle-boy and Derek had been inseparable those first few days, strangers in a strange land and totally bemused by the antiquity visible everywhere. They had quickly adopted the traditional navy custom of finding as many bars as possible, and sampling the wares.

It was in one such establishment that they had met Sophie, and introduced themselves. Normally the sheer bulk of Jungle-boy was intimidating and more often than not the girls would leave after the barest possible pause, but Sophie stayed. In fact Sophie had been there the next night as well, when Derek casually suggested that they try the bar again, rather than venture on to pastures new. Jungle-boy had stayed for a bit, but sometime during the evening he had wandered out. Flaggherty could not say for sure when Jungle-boy left, but his big friend had already passed out when he returned to their room.

After that, most of his evenings had been spent in Sophie's company, sometimes with Jungle-boy but more often not. She was an interesting girl, with a job in one of the many government buildings over in the oldest part of the City. She seemed immune to boredom and would listen for hours to the stories of the Navy and his training, his hopes and his dreams. She had clapped with glee when he related how he was one of the 'gunners', and somehow this childish display only made her more endearing. Even after a single week, she was coming to figure more and more as a part of his dreams of the future.

Derek's attention was dragged back to the hall by a sudden blaring of trumpets. With a start he focussed his eyes straight ahead and noticed with glee that the Admiral also looked a little ruffled by the sudden noise. The fanfare signalled the end of the initial speeches and now the presentation ceremony could begin. Derek wiped his hands along the sides of his trousers, glad for the first time that they were woollen fabric, rather than waterproof combat fatigues, since they absorbed his sweat with ease. One by one the 'gunners' were summoned from their seats to receive a commission from the Admiral, officially graduated from the naval academy and now junior officers in the Federation Navy.

Derek's heart swelled with pride as his name was called out and he rose from his seat to stride forward. Visions of future greatness swam before him as he stepped out to shake the Admiral's hand.

The next morning Derek was nursing another cup of navy coffee in the main cafeteria when he was literally shaken out of his reverie by a huge hand clamping onto his shoulder.

"Oh, hi, Jungle-boy," he muttered, without glancing up. A severe creaking of heavy plastic under strain announced that his friend had taken the next seat.

"Why the long face? What's gone wrong now?"

"Why do you think anything is wrong? Nothing's wrong, it's a wonderful day, go away."

"Ah, come on, when anyone tries to drink three cups of navy coffee – " Jungle-boy gestured at the plastic cups lined up at Derek's elbow " – it means there's got to be something seriously wrong. Didn't they cut you any orders?" Jungle-boy flapped a thin white envelope under Flaggerty's nose. This was met with a disgusted grunt and Derek sipped another mouthful of the corrosive brew.

"I got scout duty," gloated Jungle-boy, trying to goad his friend out of an obvious depression. "Brand new Cobra III re-fitted with navy power plant, up-rated weapons and navigation system, and a whole bunch of long range and planetary sensors. Looks like they've recognized my true merits after all this time. Lieutenant Jolius of the Federation Navy, that's me!"

Despite himself, Derek managed a smile. "So where are they packing you off to then? Someplace remote I hope, I don't want you digging me out of my bad moods forever you know."

"I've never heard of it before, had to look it up in the ship's directory myself. I'm heading out to the Frontier, starting from Zelada and heading outwards. No fixed orders, just don't come home without interesting news." Jungle-boy's grin looked like his face would split open. He practically glowed with pride and enthusiasm at the prospect of a chance to use his new commission to show off to his superiors.

"Isn't that part of the disputed zone?" Derek had a tendency to look on the dark side of everything. It had earned him a reputation as a spoiler in some student's eyes, but had kept him out of some nasty traps laid by the academy evaluators.

"Heck, everything more than 25 light years from Earth is disputed, that's half the fun. I've heard it's close to a pirate run as well! Now there's a chance to really make a name for myself. I can find a new planet, or I can break up some fiendish Empire plot to steal our space or I can smash a band of pirates." Jungle-boy leaned back in his chair, accompanied by more ominous creaking. With a theatrical gesture he waved an arm around his head. "I can't fail to do something useful." He leaned close to Flaggerty and muttered out of the corner of his mouth: "How about you?"

Derek drew a folder envelope from a pocket and slapped it to the table. "Here, take a look."

Jungle-boy slipped the flimsy out of its package and scanned through it. His brow furrowed as he read the brief instructions. "Looks like an easy job," he muttered, with a slightly puzzled tone. "Ferry a body to Achenar then carry on with the ship, the Spirit of Amenitris."

"Nursemaid an Ambassador to Capitol, make sure he reaches the Empire safely and then come on home! Some assignment that. Why use me? I thought we were meant to be getting plum postings, since we're the 'gunners'." Flaggerty's voice betrayed his emotions, he sounded petulant and frustrated. "You've got a scout ship to the ends of human space – I end up on a beggared commercial liner on one of the most secure corridors in space. I mean, where's the fun in that?"

In a fit of misery, Derek took another gulp of his coffee. Jungle-boy signalled a passing waitress to bring him a drink, anything except his friend's evil brew.

“Any idea when your tour starts then? What’s the ship like? What did Sophie have to say?” Jungle-boy was trying for any kind of channel to break his friend’s mood.

“No, I haven’t looked at the schedules yet.” The fierceness of Derek’s response caught Jungle-boy by surprise, his friend’s next comment caused a wry smile, since it did a lot to explain Derek’s sullen mood.

“She stood me up last night! We had a date and she didn’t turn up at all. I waited for hours.”

“Ha! So that’s the real reason for the long face.” Jungle-boy heaved himself out of his seat and nudged Derek up after him. It wasn’t hard for Jungle-boy to persuade Derek to get up, his sulk had been running out of steam anyway. It just seemed so unfair, just when he was getting on so well with the girl. Maybe he’d see her tonight instead. “Let’s take a trip to the spaceport then, let’s look for this tramp liner Spirit.”

Renting a cycle for the ride to the spaceport was no problem. The City streets were glistening from the scheduled morning rain and the air was fresh with the scent of leaves. (Municipal services catered for many things, and keeping a pleasant atmosphere in the City was just one of them.) Traffic was sparse and there were no crowds even as they approached the busy shuttle port. The two young officers tried to remain unimpressed by the size of the buildings, but they couldn’t help but be awed by the age of the monuments to space-flight arrayed around the site for all to see.

By the time they entered the main concourse they were as wide-eyed as any novice spacer, even though they had passed through hundreds of Navy bases in their courses.

“You go find the departure date and time from the booking desks. I’m going to look over the field to see if I can find your ship.” Jungle-boy pointed Derek at the lines of waiting passengers at one end of the hall and headed off towards the large view port at the other. He turned round as he was walking away and called to his friend: “And don’t forget to look at all the notices!”

Derek grunted and made his way to a clear space between the aisles of space-bound people and began to scan the boards above their heads.

Twenty minutes later he marched across to the window and sought out his friend. It wasn’t very hard, his large bulk was an obvious island of immobility in the shifting crowd at the view port. He was leaning against the blast-proof glass seemingly glued to the view outside.

“I can’t find it anywhere. There doesn’t seem to be any scheduled flight to Achenar for any ship called Spirit. I can’t believe they’ve managed to foul up my first mission!” Derek’s voice had a familiar edge of frustration to it. Jungle-boy appeared not to have heard, so Flaggherty repeated himself: “I said, it’s not there. There is no Spirit of Amenitris.”

“Oh yes there is,” breathed Jungle-boy, not looking round from the window. “Just you look out there, the far end of the field. The fresh looking one.”

Derek leaned towards the window and looked over at what his friend had been staring at for so long. As his brain took in the vision, his forehead thumped against the plastic with a dull thud.

“What is that?” he whispered, looking at the gleaming hull with the name proudly blazoned on its prow.

“That, you lucky beggar, is a brand new Navy cruiser. It’s making its maiden flight in two days time. It’s off to Capitol, a show of strength to the Empire, I’m told. Your ambassador isn’t taking any liner to Achenar, he’s going on the shake down cruise of our newest ship. And you are going with it.”

Derek was silent for a few moments, soaking in the news. Instead of sixteen weeks of boredom as some beggared commercial liner made the normal short jump sequence to the heart of the Empire, the cruiser could probably make it in just one or two. And then on a tour of who knew where? Commanders of new ships on first missions were traditionally allowed a free hand in picking flights, and most managed to get into some interesting situations. Life was looking up. It really was a wonderful day.

When a plan works well

David Massey

SOPHIE REDBRIDGE skimmed in towards the sands, her airboard grasped firmly in her bare feet as the fine spray off the seas of Topaz blew into her face. She glanced around at the smiling faces of the surfers and spared a passing glance at the reflection of the familiar seething white glare of Facece in the purple waters below. An enormous wave began to form below her and she prepared to ride it in towards the distant shore...

The alarm intruded on her consciousness with a strident din. She rolled over in the air field and groped blindly for the kill region. Her wildly flailing hand eventually moved into the region above the timer, and as its invisible laser web was interrupted, the alarm cut itself off and the morning greeting litany began.

“Good morning Sophie, it’s time to rise. You’re wanted at the office today. Important board meeting for you. Don’t forget the protein supplement today, and it’s time to check the bulletin boards again...” The sweetly incessant computer voice continued to advise and cajole Sophie from her rest, repeating its messages a second time in case it had not been heard originally. It had begun a third repetition before the waving arm managed to cut off the circuit. Quiet returned to the room, the only sound being the susurrations of the air conditioning and the normal rustlings of a waking body. Idly Sophie wondered why she had been dreaming of her early years on Facece. Any hint that she grew up in the Empire would be most unwelcome in her job. She could not afford to make any slips.

The clock was a computer interface and was programmed to list the day’s calendar events as set by the occupant. It would repeat four times and then ring the alarm a second time if there was no response before then. It only bothered to work at all when there was someone in the room, and if there was no interruption after the second alarm and message sequence, it would automatically ring for the building security and medical squad. When you paid rent on an apartment like this, you expected to be well looked after. Casual muggings in secure buildings were fairly rare, but it was good to be careful.

The computer took note of the normal routine of waking. The shower temperature was ready at the occupant’s preferred setting. Breakfast was ready when she stepped through the air barrier into the main room again, and a fresh selection of clothes had been laid out where the bed field had been. Some people preferred a holographic projection of an old fashioned mattress over the pressor field, but Sophie liked the illusion of sleeping in space, so the computer supplied that instead.

“OK, spill it.” She called tersely, sipping a cup of a dark Oolong tea and nibbling on a delicate sliver of toast. The computer began a detailed itinerary for the day; business meetings, lunch, official guests to recognize and a host of other minor details. From a slot in the wall came the day’s mail shot, a package of unusual fertiliser which she slipped into a large handbag. It always amused her that the central computer web of Earth let her collect that particular combination of proteins and minerals.

As she went about the final preparations for leaving for the office, she activated the bulletin board link and peered myopically at the green lines hanging in mid air in front of the grey box of her computer interface. As she quickly scanned down the list of advertisements, one caught her attention and she stared at it with a fixed scowl which would have surprised her superiors. They would have been even more surprised if they had known what had caught her eye, and vastly more alarmed if they had realised what it meant to her.

The offending article was a “wanted” notice, someone seeking a ruby studded platinum necklace. The important aspect was the rubies. Emeralds would have meant no change and sapphires an urgent meeting. Rubies told her she was being closed down. Sophie wondered what was going wrong and why they had pulled her plug. She was a very skilled agent and had infiltrated the Federation government system with ease. As far as she was aware no-one suspected her of being an Empire spy. Of course, if they were any good at all, she’d only know once she had been arrested and charged.

From the coded message, she knew that her removal was to be an orderly affair; an emergency break out would have used a different code. She still had a few days grace and all the contingency plans for a clean exit would be swinging into place. Best thing for today would be to get on with normal routine, pick up the last gossip and then set the removal machinery in motion.

Sophie was not a girl to panic. She finished her breakfast at ease and made her normal last minute check of the room before leaving for the office. The only break with routine was when she walked back into the bathroom and broke a small plastic ampoule beneath her nose and took a deep breath. She strode out of the apartment in her normal purposeful fashion and casually discarded the halves of the ampoule into a waste bin as she passed the front guard, hiding the action with a sneeze.

By the time she reached the office, her nose was sore and the sneezing and slight cough were becoming more pronounced. The desk sergeant looked up with some concern.

“Good morning Miss Redbridge.” The guard’s greeting was the same as it was every day, no indication of a sudden arrest. Sophie had fretted slightly on her short journey to work, but it looked like everything was still normal and the Fed’s were not going to close in immediately. The guard motioned towards a small slot in the desk at his side.

“I’m afraid it’s another spot check, miss, if you don’t mind.”



“No, it’s OK, Charlie, I’m still the same old me.” Sophie slid her left index finger into the opening and felt a slight pressure as the automatic sampler took a drop of blood for analysis. “It hardly hurts at all.”

“I’ll kiss it better for you any time.” Charlie grinned with an exaggerated leer. Sophie was certainly one of the prettiest of the senior team, and she laughed good naturedly at the standing joke. The desk computer flashed a green light, a buzzer sounded and the security doors popped open. Sophie walked through with a sensual gait and blew a kiss over her shoulder at the guard.

“Never trust a machine,” she thought to herself as she strode up the corridor, nodding to passing acquaintances and friends. “The Federation may know how to make splendid computers and machines, but they’ll be really upset if they find out how we fool their DNA fingerprinting.” Her stride acquired a bit more bounce as her mood lightened. She looked forward to the rest of the day, a last chance to gather a bit more useful information for her bosses back in the Empire.

Sophie was, as usual, the last to leave her floor of the building. Occasionally some of the staff working for her wondered why she took such pride in the plants in the offices and devoted so much time to looking after them. If they had realized how important the bushes were to her other activities, Sophie’s colleagues would have been stunned, not to say outraged. Striking to look at, pleasant to smell and filling the office with an off-Earth feeling, the office décor did more intelligence gathering than any of Sophie’s rare raids into the Chairman’s files.

Sophie had introduced the shrubs into the offices gradually, starting with a small one perched on her desk. “It was a present from my brother,” she would explain to anyone who showed an interest in the chirruping pot plant. Within a few months every office on the floor had one of the ‘whispering plants’, and since only Sophie seemed to have the knack of ensuring a healthy growth, she soon took over the feeding and watering of all of them.

The 'plants' were imported from Quphieth, and were a truly alien creature. Of course, in this case 'plant' and 'animal' were not exact terms, and the creature was one of the carnivorous species of that planet. It was sessile, and used colour, odour and sound to attract its prey. At the same time it could photosynthesise and so was able to last without prey for very long periods. It had needed only a minor amount of genetic tinkering to produce a perfect spy plant.

On its home planet, the whispering shrub could imitate the calls of local mobiles, bird-like and mammal-like creatures. The forests and fields of the planet were full of sounds and bright colours, fanciful imitations mixing with the call of the birds. The human visitors found a fascination in a pot plant which could mimic conversations in a way no Earth-born parrot could ever do. Sophie wondered who the clever Empire operative was who had spotted the espionage potential of the creatures.

As she moved from office to office, using a pass key provided by her section head, she looked for a last time at her valued allies. Each stood in a separate pot, some barely 20 centimetres tall, but a giant two-metre bush was set at the end of the main conference room. Each alien had the same form: a thick, fairly short trunk, with a fringe of bright blue plumes sticking out horizontally for a distance about half the height of the trunk, then a mass of astonishing red fronds at least twice the length of the trunk topped the whole thing off.

At the base of the fronds was a feeding orifice, and in some circumstances a small animal could get trapped in the crown of the plant and dragged down into it. Alternatively insects could be 'swallowed' when a frond simply folded along its length, forming a tight tube. All along the length of the trunk were small openings, which could produce the range of sounds which gave the creature its name. The great attraction for the office staff was the quiet background of alien creature calls that the plant continued to produce once it had been brought to Earth.

At each plant, Sophie paused and thumbed on a small recording device, before introducing some of the special food delivered to the apartment that morning. At the touch of the tailored molecules, the chirruping of the whispering plant changed tone. Instead of the background calls of far away Quphieth, the air filled with the muted conversation of the office staff. Sophie would send the recording to her regular contact, a person she had never met and now never would, who would decipher the mix of voices and subjects and sift it for useful information.

Sophie loved her whispering plants, they were undoubtedly the high point of her mission on Earth. Every arrival into the building was scanned for recorders, recording media were rigorously monitored and every important meeting was screened for listening bugs. Nobody had even conceived of removing the shrubbery from secret sessions, or that the normal office memo recorders could be turned to other purposes when no one was present. It was easy to smuggle additional recording media into and out of the building, just so long as no recording device was carried with them. Sophie and her allies had almost complete records of every conversation and meeting which had been held in her floor of the complex over the last three years. It seemed a shame to have to say goodbye to all of them.

"Goodnight, Miss Redbridge." Charlie called after her as she left the building, "You should see a doctor about that cold you know." Several others in the office had shown similar concern about Sophie's sneezing throughout the day. Although the common Earth cold had long been cured, allergies and visiting bugs from the colonies kept up a constant flow of new minor diseases with the symptoms of sneezing and running nose. It was a serious business to get checked and cleared.

"I'll do that." She sniffed as she walked through the doors into the cool night air. Sophie knew she had nothing to worry about with the infection. She already knew what it was, since she had breathed it in that morning when she broke the ampoule. The illness was just one of a number of covering steps which should ensure her easy removal from the Federation. She had no illusions about her own individual importance, but there was a lot of information about Empire techniques stored in her head. She had every intention of keeping them just exactly where they were.

The bugs invading her system produced a wide range of common disease symptoms, but did nothing to muddy her thoughts. Looking for all the world like a severe 'flu victim, Sophie returned to her apartment and sent out a coded call for a medical team. They would arrive within the hour and she had a set of final preparations to make before she left.

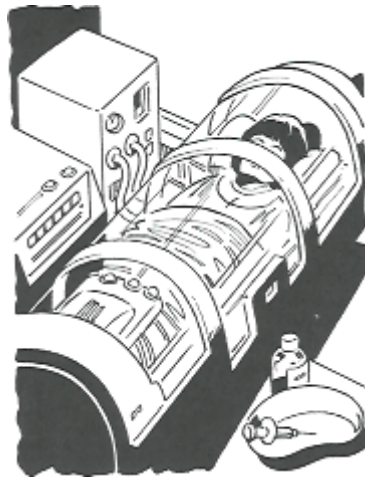
Her first stop was the bathroom, where she emptied one of her perfumes into the waste disposal. It was a shame to get rid of the stuff, but it was too incriminating to carry around. She had used the pheromone enhancer very sparingly during her five year stint, just enough to attract a few very important gentlemen who had benefited her career enormously. There was no need for blackmail or anything equally sordid. Once trapped by a few drops of her 'scent' in a drink, they were genuinely eager to help her in any and every way they could think of.

"And that young gentleman had looked so promising," she mused as the fluid drained out of the sink. "I must send a message to the boy. I won't be able to make the date tonight." The last few drops of liquid swirled out of the sink, she rinsed the bottle and half filled it with a conventional perfume. She would have to synthesize some more pheromone for her next mission.

A half hour later the door chimed and she admitted the medical team. The doctor gave her a quick scan while the orderly and a nurse stood by. Union rules insisted on a minimum call out team of three, and the Empire were about to put this to good use. After his brief inspection, the doctor turned to Sophie's computer terminal and notified the apartment of three days bed rest and a series of medications to take care of the diagnosed condition. There was a flurry of activity as the patient was ushered into bed and the first of the drugs was administered.

All apartment computers continuously monitored the activity within the rooms. Computer records were admissible as evidence in Federation courts, but abuse of such recordings by non-government officials was a serious crime. In this case, the switch between Sophie and the nurse was made in full view of the computer, but its relative coarse senses could not tell the difference between the two.

In fact, it would have taken a very skilled observer to notice the subtle differences between the two women. One was slightly stockier, one had artificial hair roots, otherwise they looked identical. This was not surprising, since as soon as the nurse had turned up in the slave pens five years ago, Sophie's appearance had been surgically altered the tiny bit necessary to make the match identical. Only a genetic fingerprint could tell the two apart, and the genetic record for Sophie, stored at the Ministry where she worked, was that of the girl now lying in her bed.



The final operation performed on Sophie before her introduction to Earth had been to replace the tip of her left index finger with a duplicate derived from one of the slave's toes (and the amputation of one of her toes at the same time, so that both girls retained the same distinguishing features). It was one of the triumphs of Imperial biological engineers that they could keep alive an artificial element, without it being rejected by the host at all. The Federation prided itself on electronic and mechanical miniaturisation, but they were far behind the Empire in biological skills. Sophie had almost laughed aloud each time the security check was run. Genetic fingerprinting ensured that no-one could infiltrate the security system. Well, that was fine so long as nobody had two sets of fingerprints!

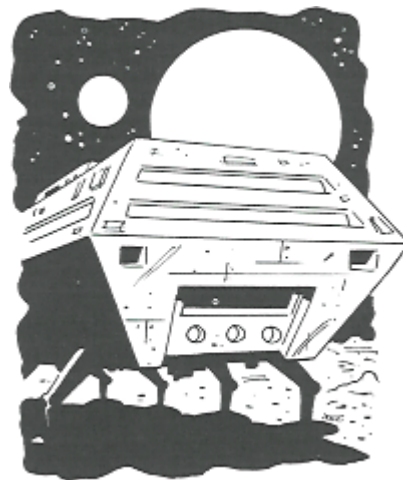
Sophie's duplicate had been kept suspended in a drug-induced coma for five years, her memories periodically updated by censored versions of Sophie's activities. When the girl on the bed recovered from her present mild disease, she would resume 'her' job at the Ministry apparently without a break. Sophie wondered how good a job she would do – at least her time as an Empire slave was finished. It seemed like a lot of effort to

go to protect one minor intelligence operative, but the techniques had been perfected over many decades and now nearly every agent had at least one cover duplicate in 'warm storage'.

The next few days were spent finalising her disappearance from Earth. The first thing Sophie did was to put a message out on the bulletin board, just one of the many 'passenger requests'. Her conversation with the doctor had been enough to convince her that the Feds were a lot closer than she had thought and her original idea of leaving by commercial liner looked less promising. As a trained spy, Sophie knew how sophisticated the Federation computers could be, and how thorough their searches would be if the alarm was raised. Although Sophie was quite certain that her DNA record was completely watertight, there was always a small measure of doubt. Her motto had always been 'why take risks?', and she was determined to keep it. The fewer times her DNA was taken into Earth central records, the fewer opportunities there would be for something to go wrong – all scheduled commercial flights were recorded automatically for insurance purposes.

The DNA records of all travellers were kept for seventy-five years or more in central records, but access to them was carefully controlled. However, a full-blooded search for an Empire agent would be enough to get access to the information. Some of the Federation's main computers were intelligent enough to make leaps of apparent intuition and might make the link between her new identity and the old one, even though she had taken all sensible precautions at the time. Better safe than sorry – if she could find a suitable trader, she might be able to avoid registering for a full DNA check, using a small shipboard unit instead of the normal commercial one used for liner flight registration.

While her hair returned to its natural colour and shape, she sent messages to two contacts. These were a pair of young models, near enough her shape and size to confuse, but with no links to the Empire whatever. They had been contacted through an agency and thought they were on their separate ways to casting interviews on nearby planets. Few actresses ever travelled off-planet for a casting, at least while they were relative 'unknowns', but since their fares and some small expenses were paid, the girls were unlikely to object. In fact the only thing which would really annoy them would be any delay in getting to their destinations. Woe betide any police who tried to keep them for any time at all!



In another day, Sophie had received three offers of transport to Facece, second system of the Empire and home to most of its intelligence agencies. She picked one at random, selecting a battered old tramp freighter which advertised a fairly luxurious modified passenger facility. Two days later and Sophie left Earth aboard the Never Too Late. She had walked aboard carrying her hand luggage and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the antiquated authorisation equipment for passenger registration.

Passenger transport aboard freighters varies greatly from ship to ship, from squalid little cages with barely adequate air conditioning to sumptuous sealed units with all imaginable facilities and comforts. There was almost never a direct connection to the rest of the ship. The Never Too Late was different, though; the passengers were able to visit the cargo holds and even communicate with the flight deck. Sophie had checked that she was the only passenger for the trip to Facece, and she managed to strike up a cordial friendship with the Captain of the vessel within a few hours, even without her phial of pheromone enhancer.

Sophie spent the next few days fretting, splitting her time between the luxurious confines of her 'cabin' and the communication centre of the ship. Sophie was surprised at how vulnerable she felt as the freighter made

its way out of the Sol system. She was acutely aware that any military vessel could swiftly overhaul them, and her arrest was an easy matter for any armed ship. She was in no doubt that the Captain would hand her over if it was demanded. One look at the ship's equipment had shown her that he was not able to run or fight against any serious opposition.

If the Captain was concerned with his passenger's interest in the news media he did not show it, and he left Sophie alone to monitor the channels as she saw fit. Gradually her anxiety passed, as they moved further from Earth towards the jump point. There seemed to be no panic on Earth, no 'Empire spy' calamities were reported and her extraction from the Federation Government had not been noticed. As they approached jump point, Sophie retreated to her cabin and took her dose of quittoline and breathed a prayer to the god which looks after all jump travellers. As the internal klaxon announced entry into hyper space, Sophie gave thanks to her slave. She wondered for the first time whether the girl would enjoy working for the Federation as much as she enjoyed plotting against it. She leaned back, preparing for the no-time of hyperspace, and as she left the confines of the Earth system she reflected that it was always a pleasure when a plan works well.

All that glisters...

David Massey

THE ATMOSPHERE inside the bar was so thick it could be sliced with a laser. A fog of smoke and bad breath hung in the air like a cloud, and the thumping strains of the ancient jukebox assaulted the ears of anyone still sober enough to listen. The oft repeated sequences of one of Roving Eye's early works rang around the room, filling the ears with deadening sound from before the space age.

The barman wondered why the music was still so popular. It was several centuries old and yet it was revived at regular fifty-year intervals – so much for the vagaries of fashion. As the barman moved methodically down the line of glasses, filling or polishing as required, the garish lights gleamed off his polished chrome features. Jaques was not old enough to remember the original band, though several of the regulars assumed that he was. He had been born some three hundred years before, and had been a cyborg for over two hundred and seventy of those years. Sometimes he wondered if there was anything human left at all.

Jaques's metal hands moved at an unhurried pace, cleaning, pouring and receiving money. It was a quiet hour, the second shift of the day was on, and the first shift had finished their initial thirst-quenching round and gone home. The shipyards were in full swing and the only clients were long term drunks, druggies or other spaceport debris. His glowing eyes easily penetrated the smog of different drugs in the bar, and his ears was on low volume so that the music was no distraction. Jaques was not keen on having drugs in his bar, except the liquid variety, but while tobacco and all other narcotics were still legal on Topaz, they would be sold in all of the bars on Peters Base.

Jaques was no longer quite human, but he was happy, whenever he remembered to switch on his emotions, to make the most of all of humanity's frailties.

The door to the bar swung open to admit a draught of fresh air. It spilled into the bar, creating a patch of emptiness in the fog of smoke. It seemed to wander around for a short while, apparently dazed at coming off the spaceport and into the humid room. It wafted about the bar for a few short minutes then gave up the unequal struggle and disappeared into the general smog. A man had entered with the air and he walked with a hunched stride to the quietest part of the bar, signalling for a drink.

"What'll it be Duke?" asked Jaques, as his hands reached to pour a bottle of Grainer's best.



"Grainer's," grunted the man at the bar as Jaques passed the foaming glass into his hand. With a start of surprise, the man glanced up into the face of the cyborg.

"How did you do that? I only just ordered."

“Weren’t you in here about ten months back or so?” asked Jaques, even as his memory circuits reminded him that it was ten months, seven days and four hours since he had last seen this man, and thirteen months, four days and six hours since he had first walked into the bar on Peters Base.

“Yeah, something like that, but how come you can remember?”

Jaques could feel a long conversation coming and so with a quick internal adjustment he turned down the jukebox. “It’s not something I can easily avoid!” Cyborg features are not able to contort, but the man could sense a cynicism behind the words even without the wry smile which should have accompanied them.

“What model are you?”

“That’s not considered a polite question amongst us cyborgs, you know. It’s like asking for your genetic fingerprint or your tax record.”

The man at the bar recoiled as if he had been stung. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. No offence intended.”

“That’s alright. In fact I’m so many different parts it’s hard to tell quite who or what I am.” He held up one hand and gazed at it thoughtfully while rotating it in the orange lights of the bar. “I think this bit’s original –” he paused for effect. “It’s a Quinentis fourteen.”

When the man did not respond, Jaques felt a quick flash of anger – how quickly normal human flesh forgets.

“The Quinentis fourteens fought at Hell’s Gate for the Federation. I was drafted into them.”

“Hell’s Gate? But that was centuries ago. Surely you’re not.”

“Oh, but I am,” interrupted Jaques. “Or at least the oldest bits and pieces are. The human part of me was. I’m not so sure now.”

“So how come you’re here, in the Empire? I wouldn’t have thought they’d like a veteran of Hell’s Gate running around on Topaz.” As soon as the words were spoken the man realised what he had done. Giving permission to a barman to tell his life story was a sure way towards a day spent drinking steadily, but what the heck, he had nothing better to do all day and he’d been intending to drown his sorrows anyway.

“It was a long time ago, you’ve got to remember that,” began Jaques. “The Federation and Empire were almost always at each others throats in those days, nowhere near as quiet as it is now.”



The man at the bar gave a small grunt. He’d run into enough disputed zone incidents to realise that neither Federation nor Empire were quite as content as their propaganda stations made out. Jaques ignored the minor interruption and continued.

“In those days if you were unemployed and a Federal citizen you had to work hard to avoid the draft. I failed. My three years on the dole came to an end and the army seized me. I failed the initial medical so they changed me into a cyborg! Mind you, in those times the Empire were genealtering their soldiers, so I guess I got the better of the offers.

“Those were interesting times. Most of the local planets had been reached, but they were nowhere near as tame as they are these days. We often found ourselves pitted against the worlds as much as the Empire troops. Truth to tell, we rather admired each other. I had a couple of run-ins against the manipulates on a number of different worlds, and they were mean guys, I can tell you.

“I was always loyal to the Federation you understand. My circuits don’t let me even think anything else. I gather the Empire had similar means to make sure that the manipulates stayed loyal. But after the battle of Hell’s Gate my section ended up behind enemy lines and were captured when our transport ship failed to rendezvous.

“Like all the other prisoners, I was protected under the Valhalla treaty, but after Hell’s Gate we were all pretty mashed up. The Empire engineers had a field day taking me to bits, and their surgeons did their part in putting me back together. It was fourteen months before I was back in one piece, and even then large chunks were pure replacement.” Jaques pointedly raised his left arm and drew back the sleeve to reveal a bright blue metallic insert, obviously different to the smooth silver metal of the hand and the wrist. “Even now it gives me a twinge when it rains.” Jaques had no trouble keeping a straight face as he uttered the words. It normally took a listener about a day to realise that there was never any rain in the orbital station.

“I was due to be part of a standard POW exchange, but when the generals realised that I’d had Empire surgeons tinkering around inside me, they didn’t want to know. The Federation were only just beginning to realise how far ahead the Empire was in genetic research and they were deathly afraid of letting in a latent plague. It had happened on one or two worlds before, so all returnees were put through quarantine. They reckoned I would need about twenty years before I was safe. Maybe they were right, I couldn’t tell you, I just decided to stay in the Empire.

“It took a bit of bartering, I can tell you. The Federation still regarded me as their property, I was quite a high-tech device for the time. By this time Guvenour’s peace had been negotiated and so technicians from the Federation could come and de-activate one or two nasty bits and pieces still inside me. All that remained was to figure out a price to let me go.”

The man at the bar gave a bit of a start. “But you were a Federation citizen weren’t you? There’s no slavery in the Federation, so how could they sell you to the Empire?”

“Oh, they weren’t trying to sell me to the Empire! They wanted to sell me back to me. Remember, I was one of the earliest successful cyborgs and they wanted to keep me in their pocket – official secrets and all that. But after Hell’s Gate and the reconstruction work, it was hard to tell how much of me was left. Different experts and lawyers claimed that between about a pint or up to a quarter of my body was original organic, the rest was Federation or Empire tinkering. They made me pay for all the modifications!”

There was a sense of bitterness in the cyborg’s delivery, and the man at the bar wondered what the cyborg had gone through at the time to make the memory so sour after all this time. He reached for his glass and noticed he had emptied it again. With a resigned gesture he asked for another. Jaques slid off to get a re-fill.

“So how did you end up here?” the man called after him.

“It turned out the Federation boys were pretty nearly right about the Empire doctoring.” Jaques rotated his head through an impossible angle to answer while he continued pouring the beer. The man blinked and remembered that he had no idea how the cyborg was put together.

“Two years after leaving the POW camp, after the money side was settled, I needed some more genetic manipulation to fix a nasty disease. When I got treatment, the Empire stung me for medical bills. It took me over a hundred years to work off the contracts to both Federation and Empire, piloting ships, cleaning reactors. Hazardous jobs which no whole human could deal with and no pure robot or android could handle either. Those days are gone now, thank goodness, not that I’m in any condition to do that sort of work any more.”

The man at the bar raised an enquiring eyebrow. “What do you mean?” Obviously the line had been a come-on, but the bar-man’s story was interesting and his own misfortunes seemed to be fading into obscurity as he listened.

It was while I was asteroid mining on loan to an Empire Corporation – Gutamaya, I think it was.” Jaques knew his memory bank was ready to fill him in on all the details, times, dates, hours worked and company personnel, but he had found that human audiences preferred vagueness to detail in matters like these.

“I had nearly worked out my debt and was ready to go freelance. This one last job would finish the lot. I was mining a small planetoid. One advantage of being a cyborg is that your life-support is much smaller than a normal person’s so it’s cheaper to set up a small mine – I’m a lot smarter than your normal robot mine equipment as well, I can tell you.

“It turned out that the planet had a load of volatiles tied up in the surface rocks, covering large radioactive deposits. My mining lasers triggered a rock explosion and I was covered with radioactives as well. I set off my emergency beacon, but by the time the Corporation found me the damage was done. I lost both my legs in that little escapade.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that would be any problem to a cyborg. Couldn’t you just buy another set and replace the ones you lost?”

“That’s what I thought straight away, I’d made sure that I had plenty of insurance in case of just that sort of thing. Unfortunately, it wasn’t just my legs which had gone. Some of my brain was wiped out at the same time, so even if I had a new set of legs built, I can’t use them any more.”

The door of the bar opened to admit another early morning drinker who strode to the far end of the bar and signalled for a drink. Jaques moved off smoothly to serve him and the man took the opportunity to look over the bar. Jaques stood on top of a smooth metal cylinder which ended where his waist would have been and a narrow track passed underneath the pedestal. The track ran the whole length of the bar. The man sat back and looked around and, sure enough, buried into the floor of the room was a similar track so that the cyborg could reach each of the tables to tidy up. The man glanced down at the bar and smiled as he noticed that even while he was talking, Jaques had kept polishing the glasses – a small pile of spotless glassware stood to one side.

A glass of beer slid into place in front of the man. He turned to see Jaques throwing the empty bottle into a recycling bucket and starting his smooth glide back.

“When you’ve been here as long as I have, you get to be quite accurate,” the cyborg explained.

“But how come you ended up here? Serving behind a bar in an orbital station around Facece?”

“Best damn mechanics in the Empire!” Jaques unconsciously raised the volume on the jukebox as it started to play a Jjagged Bbanner number. He had a signed vidicube from the band from their early days and still liked the music. The lighting strobed violently to the sounds, casting weird shadows around the room as he turned back to complete his tale.

“I was tired of spaceflight and mining. The medical insurance was pretty much enough to pay the remainder of my bills and I wanted a place to settle down. I chose to come here because in those days Topaz was the only Empire world to have any decent technicians at all, and I didn’t want to deal with the Federation. They were just building the first orbital station at the time and I asked to be included in the starport plans.

“The Federation and Empire were at peace then, and it amused some planner to include a war veteran of a century before in the starport design. They offered me the job as a barman and I accepted. That was over two centuries ago and I’ve been here ever since.

“But enough of me, it’s your turn for a story. Free drinks while you tell your tale!”

The man gave a long, theatrical sigh and leaned forwards onto the bar.

“You sure you want to hear this? I’m not a happy man at the moment.” Jaques gave a solemn nod, as if recognizing his duty to hear the man out after telling him the story of his life. The man gave another sign and drained his glass, then waited for Jaques to return with a refill before continuing.

“I’m Captain of the Never Too Late,” the man introduced himself. “Andre Capatot. The Never is a junk freighter, Lion class, and she’s been a good ship to me in the past. This last year it’s been really tough though.

“I had been doing pretty well as a standard trader, beginning with a simple grub ship – a Cobra – and working up from there. Seven years ago I got hold of the Never and I paid off the final instalment in about three years. Since then I thought I’d try and go a bit up-market, install a few extra features in the ship and take some more valuable cargoes. First thing I did was install a passenger suite, then I pressurised the hold so I could take a wider range of cargoes.

“The passenger side seemed to be working quite well. It can pay off quite adequately as long as you try to keep legitimate, but you can’t always tell. I think I got badly stung with one of my first passengers, a slip of a girl from Earth who wanted to get to the Empire. I made the journey in reasonable time but when I got back into Federation space, they went over my ship with a fine-toothed comb. I never did find out what they were after but it lost me a lot of time, and time is credits in my game.

“Anyway, I’ve never been happy with the Federation since then so I’ve been working between Empire worlds. You know, I was based at Quince for a while, Running around between Emerald in the Hoarla system, New America and Jeffries High in Quince, stopovers at Chekov on Chester’s Legacy in Ethveeth, occasional trips to the miners in Canayze system or the new colonies in Arexack system. I ran into a guy in Dickens Base at Vequess who talked me into taking a hunter out towards Home in Bedaho system, do you know it?”

Jaques gave a brief shake to his head. Naturally he had access to data banks with all the information known about every planet and system of human space, but he didn’t want to spoil the yarn because of his electronic enhancements. Over the decades he had got quite used to listening without unwanted intrusion.

“It’s quite a trip from Vequess to Bedaho, a long way for a clapped out freighter like mine, at least.”

Jaques’ link spurted the unwanted figures: Bedaho 36.62 light years from Vequess: ‘K’ type: 1 habitable planet... He tuned out the rest of the information as it poured into his brain, concentrating instead on what Andre was saying.

“I picked up my hunter here on Topaz, last time I was here. Then Anyeth, Cemiess, cd46-1150, Arcturus, Altair, Quzece, Bedaho and back.” The litany of star systems was a familiar traders’ shorthand for months of travel and interim dealings. “No jump over 16 light years to be on the safe side. No trouble getting to Bedaho, a quiet stay while my fare enjoyed his hunting at one of the planet lodges, and I carried on with a bit of speculation on the stock markets. Getting the animals aboard was no problem either. Major Griddley – that’s the hunter – had cleared all the documents just clean as a whistle. But gods, have you ever had to fly transporter with a hold full of live cargo? The stink is terrible. No amount of atmosphere cleansing gets rid of the smell completely. Have you ever had a big game hunter as a passenger? There’s only so many times I can hear a hunt described. I thought I’d plant one on him at any number of times on the way back.

“And what happens then? Just out of the jump between Cemiess and Anyeth?” Andre paused for effect. Jaques could guess what was coming, but let the man tell it his own way.

“We get jumped by poxy pirates is what!”

To emphasise the point the man downed his glass of beer at a single swallow, thumping the empty glass down on the surface with drunken force. Jaques gauged how drunk the spacefarer was getting, but decided that he’d be no trouble and needed to get some frustration out of his system. The cyborg reached out and poured another Grainer’s, this time his head stayed pointing at Andre, but the rest of the body swivelled round. Most customers found this feat of mechanical dexterity off-putting, but Andre was too involved in his own story.

“They moved in star formation, classic pirate manoeuvre. What chance did I have? Just when I thought the trip was showing a clear profit.” His fist thudded onto the bar to emphasise the point, causing the glass to jump and beer to foam onto the counter.

"I've only run into serious pirate opposition six times in my whole career. Three times I was able to shoot it out with them. You know, once a single twit in a poxy little Cobra III tried to rip me off! Ha! Did he get a shock!

"But this was different, one look at this lot and I knew that my time was up. I recognised the lead ship as Darling Hanson's – you know he's got that distinctive commcode. I had heard a lot about Hanson's gang – you know how bar-room gossip is. 'No surrender Hanson'. He's getting quite a reputation."

"I hear there's a reward out for the man, bounty hunters everywhere looking out for a hot tip," Jaques broke in with a quiet comment, interrupting the flow. When he had the trader's attention, the cyborg nodded at a woman in a back corner of the bar.

"Bounty hunters might be willing to pay a bit for a decent lead on Hanson or any of his crew." Jaques laid a restraining hand on Andre's arm as the man made to move away from the bar.

"Don't worry about that now, carry on with your story. She's a regular and won't go for a while yet."

"Well, OK. Where was I?"

"About to tell me how you managed to get away from Hanson. He's not noted for letting traders slip from his grasp."

A grin split the trader's face and he seemed to cheer up at the memory.

"No, he's not renowned for his friendly disposition is he?" A snort of laughter escaped Andre's lips. "I doubt if he's any happier with his latest haul than I am at losing it."

"It was obvious that the pirates wouldn't let us go without plundering us, and my ship was no match for any of theirs. We couldn't out-shoot or out-run them all, and surrender wasn't in the cards with that horror leading them. But what could I do?" The question was so obviously rhetorical that Jaques let it pass with a quick shake of his head.

"I've dumped cargo three times in my career – that's one reason it took me so long to get from my Cobra to The Never Too Late. It always distracts the hunters, as long as the cargo looks worthwhile."

"But I thought you were carrying livestock last trip? Don't tell me that any pirate thought that dead meat would be worth more than your ship?" Jaques was puzzled again and let it show in the tone of his voice.

"Ah. But you forget – We'd just come from Home, in Bedaho. It's where the goldskins come from." He gave Jaques a second to take that information in.

"You mean that you –"

"Yup, we shaved the fur off the animals and fed a still picture from the hold across to Hanson. He saw a hold full of gold! Now, a load of animal meat might not be worth a lot, particularly if it's spaced into vacuum, but an equivalent volume of gold would be worth stopping for."

"We claimed that we were couriers for the Fourth Catholic Province of Exioce, just out from O'Rourke Colony. It seems a bit thin now, but it was the best that the Major and I could come up with at short notice. As soon as the message was received we blew the cargo bays and dumped the lot into space then ran in another direction."

"I take it you got away unscathed?"

"I wouldn't say unscathed. We still had a quick duel with one of the pirates, but the Major turned out to be just as good with a Phlaschbugher as with a hunting rifle. At the time he was as happy as I was to escape with his skin in one piece, but neither of us was very happy when we landed, and we didn't part on very good terms. But I'd loved to have seen the look on Hanson's face when he recovered the first of his gold statues!"

Jaques kicked in his emotion circuits and let himself chuckle at the other's amusement.

“So that’s why you’re here on Topaz?”

“That’s right. Like you said, bet damn technicians in the Empire. It was true two hundred years ago and it’s still true now. I’m upgrading the Never Too Late to longer jumps, it’s the only way to get ahead in this business and I know I get a good deal here. What keeps you in this bar though? Couldn’t you find something better to do, even if you want to stay on Topaz?” Andre felt he’d been talking enough. Let the barman have another chance.

“But I don’t want to stay on Topaz, I just want the facilities of the orbital.” Jaques had a strange look about him which puzzled the man. There seemed to be some crumb of information he was keeping back, something of a private joke.

“You see,” the cyborg continued, “I’ve been here for over two hundred years, I’ve long paid off all my bills and I’ve just come to like the place. So much so that I half own it now.”

“You mean you half own this bar?” Andre was confused. He’d assumed that the cyborg probably owned the whole place. It certainly seemed prosperous enough.

“No, I mean I own half the station.” The cyborg gave Andre a chance to absorb the information.

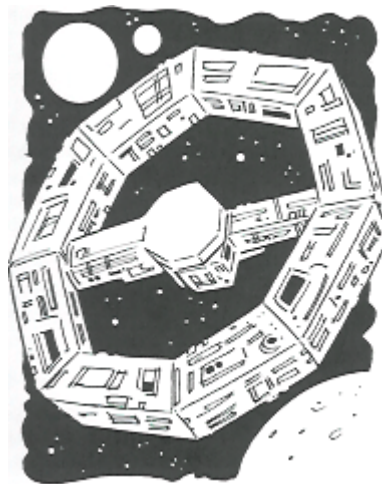
“I guess it will take me another fifty years to buy up the rest of this place and another ten to fit it out with enough drive engines.” Andre’s choking splutter distracted the cyborg for a moment. He wiped the beer from his jacket and the bar as he continued: “I’ve got a hankering to see the universe again, you see. I think I’ll do what Augustus Brenquith did and fly off into the unknown and explore new systems. But I like people as well, so in sixty or so years time there will be an invitation going out: anyone who wants to come along can join me on a long trip. If you’re still around and interested, come and sign up. I never forget a face.”

Andre stood stunned in silence for a moment, his own woes and story forgotten. This was an adventure in the making! Sixty years wasn’t too long to wait, and modern treatments meant that he could easily last another hundred or more years. He could even take a cyborg treatment. One thing still puzzled him though.

“If you’re so keen on seeing space again, and you own half an orbit station, why don’t you just sell up and buy a fancy ship and head off now?”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that!” exclaimed Jaques. “I’ve got too much invested in this place. I need its facilities for repairs and I’m very comfortable here.” He glanced down at his cylindrical base, slotted into the floor track.

“You might even say I’ve become attached to the place.”



The fiercest creature on Altair

David Massey

THE RAIN THUNDERED DOWN in deafening sheets, bouncing off the tree tops and percolating through the thickly matted vegetation onto the land below. As the small party hacked and cut its way through the dense jungle growth, they cursed the weather and the continual damp. Their clothes and equipment were soaked through, not from the violence of the storm above, but from their own sweat and the heavy mist which rose from the thick earth beneath their feet.

Except for Grossman, each one felt heavy and cumbersome, ill adjusted to the high gravity of Biggs Colony. The chirruping squeals of native birds and insects filled the air, competing with the drumming rain and drowning out all hope of conversation amongst the five humans. The woman at the head of the trail finally gave up and raised a hand, hastily dropping it as she brushed a vine frond. She glanced at the offending plant and, having verified that it was not one of the many poisonous varieties, she raised her arm again to signal a rest.

The others in the group carefully inspected the ground around them and settled to the floor wherever they felt safe. All except Helmut, who simply dropped to the ground and lay there, panting.

“You! Boy! Get up and pitch a tent! Don’t dawdle!” Colonel Griddley barked at the young man, who sullenly rose from the dirt, unshouldered an enormous backpack and started slashing at the nearby undergrowth with a machete. Griddley allowed himself a grin. The youngster would probably be fine in a few more trips time. At the moment he was resentful, but most new slaves were. In a short while he would come to know the routine and accept it.

The others lounged about, sweating in the damp heat of the jungle, keeping a weary eye out for the insidious creeping vines of the planet. They waited with varying degrees of patience for Helmut to finish the simple shelter, but none moved to help him. They all regarded the menial work as beneath them. They had other things to concentrate on.

Angela Bhramantha was nominally the leader of the group, though she, like all the others, acknowledged the colonel’s greater experience in the field. She was the one paying for this expedition and she felt responsible for the group. She was also the one who could lose the most if they failed to make some good catches. Getting trapping permits from the Reaganville authorities had taken some string-pulling and some unusual favours. She didn’t want all that time and effort to be wasted.

Angela had picked her team as carefully as she could. Helmut came with the Colonel, and although she was not as happy with slavery as Griddley obviously was, all the papers were legal and certified by the appropriate Empire vassals. It was useful to have someone around who obeyed orders and could do all the hard work, even though he did seem very young. She unconsciously swatted at a bug as it brushed against her cheek and just caught herself in time. There were a lot of dangerous flying, creeping and crawling beasts – even plants – on this world, but often they posed no threat while they were alive. The venom of nearly every insect was poisonous, but most stung only when they were attacked. The normal Earth-born reaction to brush away an insect was exactly the wrong thing to do on Biggs Colony.

She glanced across at Benjamin Grossman, the only local in the party, and hired as a guide. He seemed calm and collected in the jungle, barely sweating and simply leaving the bugs to crawl all over his face and clothes. They rarely bit humans. Something in the sweat told them that the off-world flesh and blood was no good to them. Although there was a great deal of things on this world which were dangerous to humanity, there was nothing more poisonous to the indigenous creatures than a good mouthful of Earth-stock protein.

She knew that Benjamin was actually a common or garden farmer on this world, from one of the enormous plantations, probably. The authorities had advertised on her behalf and she had no option but to accept whoever they assigned to her. Luckily he had turned out to be a competent guide and ushered them through the jungle with reliable ease. Once or twice they would probably have fallen foul of the native vegetation if it hadn’t been for Benjamin’s timely advice. He was also a reasonable tracker, though not up to the Colonel’s standard. Already they had bagged three igaunalads and a Finlay beast now safely returned to the marshalling compound ready for shipment to Tau Ceti where a wealthy client was waiting.

Grossman looked up at her from his slumped position against a gnarled tree and smiled a knowing smile. Sometimes he made her a little uneasy, but she couldn't tell why. With his gaze on her, Angela had to turn away. She saw the Colonel leaning forward to light his pipe with a sparker and almost laughed out loud. The Colonel was a fabulous anachronism. Every inch of his frame exuded a military finesse from a bygone day. He even sported ridiculous beige garments cut in incredibly ancient mode. The pipe fitted the image to perfection.

He had been a lucky catch. She had advertised for a senior hunter and he had, according to her sources, called off a hunt on a close-by world to have a crack at the natives of Altair. She knew that he lived for hunting, and that obtaining licenses for Altair was a rare privilege indeed, but she was flattered that Maxwell Griddley had decided to come along. She had not expected the slave, nor Griddley's gun boy, but they had simply finished off the party, and three was almost as cheap to feed and house as two.

The fifth member of the group was Griddley's gun boy, Walter M'banwe, entrusted to looking after the weapons and vid gear of the hunters. M'banwe had three diplomas from the technical universities in the Federation so he was well qualified to care for the sophisticated equipment which provided the back-up to this venture. She had been unsure of having the cameras along on the trip, but the Colonel had assured her that the vid rights to the expedition would probably earn more than the catch. It had taken a couple of days, but now she hardly noticed the unobtrusive vid spheres floating along with them to the sides and rear. Certainly there was no way the quiet humming of their motors would disturb the prey, not with all the hubbub generated by the jungle and the continual rain.

"What do you think Colonel?" She shouted over the thunderous rain. "Is there any point in pressing on today, or should this be a real camp? How about you Benjaminn?"

Grossman pointed to his ear to indicate that he hadn't heard and Angela shouted the message again. Benjaminn shrugged his indifference but Griddley took his pipe from his mouth and shook his head in denial.

"No, there's still two hours of good light left. We'll rest for a half hour then press on. This looks like a good trail we're following, I don't want to lose it in the dark."

"Bloody fool should have brought night-vision goggles," muttered M'banwe, while arranging his remote pick ups to give the best coverage of this impromptu camp. You could never tell when some unlikely incident would appear and make good vid fodder, and he was too experienced to let an opportunity slip by.

"Hey, boy!" Griddley's commanding tones rang out again. "Try and collect some fresh water. And don't forget the cleansing tablets this time." He nodded to himself in satisfaction as the young lad found the plastic sacks with a minimum of fuss and hooked them up correctly in the low branches. The lad was a quick learner and responded well to rewards, he'd make a good hunter.

"Better take your salt tablets, everyone," he called out, and took one himself to illustrate the point. The heat and humidity of the jungle could sap a person's strength, but worse was losing the vital minerals and salts through sweating. Native life was low in several important minerals for humans, and all the locals regularly took supplements to keep healthy. Going into the deep jungle meant keeping well supplied with anything the local fauna could not provide.

Griddley was enjoying himself hugely. He stroked his greying beard thoughtfully as he contemplated the rest of the day's hunt. He had been discussing things with Benjaminn and was pretty sure that they would track down the beffix that evening. With the other animals caught, there only remained one or two of the birds to bag then their quota was full. Although he would work at a variety of occupations, he was most comfortable with the big game hunter persona. The persona of Maxwell Griddley had served him well over the years. His military rank, entirely spurious, had increased over the years, to match his age. He now called himself a colonel and carried himself with the appropriate commanding air. No-one seemed to question his credentials and it got him access to some lovely jobs and an interesting set of contacts.

Not that he didn't take his hunting seriously, and he was very good at it as well. When he added it up, about half his time was spent trading in animals of one sort or another. It was profitable and mostly legal. Certainly this trip was entirely above board. Angela had already sorted out a buyer for the animals before they had arrived at Biggs Colony; a wealthy banker who sponsored a zoo on Tau Ceti. Maxwell was pretty certain that Benjaminn was a stooge for the local government, making sure that all the animals tracked were caught live.

It seemed strange to Griddley that trade in live animals was legal here, but export of skins was not. Maxwell Griddley rarely trusted men appointed by anyone in authority. In fact he rarely trusted authorities at all.

Helmut had finished the simple shelter and everyone huddled into it while the worst of the storm blew itself out. Griddley had developed a simple strategy for trapping with an inexperienced crew; take frequent short rests and never, ever show any impatience. If Angela was tired and needed a rest, then they could all take one. It was cramped inside the simple shelter, but it kept the rain and mist out. At least this break gave him a chance to smoke his pipe in comfort.

Helmut lay across the entrance to the tent. Somewhere along the line a slaver had taught him that a slave's life was the least important in a group like this. The idea brought a frown to the hunter's brow. He would have to improve the boy's self image in the next few years, or he wouldn't be as useful as he could be. At one point the questing tentacle of a local vine tried to probe through into the concentration of warmth in the shelter, but Helmut had seen it and reacted quickly with his machete. Griddley nodded to himself; the boy showed promise.

The rain lasted a further half hour then gradually petered out. The noise level reduced to the normal bedlam associated with the jungle and the group continued on its way. The mist rising from the jungle bed increased in thickness and odour as the normal stifling heat drove the moisture back into the air. A miasma of rotting vegetation and decaying animals filled the air, but the group had their filters in place and could ignore the stench. The Colonel tapped out his pipe on a nearby rock and announced that it was time to move off again.

Angela liked to feel that she was leader of the group and should decide when it was time to move off again, but she knew that it was the Colonel who really decided the path they were to follow. She looked on in bemused admiration as the hunter plodded around, peering into this and that thicket, probing at a vine or two and having muted conversations with Benjamin. A couple of minutes of nosing about and the Colonel had re-affirmed his directions. Giving terse instructions to his slave and to M'banwe, he began hacking onward through the vegetation. To Angela, one direction looked exactly the same as any other, but she was sure that the native and her hunter knew their stuff, so she shrugged and followed on.

It was M'banwe who caught the first glimpse of the itorilleta. He was glancing at one of his many monitors, feeding back low grade pictures from one of the three floating vids. The sight stopped him dead in his tracks. He let out a low grunt in surprise and then a louder cough, trying to attract the others.



"Hey boss!" he called in as quiet a voice as he could manage. "I don't think you should go much further." M'banwe tried to keep his voice calm, but there was a slight stutter which instantly caught the hunter's attention. As he made to come back to the technician, M'banwe made quick gestures to stop him. He slowly and carefully slipped the monitor off his wrist and tossed it to Griddley who caught it deftly without seeming to move.

The careful movement of the two men had affected the rest of the group who all stood stock still. Griddley glanced at the small screen in his hand. He'd already guessed what was there but it was no comfort to see it confirmed on the monitor. The image was grainy and poor quality but there was no mistaking the shape which filled the picture. "Now this is what hunting is all about," he thought to himself.

Biggs Colony has more than its fair share of creatures inimical to mankind, but without doubt the most cunning was the itorilleta. Looking like a cross between a dinosaur, a spider and a scorpion of old Earth and crowned with a waving mass of sensitive tentacles, the twenty-metre tall beast stood across a faint trail. Just off the corner of the monitor screen, Griddley could see fronds of the jungle moving; some smaller animals were making their way along the faint trail, about to fall prey to the patiently waiting creature. Griddley had no doubts about who the intended prey were.

Angela stood stock still; something was worrying the Colonel and had truly put the frights into young M'banwe. Even as she watched, the hunter was motioning to his technician in an intricate series of gestures what he wanted. The young man slowly unbuckled his backpack and let it slide to the floor. Reaching into it, he drew out a machine which Angela first thought was an elaborate shoulder-mounted vid-camera. It was only as M'banwe started to add the barrel section that she thought of it as a gun. She had not even known the Colonel carried such a weapon. She was sure it was not legal on this world. M'banwe reached into the pack a third time, bringing out a further barrel extension or some other device for the gun, to be joined by a fourth and finally a fifth element.

Benjamin Grossman also looked surprised at the appearance of the artillery. He recognised it from his days as a conscript in the planetary expeditionary force. It was an infantry support weapon, more useful in stopping armoured vehicles than in bird hunting. Either the Colonel was over-reacting or they could be in real trouble. There was a quota on hunting native wildlife and one of his jobs was to make sure that the quota was not exceeded, but he had a shrewd idea that this animal was not going to be taken alive.

The Colonel had the weapon now and was hefting it in his arms. He squared his shoulders under the gun and began to set off down the trail at a cautious pace. Helmut had been staring open-mouthed at the construction of the fire-arm, his eyes wide and his whole body tense. He needed no instructions to keep still. The jungle terrified him and he wished he were safely back on board the blue prince's ship, where the only dangers were the slavers' whips and prods.

Only Benjamin was looking in the boy's direction as Helmut's nerve broke. A convulsion ran through the young man's body and he released a wild scream before running off into the tangle of trees around them. Grossman dived towards the young slave's legs, but missed and lay sprawled in the mud. There was a sudden thrashing in the jungle immediately in front of the group and eight legs the size of small trees brought the body of the itorilleta into view. The giant misshapen belly was fully ten metres off the ground, supported on limbs which looked spindly in comparison to the bulk above. The questing head peered myopically down at the jungle floor while the ring of sensory tentacles about its neck and head probed for the commotion.

Angela screamed and M'banwe ran at her, dragging her into the jungle on the opposite side to the slave. A thin tentacle, barely a decimetre in diameter, shot out from under the eye ring of the monster, spearing towards the disappearing boy. There was another scream and terrified shouts as Helmut was lifted from the floor of the jungle high into the air. He swept towards the creature's jaws, carried on to additional limbs which jutted from the body just behind the neck.

A deafening roar filled the air from the centre of the path, as if a swarm of wasps from hell had risen into the sky. The noise temporarily overwhelmed that of the forest as a line of brilliant green pin-points seemed to flow along the length of the creature. Spouts of yellow blood sprayed from each bright spot as the Colonel directed his fire skilfully at the beast.

Roaring its agony, a strange ululation from the animal's twin mouths, the itorilleta turned to try and locate the source of its pain. Helmut was flung from the creature, falling away into the forest as the monster tried to combat the stream of explosive shells which were raining into its body. The creature reared up and with surprising agility span away to run into the jungle. The Colonel stood, buffeted by the recoil of his own gun, keeping the sights trained on the disappearing hindquarters of the animal.

Just as it was about to vanish into the dense jungle, he flicked a second trigger and there was a sharp report. An instant later there was a tremendous concussion as a grenade hammered into the back of the animal – and then it was gone, into the jungle. As Benjamin and the others looked on, the Colonel kept up a constant fire, walking forward to follow the thrashing monster. With deliberate steps the Colonel increased his pace to a jog and advanced onward, a wild gleam in his eyes and a triumphant smile tugging at his lips.

The others picked themselves up from where each had fallen. They could hear the crashing in the trees around them as the wounded animal and its pursuer chased through the jungle. Flights of screeching birds and local insects fled into the air, out of the monster's path. M'banwe was first to recover and sent the two floaters still under his control scooting through the wreckage of trees after the beast. Benjamin offered his arm to Angela and she struggled to her feet, leaning heavily on the guide. The three looked at each other, bewildered and confused expressions flitting across their faces as they tried to take in what had happened. With one accord they set off after the Colonel and his prey.

They found him a quarter of an hour later, standing at the edge of a cleared space where the body of the itorilleta lay twitching in a pool of yellow blood. The jungle was quiet around them, silent except for a mute rattling sound. The noise was coming from the Colonel's gun which continued to try and fire, though its magazine was long emptied. The Colonel stood panting, gazing at the shattered body lying on the jungle floor. A shudder ran down his body, followed by a second and then a third, and he drew a deep breath into his lungs, letting it out as a long, low whistle.

"I don't think we'll be allowed to keep this one Angela," he commented as he turned away from his kill and back to the group. "Has anyone seen Helmut?" he asked.

There were guilty looks exchanged between the rest of the group as they realised that they had completely forgotten the young slave. M'banwe sent his camera floaters off to scour the jungle for signs of the boy. Angela dropped inelegantly to the floor and started applying a disinfectant cream to one of her legs which had been caught by a vine in the pursuit. M'banwe let out an exclamation and pointed to his screens, gesturing to Benjamin. Helmut had been found, curled tightly into a foetal position on the floor of the jungle, hugging his knees to his chest.

"Here, take this." M'banwe thrust a small earpiece into the native's hand as the man started off into the trees.

"I can direct you from here," he explained. Grossman grinned at the technician and slipped the device into his ear, then trotted off into the jungle.

"We'd better move away from here, Angela. The local scavengers will get here soon and it's probably best to be somewhere else in case they start to fight." The Colonel was dismantling his gun and packing it away while M'banwe issued curt directions to Benjamin. She nodded, and the three moved back down the trail of destruction left by the wounded itorilleta. M'banwe kept a continuous stream of talk with Grossman, keeping him informed of their relative positions, so that the native was able to rejoin the group when they returned to the crude shelter Helmut had made only an hour before.

That night the group was unusually quiet. The normal banter and chit-chat about the day's progress was missing from the conversation. Each member of the group was nursing some kind of wound, since in the hurried chase they had all sustained some injury. The Colonel was suffering from a bruised shoulder in particular, but of the five he was certainly the happiest. He sat at the edge of the shelter, peering into the moonless night sky. He sucked on his pipe and listened to the haunting cries of the night creatures.

He was aware of Helmut sliding close to him in the dark and turned to face the boy. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Don't send me away. Please don't send me away. I won't do it again." The pleading tone in the slave's voice grated on the Colonel's nerves, but he understood the cause.

"No, lad. I'll not send you away. You did well to come this far. A bit more seasoning and you'd take on that creature bare-handed!"

Helmut looked at the floor, unconvinced by his master's good humour.

"No, I mean it lad. I paid good money for you and I made sure of you before I parted with the cash. I expected someone to break when you all realised what we had met. At least you ran away, instead of collapsing and gibbering at its feet. Without your distraction I might not have got such a clear shot.

“Anyway, it’s all done now. You are patched up and the beast is dead. Tomorrow we’ll head back to the kill. We should be able to pick up the rest of Angela’s quota if we just wait by the body. I want you to get used to this sort of thing, so you don’t pull a fool stunt like running away again. You can have first shot in the morning.”

Helmut was confused by the Colonel’s words. He had expected to be yelled at, possibly thrown out or sold on, but his master was giving him more responsibility not less. Perhaps this life of adventure and hunting would not be so formidable as it had once seemed. He crawled off to find a comfortable place to sleep, leaving the Colonel with his pipe and the night sky. He was determined to do better next time.

On the wrong side of the law

David Massey

CAPTAIN JUPITER rolled out of his sleep field and landed nimbly on the deck of his stateroom. Something had gone wrong. He could feel the uneven throbbing of the engines through the deck of his ship. He hastily donned a set of shipboard coveralls, cleaned and laundered by the ship while he slept and still smelling slightly of lemons. The mild odour did nothing to improve his humour.

He took the narrow gangway to the flight deck at a run, all the time glancing round and checking for telltale signs of imminent depressurisation. It did not happen often, but this latest flight had been dogged by bad luck. It would really cap it all to have his ship break apart in mid-space. The recovery rates for the Astrogators Association were insufferable and he had let his membership lapse the last time he changed his name.

He checked the monitoring interfaces as he ran. To his experienced eye the series of blinking lights gave a quick indication of the status of the craft. So far none of the passengers had responded to the change in the engines. They probably hadn't noticed any difference. This latest lot did not seem very used to space travel. They had each needed a double dose of quittoline to get them through hyperspace. It was odd how he never suffered from hyperspace syndrome. Maybe he was born lucky.

Captain Jupiter reached the flight deck and un-dogged the door. With the ease of familiarity he slid into the silastoplaston seat then leaned forward to caress the controls.

"What's the problem Iolanthe?" he called out to the ship.

"Something went wrong with the last jump, Cap'n." The ship's voice had a lilting, humorous tone which belied the seriousness of its information. For some perverse reason its emotive circuits were tangled way back at manufacture. The computer always sounded most cheerful delivering bad news and least happy when everything was going OK. Captain Jupiter had been meaning to get it fixed for years but had come to like the ship the way it was and so he was wary of changing things. At the moment the computer sounded positively happy. Things might be very bad indeed.

"So what's our situation, chips-for-brains?" Captain Jupiter adopted a bantering tone to hide his own misgivings. It wouldn't fool the computer, but made him feel better.



"It's like this, wet-and-squishy: Our main hyperdrive coils have exploded and we've dropped out of hyperspace somewhere! The atmosphere system has taken some damage and we're leaking fuel from one of my tanks." The computer sounded positively delirious as it delivered the news.

"Max always said that every cloud has a silver lining, so what's the good news in all this?"

“Well, the galley got damaged as well, so your coffee machine’s a load of scrap. You won’t have to endure that awful drink any more.”

The last comment caused Captain Jupiter to smile. He’d picked up the habit of drinking the evil navy brew from Max. No doubt it rotted your guts, but it sharpened the nerve. He’d been meaning to give it up for ages. Now perhaps he’d have a real chance.

“How about the cigars, tin-brain?”

“I’d love to say that they were destroyed as well, Cap’n. They play merry devil with the air conditioning, but unfortunately they seem to be intact.”

“Well, let’s have one then. I can’t think straight without a smoke if I can’t get a cup of coffee.” Jupiter sat back in the familiar chair, looking round at the worn and shabby state of the control console. He admired the furry dice hanging down over one of the view screens, a souvenir from Quince. He frowned at the memory, then smiled.

There was a hiss of air as a small delivery slot opened and a thick Tilialan cigar rolled out. He picked it up, rolled it by his ear and smelled the fine aroma of the perfectly kept leaves. It lit with his first indrawn breath, another indication that the ship’s Humidor was still functioning at one hundred percent. Things could be worse, but he’d love a cup of coffee right now.

“OK then, Iolanthe, what have you found?”

“I’ve located our system for you, boss. We’ve popped out at van Maanen’s Star system, a bit farther out than normal, but we should be able to make it to one of the inner worlds if we are careful.”

“You’re doing this to depress me aren’t you, computer? Tell me where we really are – anywhere but van Maanen’s. I don’t need this.”

“Fraid not, Cap’n, it’s Major or nothing. And before you ask, there is no way I can repair those hyperspace coils with the equipment onboard. You need to land and get to a shipyard, and it won’t be cheap.” Iolanthe had that delighted tone in its voice which signalled that the troubles were probably only just beginning. Captain Jupiter thought about having another cigar, realising that he had just crumbled his first to junk in frustration. Instead he leaned forward and thumbed the button to give him through-ship communications. It was time to let the passengers know what was happening.

“Now hear this! Now hear this! This is an emergency! I repeat, this is an emergency.” The message blared from speakers in each of the passenger’s shells. Iolanthe’s tell-tales showed him that all his passengers were now awake. He presumed they were all listening and tried to convey some confidence as he reported the ship’s condition.

“We’ve had a bit of an accident.” Now there’s an understatement, he thought to himself as he tried to break the news. “We’ve suffered an IPH, that’s an Inadvertent Precipitation from Hyperspace, to those of you who are unfamiliar with space travel. They don’t happen often, but there is no hiding the fact that it is serious.

“Luckily, we’ve been thrown out into an inhabited system, so there is some small comfort there. Unfortunately, we are now at van Maanen’s Star and the only habitation is a little rocky planet called Major. For those of you who don’t know the place, it’s run by a religious sect, the Guardians of the Free Spirit, and they are not a very cheerful lot. I recommend that when we eventually reach the planet, you try and keep pretty much to the ship. There isn’t much sight-seeing to be done anyway, since most of the colony is underground.

“One more bit of good news: they don’t allow trade in animals, so our cargo can’t go onto the open market.” With that last piece of information he cut the circuit, leaving the passengers to shout about what had happened amongst themselves. He had no doubt there would be a lot of rightful indignation directed his way in the next hour or so. Let them blow off a bit of steam shouting at each other before they started on him.

The situation was not helped by his current cargo. He was shipping a hunting party from the jungle world of Biggs Colony at Altair to Tailor Colony in Tau Ceti, or at least that was the plan. Everything had started smoothly – no problems with the hunting – then the first jump from Altair to Fomalhaut had been faultless. 12.6

light years without a quiver. He had harboured doubts about his engines ever since the cut price repairs at Harristown on Miller in the Quzece system. He was going to give the engines a thorough overhaul when they reached Taylor Colony, but now it was too late.

IPH occurrences were rare, as he had told the passengers. In some ways he had been very lucky, since they had emerged somewhere close to human habitation. A good proportion of IPH events must occur in deep space, well beyond hope of contact. There were lots of unexplained disappearances in space and piracy could only account for so many. Popular press put down the rest to unidentified and malignant aliens. Captain Jupiter was more inclined to the idea that hyperspace was a lot more dangerous than most people thought. He was more concerned with the immediate problem of how to fund his repairs than with mysterious alien forces.

His real problem was his bulletin account probably would not cover the cost of his engine and ship repairs. He would need to sell some cargo and all he had on board was the hunting tour and their quota of game. The animals would have fetched a prime price at Haynes Landing on Taylor Colony for one of the Supervisor's zoos. But the religious authorities at Goldstein starport banned trade in both animals and skins. He had some contacts with the black market on van Maanen's system, but he hadn't contacted them in some time.

It seemed ironic that disaster should strike on this particular trip. It was so like his first real taste of freedom, when Max had taken him along on his first hunt. Captain Jupiter thought back to the old days. He had just been sold. A new slave with nothing but quick wits and strong arms. The hunt had been in the jungles of Biggs Colony, a frightening and unfamiliar place of harsh vegetation and air you could chew on as easily as breathe. He had almost died right there, except that Max had managed to save him.

That very night he had vowed to become as good a hunter as his master. Since then a real bond of friendship had grown up between the two of them. He soon learned that Max was not the great hunter he so often claimed to be, shifting from one personality to another whenever a commission demanded it. He found that Max was not his master's real name, but that names could be changed as easily as clothes and that often the right name helped more than piles of credentials.

He had dropped his early name as soon as he was registered as a free man. True to his word, Max had let him go as soon as his hunting and other skills had managed to earn five times his purchase price. Helmut had died with the slavery documents, and he had felt a tremendous sense of relief as he sat with Max in a spaceport bar casually tossing new identities about over a bottle of Fujiyama Old Gold. He had often wondered what had made Max pick him out of the crowd back on Mackenzie's rock, when Phildop IV had held his auction.

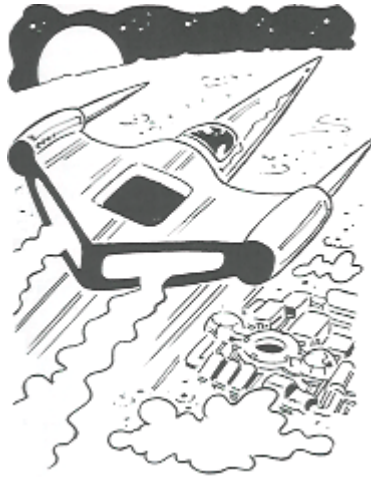
He had stayed with Max for a couple more years, operating as a partner before taking over the business when the old man retired to Honda in the remote Alkaid system. Then he'd bought the ship and gone into business on his own. His years of working with Max had introduced him to a number of skills and contacts which he had been able to use well.

His luck had taken a turn for the worse recently though, and a series of bad judgements had reduced him to piloting a gang of second rate game hunters around some interesting worlds. The jungles at Altair were the last climactic stop on a tour of big-game hunts. This had been the final leg, and now he was back to nothing again. Worse than nothing, he had to find the cash for his repairs or they would be stuck in this desolate hole for who knew how long. He'd have to hope that his old contact on Major was still in place and still operating.

"Iolanthe, I need a quick pick me up. Fix me a sandwich will you?"

"Do you want just a sandwich, or do you need some pills with that?"

"Sandwich will do. While you're thawing it, get me all the system info on Goldstein starport, OK?" Captain Jupiter and Iolanthe preserved the illusion that the food he was served was kept in a freezer and that the ship thawed the packages as and when he needed them. It was a lot less unsavoury than imagining the process by which the food was re-cycled and re-constituted in the depths of the machine.



The sandwich duly arrived, delivered through a different slot to the cigar. He took the gently warm package from the counter, then took a bite. With a grimace he spat the food out across his command console.

“What is this?” he bellowed, all the fury and anger at his fates concentrated on the disgusting taste in his mouth.

“Bacon and tomato, of course – your favourite.” Iolanthe sounded puzzled.

“I think you need to check again for internal damage, silicon-brains. That’s horrible, indescribable – marinated grana-root porridge wouldn’t be worse. That’s one taste I’ll never forget. Get me a strong beer, I need something to wash my mouth out.” Jupiter spat the last fragments of his mouthful at the floor of the cabin. The clean-up mechanoids would get rid of the mess when he next took a break. “Better get me those pills as well, until you find out what’s wrong with the galley.”

The loss of the galley only served to make the four-day journey to Major even more intolerable. The passengers were restive and grew progressively more impatient and angry as they approached the planet. Iolanthe discovered that the galley could only fabricate meals for the animals in the hold and the most palatable of them smelled like rotting cabbages and was served as a thin porridge. The only alternative was alcohol, which was available in countless synthesized varieties. So when the passengers arrived at Goldstein starport they were both argumentative and roaring drunk.

Captain Jupiter expected to be cleared for landing with a minimum of fuss. His was a small ship, his inventory was completely up to date, and the accidental arrival in the system was fully recorded in the ship’s memory. He had adopted standard configuration, leaving the final approach and docking to the autopilot – no point in taking risks. He had settled back in the ancient silastoplaston and let it absorb the transient strains and thrusts of final approach. Suddenly the communicator screen glowed a fierce blue, then green, and superimposed on the swirling background was a pair of angry looking faces.

“You have approached this colony without permission or permit. Landing permission is may be denied according to Church tribunal. You are carrying illegal animals in your holds. Be alert to the penalties imposed on trade in beasts of flesh or their products on this world. The Church Elder will judge the issue. Tribunal is now in session!” The uniformed customs official barked out his speech with less emotion than a pocket calculator. His face moved to one side and the second person came into close focus. The woman had a harsh and unforgiving appearance, accentuated by the coarse plain garment she wore.

“State your reason for profaning this colony, foreigner. We do not tolerate careless visits and this is not a tourist resort. We must labour hard to expiate the sins of humanity, we do not have the time for frivolous distractions.”

Captain Jupiter had been unprepared for the bluntness of the approach and took a second to compose his thoughts.

“Uh... I... That is... Excuse me, your lady.”

“Your eminence,” the woman interrupted. “The correct term is ‘your eminence’.”

“Uh, thank you, your eminence. But this is not a sightseeing tour. We come to your planet in distress. My cargo is not intended to profane your colonists. My flight computer can verify that these animals are in transit to Tau Ceti.”

“We are a long way from Tau Ceti, young man.” The woman’s tone was icy and there was no mistaking her hostility. From the way she was staring at him out of the screen it seemed that she expected him to grow horns and a tail on the spot.

“No, you misunderstand.” Captain Jupiter wondered briefly if this was the way to talk to a figure of authority in the local theocracy, but pressed on regardless. “What I mean is that we were meant to go to Tau Ceti – your landing computers and computer searches of this ship’s itinerary will verify that. We had a catastrophe on our last jump and precipitated from hyperspace within this system. Don’t ask me how.”

The words seemed to have little effect on the woman. She continued to glare darkly at him. Her eyes flicked to the left, presumably to some data display out of view of Jupiter, then returned to stare out at him. “My warder assures me that what you say bears some resemblance to the truth. You must re-align and jump out of this system of the Chosen immediately. We have no need nor desire for contact with you. Landing permission is denied.” The woman moved forwards on the screen, to terminate the transmission.

“No! You can’t do that! Wait! Our engines are burnt out. We can’t jump out of the system.” Jupiter had a sudden vision of himself, his passengers and cargo remaining in orbit indefinitely because this wretched woman would not let them land. It was vital that they land at a ground based starport. The orbiting station was not an option in his plans.

His agitation was obvious and the revelation about his engines was enough to stop the woman. “Is this report true?” she asked the customs warden.

“The ship’s computer matches what the man says, your eminence. He’s got no drive coils and quite a bit of internal system damage. The computer on board has been diverting emergency power to maintain itself in operative state, but it too is damaged.”

Jupiter cast an accusing look at the central speaker set into his console. It was where he associated Iolanthe as ‘living’. The speaker gave a short burst of static, perhaps the computer’s equivalent of an embarrassed cough. “I’ll have words with you later, silicon-baby,” he muttered under his breath, sure that the computer would pick it up.

“Very well, young man, you may dock to use the repair facilities of Goldstein. Do not disembark from your ship. Conduct all business through indirect communication channels. You are not to pollute any Free Spirit with your non-industrious ambitions. Do you understand? Land immediately after this conversation.” With that final message the woman turned and strode out of communicator range. The image of the official once more filled the screen.

“You are carrying illegal animals in your holds. Be alert to the penalties imposed on trade in beasts of flesh or their products on this world.” The official repeated his speech with an emotionless quality. Captain Jupiter wondered if the colonists had imported robots from the Federation, but dismissed the idea. Federation robots certainly showed emotions when they talked. “Land under computer control and contact the shipyard immediately for repair requests.”

The screen flashed then green before fading to a dull grey indicating that the link had been broken. Jupiter let out his breath in a long sigh and went limp in his chair. That had been too close for comfort. He ought to think of changing his profession in the future. With deft touches he began the landing sequence and allowed the ground based facilities to pilot the ship in.

The ship began the normal tumbling and rotating manoeuvres which always accompanied a computer-directed landing. Somehow no computer autopilot ever managed to control a ship with the same delicacy a first class pilot achieved. Captain Jupiter gritted his teeth, ready to face unannounced and unexpected accelerations which should bring him to rest at the surface.

The blasts from the engines came suddenly, catching him by surprise even though he was braced for them. He wondered how the passengers were taking it. The duration of the engine noise and the direction of thrust were strange as well. The computer seemed to be taking him in an almost vertical descent. It was normal to glide into runways on atmosphere planets, as it was far more fuel efficient for the ship and less traumatic for locals.

As the rapid descent continued, Captain Jupiter had a sudden foreboding.

"Iolanthe," he called, as a further apparently random thrust from the engines rattled his teeth. "Just how thick is the atmosphere on this world?"

There was a momentary pause before the computer answered.

"You know, Captain, I can't remember." Iolanthe sounded ecstatic. Captain Jupiter frowned. The damage to the computer must be severe for it to lose part of the system information encyclopedia. He hoped there was nothing else it had forgotten about the planet. He tried to remember his own visits to the colony, but he had not been allowed off ship then, either. This could be very bad.

Captain Jupiter kept alert for the thunderous rumble which normally accompanied a descent through atmosphere. He was caught off guard when the engine noise rose to a sudden shriek, then dropped to nothing. The ship settled for an instant then all engine noise ended. They had landed! A series of loud 'clangs' ran through the vessel as clamps gripped the ship, and Captain Jupiter felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as the ship sank into the planet on a standard spaceport lift.

The sinking feeling was not just physical. He had needed an atmospheric space-port for his emergency plan. Now there was an additional element of uncertainty. This had been an awful mission so far. He hoped it would not get worse.

By the time Iolanthe had landed, the shipyard had been informed and was clamouring at the communications channels to get access to the ship's computer and records. Captain Jupiter instructed Iolanthe to deal with the refitting as best as it could, making sure that its own computer system was the first thing repaired. The computer knew as well as anyone the limits of his assets and would flag him if there were any problems with the outfitting. In the meantime he would make some discreet inquiries in case more funds were needed.

He made a quick enquiry of the stock market, but it simply confirmed what he had suspected. Dealing in almost any normal trade goods, including luxuries, liquor or medicines was as illegal as that in animals or skins. That rendered his cargo and ship's capabilities completely useless on this lump of rock. He would have to try the black market again.

Once before he had made a trip to this world, while he was still working for Max. They had brought in much-needed medicines to help eliminate a plague running through the colony. Medicines or drugs of all kinds were forbidden to the population of the planet, but the few who were not in the sway of the Guardians of the Free Spirit had organised a channel to the outside worlds. The independents were few, but Jupiter hoped that at least some of them would still be around.

He keyed the bulletin board and was immediately on-line to the planet's communications network. Fully three-quarters of the channels were devoted to state-run doctrinal propaganda, but with a few unorthodox and possibly illegal access codes he managed to find the portion of the board he wanted. There were a few 'goods bought and sold' come-ons, but the one he was hoping for was not present.

Last time they had been here, their transaction had been conducted through George Hanburry, just a name amongst many on the board, but the man had been a contact into the black market. His name did not appear on the list presented. He might have stopped trading temporarily, to avoid local police attention, or perhaps he had fallen foul of the law and been arrested. Jupiter was in a quandary.

Landing in a new system always posed some problems, especially if your major trade goods couldn't be exchanged through the normal stock market channels. If you visited a place regularly it became quite easy to spot who were the genuine dealers, since they would normally appear quite frequently on the boards. The problem was the police traps which appeared in the guise of a legitimate trader.

The only sure way to find out if an individual was with the cops was to deal with them, but that meant being caught about a third of the time and the fines for black market trading were often substantial. Offering bribes to police officers sometimes worked, but not always, and Jupiter thought that Major was a world unlikely to have many dishonest cops. If he came often to the planet it would be no trouble. The police never used the same name twice on the boards. Once one false dealer had been exposed by an arrest, the rest of the bulletin community passed the word around and the cover was blown. Unfortunately, if you only came to a 'port once, there was no way to tell which was which.

Captain Jupiter just hoped that he had enough credits in his account to pay for the repairs, but he was ready for the worst when Iolanthe broke the silence and gave him the news.

"You have enough immediate credit to have the coils repaired, get me patched up and fix the hole in one of the hydrogen tanks. Those are all the items you'll need for hyperspace, but I don't think that the crews here are going to be able to do a good job. You can't afford to service any of the other damaged equipment and you'll have no funds at your next stop. If word gets out you're broke, the traders will take you to the cleaners."

Jupiter considered this information for a moment. It was pretty much as he had expected. He would have to try and contact someone on the black market.

"Looks like I'll have to chance my luck, old girl," he muttered to the computer. "See to it that our fuel tanks are filled. Give me a bleep when we are at maximum capacity."

"No need, boss. I made sure that re-fuelling was the first item on the agenda. I also got the coils repaired as best we could do on your credit. We are in as good a condition as your bank balance would allow."

Captain Jupiter grunted in acknowledgement. He should have guessed the computer would proceed with the important jobs without further consultation. There was no need to delay any more. Only one thing left to do before seeing if he could reach the black-marketeers, but it could save a lot of trouble if worse came to worst. He flicked open the communication channel to the passenger quarters.

"Now hear this! Now hear this!" He used his most commanding tone to drive home the importance of his message. "There will be a test firing of engines in ten minutes. I repeat, ten minutes to test firing. All passengers retire to berths and strap down. This is a full emergency drill. This is a drill. Retire to your berths and strap down." He switched off the internal communicator. If he didn't have to use the motors, he could always claim it had been a routine test for a test, but he didn't want to have to worry about broken arms or legs if things did get a bit hairy.

He flicked his controls to the external communication channels.

"Get me the Bulletin Board, Iolanthe. Let's see who we've got to deal with."

With a tiny flicker the screen switched to the standard interface logo. He looked down the list and made the ritual traders' prayer for a correct choice of dealer. "Eeny, meeny, miny, mo..." He punched for the second name on the list offering 'goods bought and sold'. The name was Seymour Aleson. It seemed as good as any.

There was a short musical introduction and a spray of coloured patterns, the sort of fanfare which had gone out of fashion in the central worlds about a decade ago. Then the screen cleared to show Aleson's goods. Almost anything illegal on Major was on offer. Captain Jupiter toyed with the idea of buying some of the items but restrained himself – there would be time for that later if he managed to sell his cargo. He scanned down the list and selected sell animal skins. Mentally crossing his fingers he pressed the send key.

Instantly the screen flashed red and yellow and the cheerful face of Seymour Aleson was replaced by a glaring police officer. "I'm warder Diclenm of the –" Jupiter hit the cancel button to turn off the rest of the message and stabbed down at the system broadcast key.

"This is trader Iolanthe preparing for blast off. Open the dome or I'll open it for you! You have thirty seconds before my main engines fire. Commencing launch sequence NOW!"

Sweat beaded his forehead and he had to wipe his palms against the seat to dry them as he readied for the emergency take-off. Iolanthe had responded immediately when he cut the communication channel to the police trap. There was a steadily mounting rumble as the computer fed hydrogen to the main engines and they warmed to operational temperature. If they could launch from cold in only thirty seconds, Jupiter would be as surprised as the control tower crew, but he was deadly serious about launching through the dome if it wasn't opened to let them out. With studied indifference he ignored the frantically flashing lights showing incoming messages from the starport.

He was glad that he had warned the passengers to belt down; if they did make it to the surface the take off would be harsh and he might have to make all sorts of evasive manoeuvres to leave the system. He would have some explaining to do when they found out how thorough an emergency drill he was conducting, but he doubted if they would have liked a stay on Major as guests of the Guardians any more than he would.

A feeling of relief flooded through him as he heard the muted sounds of activity outside the ship and felt a small shudder as the spaceport landing allocation system came into operation. The Iolanthe was hastily loaded into the surface elevator and a fierce acceleration caught him as they were shot to the surface. The emergency response of an underground starport had to be able to get rid of dangerous ships – for instance, if a ship's engine threatened to go critical – but it was rare indeed for anyone to threaten a main engine burn on a starport. Captain Jupiter was playing on the fears of the Guardians. He just hoped they were as scared as he was.

The small slot at his elbow and a fresh cigar rolled out. He grabbed it and sucked it to life, breathing deep on the pungent smoke. It was the little touches which made Iolanthe such a nice ship, he mused. "Thanks old girl," he called out, then nearly choked on his cigar as a deep throated roar pronounced main engine ignition and an enormous weight settled onto his chest as they lifted off.

"Take whatever evasive moves you think are best," he managed to splutter as the ship accelerated into space. There was no impact as they rose, so Jupiter assumed that the authorities had opened the dome in time. The main reason he had been so determined to land on the planet rather than the orbiting trading post was that the port authorities in space could clamp a ship in place, preventing exactly the sort of desperate move he had just made, while planet-bound facilities rarely bothered. It was a useful fact to know for anyone who might tangle with local police.

The only problem now was to get far enough away to make a jump. Jupiter hoped that the in-system police were only as efficient as the planet forces.

"Anyone around Iolanthe?" he asked.

"Nothing in comm range boss – seems like we got clear away again." Iolanthe sounded morose and disappointed. Captain Jupiter began to feel happier. With such a glum reaction from his computer, their chances of getting away must be pretty high.

"Well, then, make course for a clear jump, find us a good target and let's get out of here. While you have a moment, fix me something to eat, would you?" The tension eased out of the Captain and he felt that a small snack – perhaps a cup of coffee as well – would do wonders to restore his good spirits.

"How do you want your porridge then, Cap'n? Grana-root or pigni-berry flavoured? I didn't have a chance to get the galley repaired or the larder stocked. I'm afraid it's animal feed or food pills to the next stop. But count your blessings. At least there's none of that beastly coffee for you to rot your guts with."

Living in hope

Kathy Dickinson

“SEND IN THE NEXT BATCH! Weed out the weak ones! The Almighty wants to move this lot!” the slave controller, named Slatter, shouted to another. “Bargon! These places stink,” he muttered as he eyed up the shabby bunch of slaves, searching for any that looked less than a good buy – he’d space them later. They were herded into an enclosure. “Stand straight, look reasonable! Prove you’re worth more than fertilizer!” Slatter looked over to Ham who was hauling a slave out of the crowd; that made five rejects. “How are we expected to make profit when half of them expire! What’s wrong with that one?”

“Too small,” Ham replied. He was wearing the brown overalls worn by slavers when dealing with stock. It made him feel more protected from the vermin they were supposed to be. Ironically, since the slaves had shaved heads and got hosed down daily, he was actually dirtier than they were.

Five was too much and Slatter decided to take a look for himself. “He might be small but he’s strong – throw him back.” He scrutinised the others. “Hmm, I suppose so. You can’t trust anybody these days, they always try to slip in duff ones.”

Slave DB115 was picked up bodily by Ham and thrown into the pen, just to prove his point. Being young and used to this sort of treatment, DB115 rolled well when he landed and came to no harm, pleasing Slatter.

Slave pits were unpleasant places where traders came to strike a good bargain. Hospitality lounges were provided overlooking the scene of dirt and degradation, and bids were made on a console. They felt good to be putting the galaxy’s criminals and no-goods to honest work and doing a service to mankind. Those who knew where most of them came from didn’t feel at all.

Phildop IV sipped at his drink and surveyed lot four containing DB115. “This bunch seems to be OK,” he thought. “I’ll take the best and sell the rest on the black market.” The fake zublic jewels on his forehead itched annoyingly as he keyed in his bid.

DB115 had been shipped about with this gang for the last two stops which was considered a long time. You rarely saw people for long; they either died for one reason or another or were sold off as single slaves, a fate that could mean relative freedom or utter hell. Rumour had it that slaves were spaced if they were thought to be of inferior quality. A man told him that he had seen a cluster of slaves floating in space, naked (uniforms were reused) but recognisable by the code tattooed on their arms.

As he looked at the group, DB115 noticed a larger boy weeping. “Don’t do that, not here anyway. It doesn’t look good to them, they’ll space you.” DM134 looked up, surprised at another person seeming to care.

“It’s my arm, it hurts.” The laser-seared flesh was still blistered and there was that faint characteristic smell. It was of course the code that had been marked on this new slave. DB115 squeezed his shoulder in encouragement. DM134 blurted, “I’m not meant to be here, they took me away. Our homestead on Camp Hooper was attacked by a gang; they sounded like they were from the Empire. My family were taken or killed. They said we were criminals and now I’m here.” He looked about him at the metal pens illuminated by the red lights used to make the pallid slaves look more healthy. Most of these people did not look the hardened criminals the worlds were lead to believe they were. The ownership of his homeplanet had been in dispute between the Empire and Federation after a mineral was found in its barren, uninteresting crust. Petty, unofficial hostilities between the two sides had occurred intermittently ever since.

He could hear the faint music coming from the lounges used to encourage the traders to relax and buy. Displays above each pen flickered as bids were made and bettered. DM134 felt his life had ended, and stared blankly.

DB115 had seen this look of hopelessness before. He had felt the same and still did from time to time. Those who got through it somehow found hope, hope that one day they would be free or, failing that, would find a master with a heart. “My name’s Kharon,” said DB115. “What’s yours?”

“Welpin.”

They shook hands, feeling the warmth of a bond.

Kharon remembered the day he was taken from his home, under different circumstances to Welpin. Those who presided over his loss of freedom were the Fathers of the Pure Soul, a religious sect that ruled his community. Being only ten then, Kharon had not fully understood what was happening when he and his family was summoned to the high temple. The priest said his father had avoided Observance, so the family must be punished. What followed was an hour of prayers and laments, only a few of which he understood as he had only reached the fifth level of schooling. Soon it would be finished and they could all go home, his thoughts ran. A column of blue-robed holy men emerged from the sacred room and gave an address. They spoke of sin and terrible deeds, using far too many words to say a simple thing, Kharon thought. As he counted the carved heads on the ceiling, the words “only son” and “taken” drifted into his consciousness, so he listened more attentively, only to hear a final eulogy to their God. Two holy men took him by the arms and his mother screamed. He turned his head and could only see his sister Alista’s panic stricken face – that was the last he saw of any of them.

The gong to declare end of business shook Kharon’s memory out of his head; now it was time to meet the new master. They were pointed at gate seven and the group shuffled off through the fumigation tunnel from which they emerged coughing. One bleak corridor after another ended when they came to a ramp up to the cargo hold of a large pirate galleon, where the group was told to assemble in an orderly fashion. Usually a slavemaster would outline the rules, and, of course, the punishments, before the new stock was taken to the hold. The crew stood to attention as a door slid open for a bulky man, walking in obvious discomfort due to some ill-fitting shoes. He was dressed in a metallic blue tunic and trousers that were designed for a diminutive frame. A matching cap sat at an angle on a balding head, no doubt intended to look jaunty but instead looking comical. All the crew members present were able to stifle giggles; those who hadn’t in the past had found their careers or lives at an end. Phillop IV swaggered along the line of dishevelled individuals, came to rest at Kharon and bent over so that their noses nearly touched, a cloying scent pervading his nostrils. “Your name?”

“Khar... er... DB115, sir.”

“How do I look?” said the pirate leader, his brow furrowed with the frustration that one gets when an itch cannot be scratched in public.

Kharon being totally bemused by the spectacle said the first thing that came into his mind. “Very blue, sir.”

The pirate leader’s eyebrows moved up an inch, and Kharon could see that the zublic jewel fakes were irritating beyond endurance. Unable to help himself, he instinctively reached out and scratched, and by the time he realised what he was doing it was too late. Trying to redeem the situation Kharon said weakly: “A bit of dust sir... sorry.”

The eyebrows seemed to rove around the forehead before coming to rest over bulging eyes, then the face which had filled the entire field of view moved away, and the mouth which was too close to be visible could now be seen, smiling.

“Take this one! And don’t use that,” he said, motioning at the guard’s magnetic slave prod. Again Kharon felt a feeling of loss as he turned and waved to his new friend, Welpin, and was marched away, unable to say goodbye properly.

The tiny room was empty except for a bed and a table – real luxury. UN accustomed to the cleanliness Kharon touched the walls and floor and inhaled the clean air deeply. A cupboard door provided the only other feature, and inside were two huge, blue body suits. The guard had said that this was the room of the personal slave and that the suit had to be worn after the wash. A loud buzzing was followed by an electronic voice saying, “Stand by for hygiene cycle,” then suddenly water rained down from above and squirted from the sides. It smelled like rose flowers. Still amazed, he stood in his soaking clothes as the voice advised him to put on his garment. He hurriedly removed them and took one of the suits which was ice cold and put it on with sharp intakes of breath as the chilled material touched his body. No sooner had he done this than the fabric started to shrink as the moisture and body heat activated it. Thankfully it stopped before it became to uncomfortable but Kharon’s face still looked horrified as the guard stood at the open door laughing.



They walked through a labyrinth of passages, of a hue that was fast becoming familiar, until they arrived at a door heavily decorated with carvings. The mechanism whined painfully, shifting a weight exceeding its specification, as it pulled the door aside to reveal a room quite extraordinary in its range of that colour between green and purple in the spectrum. The smell of roses was almost overpowering. Phildop IV sat in a grotesquely ornate chair and shouted, with a wave of his arms, “Come here! Discretion... discretion is your strength. That is why you are to be my personal servant, and I shall call you... umm,” his eyes searched the ceiling for inspiration, “...Slave!”

Kharon spent the rest of the day learning about his duties which included tasting food, preparing cocktails, and making decisions such as which shade should be worn on a particular day. He was given a device to be worn at all times with which his master could hail him and trace his whereabouts. To Kharon’s surprise he was given the freedom of the entire ship except the control centre, but the first two days was spent constantly with the chief clerk on probation. He was to find his position as personal slave a lonely occupation for he was not accepted by the general servants or the guards, nor did he belong with those he served.

As soon as he was independent, Kharon located the slave quarters with a sense of urgency. Was his friend still there? They could all have been sold by now, although he had noticed that the ship had not stopped anywhere. The slave keeper looked him up and down, and Kharon summoned up his most commanding voice and said: “Stand aside, I must inspect the slaves!” It was not his high-pitched voice that made the guard stand aside, it was rank, but Kharon assumed the former case, feeling the first flood of well-being since he had left home. Relief flooded through him, as they were still there, and he ran with his heart pounding. The slaves looked up in surprise and then recognition and came to the edge of the containment field through which he was able to walk unhurt once he had placed his hand on a panel. Kharon slipped them the sweets he had smuggled in and looked for Welpin. “He’s not here, lad,” whispered a voice belonging to a man he had known for three stops. “He went berserk so they’d kill him, which they did.” The group stood silent and unmoving. “He gave me this before he did it, asking that you give it to any of his family if you come across them.” It was a jewel-encrusted candack, an ornamental dagger. “Welpin managed to hide it, I don’t know how. Good luck, son.”

Kharon turned and left, the loneliness a pain that felt like a gaping hole.

Over the months that passed Kharon went about his duties, trying to forget the past as this was his life now. Phildop IV was pleased with his new attendant who had a particular talent for anticipating his moods and needs. The pirate chief was a reasonable if stupid man who thought he ought to act like pirate chiefs do. He didn’t like what he did and usually told himself that it was his unhappy childhood that made him rob others, and they were just as bad as he was so it didn’t matter. As he came to trust Kharon more, Phildop IV confided in him and took him to meetings to take notes by hand – electronic means were far too easily probed. After making a deal on Altair they were walking along a promenade in a tourist complex Kharon the obligatory four steps behind. Two individuals confronted them, both looked rough but smartly dressed. “Hey, you fat blue blather bug with his toy.”

Phildop IV disliked lack of respect of himself intensely and bristled, “Don’t you insult –“ While engaged in mustering his retaliation they struck, one man grabbing his head in an arm-lock. The other brandished an evil looking blade and aimed at the blue belly. “Run, slave, while you can! We’ll give this slug what’s been coming to him!”

Kharon looked around for help but the place was deserted; nobody liked to be involved in the frequent skirmishes that occurred here. Many thoughts shot through his mind. What would he do if his master died? Maybe he liked him after all? He tried to imagine what real freedom would be like. He could hear the pathetic whimpering of Phildop IV. Kharon thought of Welpin and the candack.

"No! Leave him alone!" he shouted, and leapt at the man holding his master who still had his back to him. He plunged the jewelled spike in the back of his neck. The man's eyes widened in surprise then he stiffened and collapsed twitching. The other, suddenly feeling very alone and shocked, ran off, leaving Kharon and Phildop IV to make a hasty departure.

"Well done, slave! You got in there before I did. I was just luring them into a false sense of complacency." Feeling magnanimous he went on trying to converse with a lower class, "What's your real name?"

"Kharon Marlbron, Sir."

"Well... er, Kharon, did you learn that little trick during your life of crime?"

"No, that's how they used to do the sacrifices at home."

"Oh." His imagination conjured up images of horror and depravity. "So, what hideous deed brought you into slavery?"

"My father stayed away from Observance for one day to sit with my dying brother."

Phildop IV's face fell, then he recovered it as he convinced himself that the criminal was lying.

"How can I reward you? Apart from freedom," he said to change the subject that his instinct told him was probably true.

"Could you find out if my family's still alive and tell them I'm safe?"

This was too much for Phildop IV who did not like his conscience to get too much exercise. "I'll see, now go about your duties!" he said in agitation, all signs of friendship gone. A week later news came back that the community had been destroyed by an earthquake a year ago with all known occupants presumed dead.

Kharon felt he could bear no more pain and thought that maybe Welpin had had the right idea. Phildop IV had been more distant in his approach since the day he realised that Kharon was an ordinary boy taken from his parents. He frequently scolded and found petty faults but rewarded generously and granted favours such as shore leave. Slave quarters were made more comfortable and the slaves' food was improved, and that seemed to be how Phildop IV, masterful and illustrious pirate leader, coped with his knowledge.

A year passed and Kharon became one of the highest ranking people onboard the ship, and long gone was the basic room for his quarters. Life was relatively easy now with his own staff to see to menial tasks; however he was not free. He thought that he should be grateful for the outcome and wondered what had become of all the slaves he had ever met. Kharon felt empty and without direction, and disliked working for a potentially honourable but hopelessly weak man, who was obsessed with his own image. How long was it since he had talked to somebody as a friend, an equal? He could not remember. Running away on shore leave was not an option as there was nowhere to go and he would be found easily. Something always stopped Kharon whenever he decided to end it all. He would stand in the air-lock hand on button, but never got as far as pressing it. The guttering fire of hope seemed to find a way to flicker back to life.

Phildop IV eyed his personal slave who was checking the stock market for potential bargains, the glow from the screen making the frowning face seem ghostly. The master, who was now experimenting with red, walked over and said casually, "I got an offer for you today."

"Kharon looked up, surprised. "You mean, I've been advertised?"

“No, apart from singing your praises at this meeting or that, I don’t suppose you want to go do you? Not that I would allow it.” A glazed look came over his face and the corner of his mouth twitched. “They did offer an extraordinarily high price though.”

“I might do,” said Kharon, bluffing.

“Oh, I see.” All of a sudden Phildop IV was faced with a dilemma. Should he be angry that the ungrateful young man would consider leaving him? Could he find another as good? The money, oh the money. “Right! I’ll see to the transaction.”

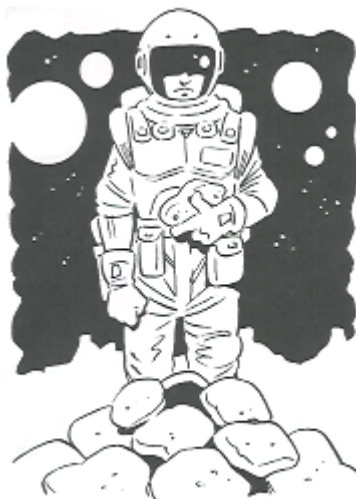
Kharon was stunned. A moment ago he was despairing but secure; now he was about to become the property of an unknown and possibly tyrannical pirate. He felt sick.

“Who is it?” he said weakly.

“Oh, umm...” Phildop IV pored over the document, “...Alista Marlbron.”

The Outer Limits

Moira Sheehan



LORN FINISHED ADDING the last stone to the cairn then stood up with the careful movements of a man used to operating at low gravity. He only wanted a few minutes considering a tombstone; there was little point in marking a grave on a planet where no other human had ever trod and where no other was ever likely to walk in the future. He did not look back as he loped toward the Marie Louise.

Once inside he scoured the ship for any trace of the girl, stuffing her clothes into an anonymous storage crate. He only paused once and that was when he picked up the ridiculous little music box. He opened the lid and listened briefly to the trite melody that Elise had persisted in playing even after he had introduced her to the majesty of the great composers. He stifled a pang of regret and tossed the box into the crate; it was easier if one kept nothing, he had learnt that lesson long ago.

The routing of lifting off settled him. He checked the fuel and decided, as always, to err on the side of caution. Although he had fuel enough for two more jumps, the next two systems might not have a suitable gas giant for skimming. Early in his career Lorn had been reduced to skimming a sun and he had vowed never to allow the situation to arise again. Dying because Lady Luck decided against you was a risk that went with the job; dying because of rank stupidity was not.

He instructed the computer to calculate a course that would take them to the nearest gas giant. Elise had asked him why he had chosen a primitive keyboard for the computer when every other fitting was so fine. It had been one of the first questions that she had asked and he could still hear the fear in her timid, little girl voice. He smiled. It had not taken her long to realise that her new master would not beat her for displaying her curiosity. She had not understood his answer and she had tried to hide her confusion with a small, nervous laugh. He had not expected her to understand. It was her first trip into space, and she could not comprehend that a man could become so lonely that he fell passionately in love with the warm, female tones of his computer.

He shook his head to dislodge the unwelcome memories and decided that updating the log could wait until he was feeling more calm. His fingers hesitated over the keys that would initiate one of his twenty favourite dream sequences, and at the very last moment he chose Three over Thirteen. He settled back into the perfect fit of his chair and felt the whisper touch of the hypodermic at his neck.

Some explorers were content with the fantasies stored in their data banks. Lorn knew that his need for human companionship was both a weakness and a strength. It stopped him becoming totally disconnected from reality but he had yet to find a woman who could sustain his interest for more than a year in the confines of the Marie Louise. Jenna had been the best because she had seemed so independent. It had been a shock when he had found her lying dead with the arteries in her wrists opened. That had been the day that Lorn had admitted that he

would never understand women. Perhaps he would never realise that he found all humans, male and female, equally alien.

He was vaguely aware that Dream Three was being brought to a point where he could be woken without the return to reality being psychologically or physiologically traumatic. He heard the gentle hiss of the antidote entering the vein in his neck. He tested his muscles then moved towards the head in anticipation of the urgent bodily demands that always followed once the antidote took hold.

Skimming the outermost reaches of a planet's atmosphere for fuel always gave Lorn great satisfaction. It was one of the few tasks a human pilot could perform significantly better than even the best autopilot, and after thirty years Lorn was more than skilled, he was a master. Within an hour the tanks were full and the autopilot was taking the ship clear of the planet for the next Jump.

Elise's death had made him reconsider his plans. He suppressed a small surge of anger that he had allowed his hormones to overcome his better judgement. The other woman would have been better; she had been older and the depth of her misery would have made her all the more grateful. Five years of servitude would have seemed a small price to such a woman, especially when the payment was her freedom. As it was he had the choice of following his original schedule and enduring three years alone, or of heading for civilization and accepting the inevitable losses.

A review of his accounts decided him. It had been a profitable expedition so far with two habitables and three systems so rich in rare elements that he would earn a bonus for each from the Corporation. He would hold one habitable back. Lady Luck might not smile so brightly on the next expedition. Cisco would pay a fat bonus for Inexve 1, even if it was a bit hot and the gravity was low, and they would be pleased that Inexve 3 was such a good terraforming prospect. Lorn always marvelled at the long-term planning of the Corporations. The corporation accountants thought nothing of paying handsomely for information that would not be used for another ten generations.



Of course if the expedition had not been so successful Elise would have not been tempted. Lorn had realised quite quickly that the girl was greedy; it had shown in the amount she ate once food was freely available, and in her avaricious eyes when he had taken her shopping. He had not expected her acquisitiveness to extend to his ship and the priceless information in its data banks so it had been a cruel shock when the security system he had programmed into the computer had alerted him to her clandestine enquiries. Taking her out on the surface with him when he surveyed Ceiool 1 had been a test that she had failed. He had felt no satisfaction at her surprise when the laser torch she swung across his pressured suit proved to be no more than a harmless beam of weak light. He had cut the radio link so that he would not hear her pleas for mercy as he swung the cutting beam of his own torch towards her torso.

He decided to head for Epsilon Eridani, exploring two Type K orange systems on the way and stopping at Aymiai. He had found his best habitables around Type K suns, including Phiface. He recalled the wonderful moment when he had realised that he had found a near perfect habitable; surface temperature 20 degrees Celsius, gravity within two percent of Earth normal. He had taken the information to the Cisco Corporation and earned himself a massive finder's fee and a twenty-five year contract. The finder's fee had bought the Marie Louise, and the credit Cisco had paid him since had allowed him to turn the standard Asp into a tiny personal paradise. Cisco

were talking about settling Phiface but Lorn would only believe it when it happened – they had been discussing it for the last twenty years.

Neither of the Type K systems yielded a prize. Lorn made a note of the various planets and moons and collected as much data as he could without making a pass over each planet individually. Cisco were only interested in the good stuff. He was free to sell mundane information to both the Federation and the Imperial Central Libraries. Some explorers sneered at such paltry payments but not Lorn. For Lorn every credit earned was a morsel of insurance against the consequences of losing the Marie Louise or against an old age spent eking out his Cisco pension.

Once the two Type K systems were behind him the Marie Louise soon Jumped into explored space. Lorn plotted a course for Aymiy that would take him through his favourite systems. He refuelled at Canayay and lingered to admire the two binary stars, one like a diamond paired with a topaz and the other two blood red rubies, then at Mibean with its five suns and Intiho where he manoeuvred the Marie Louise to where he could watch the yellow and white suns rising over the coloured rings of the single planet. Such beauty soothed him.

By the time the Marie Louise Jumped into the Aymiy system more than half a year had passed and Elise was no more than past experience that had been edited so it rested better in Lorn's memory. Lorn was weary of the dream sequences and he recognised that his desperation for female company was making him anticipate his reunion with Alista more than was advisable. He decided to find a professional companion as soon as he had landed and booked the Marie Louise into Charlie's at Goldstein Starport.

Charlie was the Marie Louise's creator. She had taken a standard Asp and created a masterpiece. Lorn knew that the grizzled little woman charged him far more than the going rate; part of him dreaded the sharp intake of breath that preceded the inevitable comment: "It'll cost, you know. Work like that costs." Charlie knew Lorn well enough to keep her prices marginally short of the level that would drive him away to find another mechanic. Lorn trusted Charlie and Charlie capitalised on the fact that explorers were paranoid and trusted no-one.

This time Lorn only listened to Charlie's usual spiel with half an ear. All his senses other than that half ear riveted on the girls walking through the repair yards. Aymiy was hot even this far from the equator, hot enough that the standard apparel for women was skimpy shorts, a brief halter and a generous layer of ultra violet filter. Lorn was past caring that only a very small number of the women had the kind of body that suited such a fashion; every one of them looked wonderful.

"I thought you always travelled with a woman?" Charlie said bluntly after he had failed to answer her fourth question.

Lorn's attention was suddenly focused on the old woman. Most people would have shrunk from the intensity of his glare but not Charlie. She spat a globule of her chewing tobacco into a convenient spittoon and began to repeat her comment. Lorn interrupted her. "I do. There was an unfortunate accident."

Charlie leered. "So that's why you are back so soon. I wondered." She patted a convenient piece of hull. "She doesn't need a full service but I'll give her a thorough going over. I have some new lasers in," she suggested hopefully.

Lorn shook his head. "I don't waste credit on weapons. I might start getting crazy ideas about fighting instead of running. I'll pay for a full inspection and call you in two days time to see if there is anything that needs further attention."

"So I can't contact you?" the old woman asked.

Lorn refused to give her any information that would end up as gossip. "No. I will call you, in two days." As usual he was loathe to walk away from his precious ship. "Look after her, Charlie," he said in a tone that was half request and half threat.

Lorn booked into the Hilton. The Hilton was civilised; the rooms were almost as comfortable as his cabin on the Marie Louise and the food was much better than anything the shipboard synthesizer could produce. In addition the Hilton provided a high quality, and discrete escort service. After two days Lorn felt capable of contacting Alista in Donaldsville.

Charlie had found her standard number of minor faults with his ship. Lorn suspected that she worked to a formula; one major component to be refitted every five years and two minor faults for every year between overhauls. He agreed to pay the estimated price and warned her not to go over by more than ten percent. She tried to tempt him with a new interface for the computer which would allow him to give instructions verbally but still restrict the computer to communicate via the screen. Lorn considered it but decided that he would think about it during his next trip: there were times when even his own voice annoyed him.

Once he had closed his connection with Charlie, Lorn requested a link with the Marlbron residence in Donaldsville and asked for Alista. She was out and the irritatingly polite computerised voice asked him if he would like to speak to Kharon Marlbron, to Lester Marlbron or whether he would like to leave a message. He refused all the alternatives and closed the connection. He went shopping to kill time and regretted it immediately as he hated the activity and it reminded him of Elise. He bought the first presents that came to hand for Alista and Lester then hurried back to the haven of Hilton.

Alista was home when he made his second attempt. Lorn schooled his expression into polite interest as her image filled the screen. She was still beautiful, even as she approached forty, and he was glad that he had found other female companionship before calling her. Alista could not abide men with their tongues hanging out.

They weaved their way through the complex dance of pleasantries that always marked their reunions. Slowly Lorn established that Alista had no man in her life at that particular time and that his presence at the villa would not be unwelcome. She also told him what he already knew from the house computer – Lester was home. There was a short silence.

“You could come here,” Lorn suggested tentatively.

Alista laughed. “He’s only a boy, Lorn, surely the great space explorer can cope with one boy?”

Lorn was stung that she should mock him. “I’ll be there tomorrow.”

The public shuttle was uncomfortable and crowded and Lorn wished that he had hired a small craft for his own personal use. By the time he had fought his way out of the public terminal in Donaldsville he was more than willing to pay an outrageous fee for a private taxi to take him to the Marlbron residence. He settled back in the rear compartment and tried to diminish the memory of so many people crowded close. It had reminded him of his childhood on Earth, the constant overcrowding and the tiny apartment that he had shared with his parents, his grandparents and his brother. He briefly yearned for the inorganic solitude of space.

The Marlbron villa looked almost the same as three years before except that the climbing rose had finally died. There was a youthful replacement that had yet to scale the wall, never mind spreading over the lintel so that the rose hung over the doorway. Lorn regretted the passing of an old friend. He had plucked one of those overhanging roses and handed it to Alista on the occasion of their first meeting. That had been eighteen years before, a lifetime before, before Alista had been reunited with the lost brother who had come between them.

It was Kharon who answered the door and the two men stared at each other for a few minutes before their real emotions were covered with the façade of politeness that allowed them to stand under the same roof. Kharon was small like his sister and eerily like her in looks with the same dark curls and the same velvet brown eyes.

“I hope your life is proceeding well,” Lorn said politely as he stepped over the threshold.

“It proceeds most well. I have a wife now and she is with child,” Kharon answered proudly.



Lorn grasped a faint wisp of memory of meeting the young woman in question on his last visit. She had been plain and had said nothing but Kharon had obviously thought most highly of her. Lorn could not remember her name so he settled for the tritest of comments and ignored Kharon's barely concealed contempt. "Fortune smiles on you," he said, then continued before Kharon felt obliged to reply. "Alista is expecting me."

Lorn was shown to Alista's apartments surrounding the garden in the centre of the villa. Unlike the rest of the villa Alista's apartments were always cool and the plants that grew in the air-conditioned garden were varieties that would never survive the hot and acrid climate beyond the villa. Alista was sitting on the low wall surrounding the lily pond. She was wearing a loose white dress and trailing one hand in the water. Lorn was immediately suspicious: Alista must want something very badly to be so blatantly manipulative.

He discovered what that something was the next morning. It had all been rather too perfect: his favourite music, his favourite food, an excellent wine and his favourite companion. He was so relaxed and contented that Alista's words almost flowed over him. Then what she had said registered and he sprang to his feet to pace about the room.

"If the boy needs to go to the Sol system I will pay for his passage. He can go on a luxury liner, any boy of seventeen would like to travel on a luxury liner."

Alista's brow furrowed in a manner that reminded Lorn that this was one of the richest women on Coopersworld and that her fortune had been built up from nothing by dogged determination. "I do not want him to travel by luxury liner, I want him to travel with you. A boy should know his father."

Lorn decided to make a stand. "No. We are strangers and the boy resents me, an attitude that is perfectly normal under the circumstances. Forcing us into each other's company is not going to make us into father and son."

Alista's mouth was set hard. "Family is important. He is your son, your only child."

Lorn knew that the argument was lost even before it had properly begun; it had been lost when he saw Alista sitting at the edge of the lily pond, but he battled on. "So he can have all my credit when I die. He can even have my secret list of planets." He gave up and started to beg. "Please don't ask me to do this, Alista, the boy hates me, he would much prefer to travel on a liner."

Alista knew that she had won. The frown vanished and her lips curved in a smile. "Oh Lorn, you would think that Lester was still a little boy who hides grail bats in your clothes cupboard. He is a young man and a very clever young man at that. He has been accepted by the Academy."

Lorn imagined any son of his in the uniform of the Federation Navy and shuddered.

The trip from Donaldsville to Goldstein Starport was unbearably tense, so much so that Lorn wished he had taken the public shuttle rather than hired a hopper. The boy had grown over the previous three years but he was still small like his mother and his uncle. Lorn could not see any resemblance between himself and the boy

and briefly, hopefully, he wondered if the boy was someone else's child. He knew that it was a vain hope. He had been on Coopersworld from well before the conception until well after the child had been born: it had been the longest spell he had ever spent on a single planet since leaving Earth. He had been young and wealthy and Alista had been even younger and even wealthier: they had thought themselves in love.

Lorn wondered if the boy ever smiled. He took after his uncle in that: Kharon Marlbron never smiled. He made another half hearted attempt at conversation.

"Unless there is anything you need to do in Goldstein I intend to lift immediately," he informed the young man.

"Fine," stated the young man and the silence resettled.

Lorn should have known better than to try to slip his reluctant passenger past Charlie. She sauntered over just as Lorn had instructed Lester to remain outside the workshop.

"Not your usual type of passenger," Charlie observed loudly. "I did not know you liked boys."

Lorn took advantage of Lester's initial speechlessness. "This is my son, Lester."

Charlie scowled at the young man. "You've done a good job of hiding him, he's quite well grown." She studied the young man's features intently. "He looks familiar. Got it, Alista Marlbron and that brother of hers. So you are the elusive father, Lorn. Nice piece of gossip. Thanks."

Lorn knew that it was hopeless even to try persuading the garrulous old woman to hold her tongue. Instead he paid the outrageous bill without a quibble and hustled Lester towards the Marie Louise.

"What a disgusting old hag," Lester hissed.

Lorn thanked Fortune that Alista had taught the boy some manners; at least he had waited until they were out of earshot. "She's the greatest mechanic on Coopersworld, she can be as nose-y and obnoxious as she likes."

"She overcharged you," the boy told him.

"I know," Lorn admitted.

"Why did you pay then?" Lester demanded aggressively.

"Because I won't let anyone else touch the Marie Louise and she knows it," Lorn replied.

Lester stroked the Asp's hull. "She is beautiful," he confessed.

Lorn could not stop the fond smile that crept to his lips. "Wait until you see the inside."

They talked about nothing but the Marie Louise for the first ten days. It filled all the awkward gaps between the comfortable silences. Lorn had begun to think that the boy was more like him than he appeared: he had met far too few people who understood that there was no need to speak to fill a silence. Then, on the eleventh day the first telling question was asked.

"Lorn, why did you abandon my mother?"

After that the questions came thick and fast. Lorn tried his best to answer them but reasons that had seemed so compelling at the time sounded unconvincing when related to a young man whose view of the world was black and white with no room for grey. The boy had an almost childlike naivety that left Lorn questioning his whole lifestyle. Should he keep a slave? Should he work for a Corporation? Was it immoral to waste so much credits on luxuries?

Even so, Lorn was sorry when they Jumped into the Sol system and separated at Titan City. The boy was provided with naval transportation to the Academy while Lorn was going to take the opportunity to report in person to the Cisco Head-office on Mars. He spent a feverish half day rewriting his report to include the second

habitable: if he was going to see someone of importance then it would be worth making a good impression. He saw one of the twenty vice-presidents and felt ridiculously pleased to be received by such a prominent member of the Corporation, even though Lorn knew that the man's sole function in the Corporation was to shake hands and to tell people that they were doing a great job.

From Sol, Lorn Jumped to Epsilon Eridani, his favourite holiday haunt. One could get almost anything on Epsilon Eridani provided one had credit, and the Corporation's generosity had ensured that Lorn would have credit for a considerable time to come. After ten days of uninterrupted hedonism he decided it was time to pick out a companion for his next expedition. He contacted the slaver he normally bought from and arranged a viewing. There were seven to choose from, all under thirty. He had almost settled on the youngest, a ripe sixteen year old, when a mental image of Elise came sharply into focus and he selected a small, dark woman of twenty-eight with curly hair and velvet eyes.

Lorn stared at the yellow sun through the visor of his helmet then waited for the filters to readjust as he swept his gaze across the rolling landscape. Cevphi was a one in a thousand find: a habitable with an ambient temperature of 21 degrees Celsius and fifty percent Earth normal gravity. Cisco would pay a huge bonus for this one, maybe as much as they had paid for Phiface. A faint click heralded an incoming communication and Lorn suppressed his annoyance: He wished he had told Hannah to stay on the ship.

"Why can't I open my helmet?" she whined. "All the tests say that the air is fine."

Lorn was tempted to let her do it. Cisco would pay extra for such a pertinent test of atmospheric purity. He briefly considered the practicalities of isolating Hannah in a separate life support unit on the Marie Louise but decided that there was too great a chance of cross infection. Besides, the expedition was less than a third complete and he did not want to cut a second mission short for the lack of a woman.

"The helmet stays shut," he ordered. "Back to the ship."

He ignored her as they stood waiting in the airlock for the decontamination cycle to complete but watched her wriggle out of her suit once they were inside. Her hair was beginning to fade back to its original dark brown colour and he wondered yet again why he had chosen a woman with dark hair. He hated dark hair on a woman.

"Your hair needs doing," he informed her.

She glanced at him like a frightened rabbit and nodded before escaping into the galley to prepare a meal. Lorn settled into his chair and began the satisfying task of computing his projected profit.

Full Circle

David Massey

GENTLE GOLDEN SUNLIGHT streamed out of a clear blue Mediterranean sky, glinting off the polished buttons of the academy band as they played background music while the new graduates filed solemnly to their seats. The green and blue dress uniforms were pressed and spotless, every button burnished and bright. Each instrument shone with hours of cleaning and every note seemed to have a new minted quality in the pure clean air.

Lester drew the pure air deep into his lungs. He wanted to remember every bit of this day for the rest of his life. The amphitheatre, more than three thousand years old and still in use, was filling up with academy students, their relatives and guests. A bright and festive air hung over the non-naval personnel. They laughed and talked, the multi-coloured garments giving the place a holiday atmosphere. They contrasted in a pleasing manner with the naval personnel gathered on the ancient stage in formal uniforms, each with a row of service and combat medals adding distinctive colour to the muted uniforms.

Lester and his fellow graduates formed the central block to the audience, every face scrubbed, depilated and attentive. The final preparations for the day had kept them busy to the early hours last night, fetching gear from the laundry, stripping and cleaning, rubbing and polishing brightware and making sure that every last item was spotless. Checking each others' gear and parading before one another to make sure that they presented the very best image for the grand day.

Overhead a lone seagull screamed, wheeling in the beautiful sky of Earth, before turning out to sea, to fish in the clear waters of the bay. As a youth Lester had been used to money and the things riches could buy. But the years in the academy had taught him a humility and now he found the greatest joy in the abundance of nature and the beauty of living things than in any amount of material goods.

He wondered if it would break his mother's heart to know that he really did intend to take up his commission in the navy. Ever since his father had brought him to Earth, five years ago he had wondered at his mother's motives. He had no doubt that she had pulled numerous strings and used her enormous commercial influence to get him a place here, at the heart of the Federation. She had even managed to get an escort from the Admiral himself to attend today's ceremony. But there remained a small doubt about her real intentions. Somehow he doubted that Alista intended her son to be a naval officer, he always suspected her of harbouring political ambitions on his behalf. But he had grown up in the years on Earth and he had a mind of his own now.

He had made up his mind. He was going to take a renewable commission and devote himself to the Federation, just like the Admiral there. He glanced towards the assembled top brass sitting facing the growing audience as more and more visitors and graduates filed in. He wondered how often they had attended similar ceremonies, and whether they ever became bored of the displays. He could not envisage such a thing. His blood sang and his heart swelled as he swept his gaze around the open air stadium.

The ancient rocks, carved by civilisation almost as old as man soaked up the sun and the music as they had done for centuries. The air of solemnity imposed by the ancient surroundings contrasted with the whimsy of the bright clothes and muted chatter amongst the anxious and proud parents. Lester looked over into the crowd and caught the eye of his mother, still a strikingly handsome woman after all these years. She shook her head and her dark hair flew about her shoulders in wild abandon, no doubt helped by some expensive and exotic electrostatic device purchased for just such an effect.

It was odd to think of his mother as 'handsome'. His own taste in girlfriends ran to entirely different lines, but he was sure that many would be attracted to her charms, quite apart from the enormous wealth at her disposal. He wondered why she had never re-married after his father left, preferring instead the company of his uncle Kharon. She had plenty of boyfriends and male companions, but never become serious with any of them. It looked like she had her eye on the ambassador to Veliaze who was sitting next to her. They were flirting shamelessly in the morning sun.

His mother laughed at some joke made by the ambassador. She caught Lester looking in her direction and gave him a broad wink, smiled and turned back to her companion. She seemed perfectly content to enjoy the

carnival atmosphere which was present amongst that part of the crowd. Lester had no doubts that as soon as the graduation ceremony really got underway, they would all become attentive immediately. Meanwhile, why shouldn't they have a chat and a joke when it was such a truly glorious day?

Admiral Flaggherty, sweated in stifling heat. His collar itched and no matter how he shifted in his chair the damned sword just would not shift correctly. He hated these formal occasions – he always had and he always would. Damn that Marlbron woman for getting him to Earth. She must have called in a host of favours to ensure that his schedule got him to the academy just as graduation was due. He had to admire the cunning of the woman. He could hardly turn down the honour of the occasion since he was there on Earth at the time. Especially when he had the privilege of handing out the class honours himself.

He tried to stifle a yawn as the green and blue clad band struck up another martial air. He didn't even like military music, it was just one of the things you had to put up with. It went with the rank, like endless discussion meetings and senate inquiries into fleet expenses. If only they would learn a few jazz numbers, or some operatic pieces, it would make the day pass more quickly for him.

Looking around the old ruins, collapsing in the heat but still with astonishing acoustics, Derek thought back to his own graduating days. He wondered if the young men in the audience today felt the same gut wrenching nerves that he had. He doubted that things had changed very much. He could certainly remember the excitement of receiving his first orders and realising in an instant that he was to fly on a brand new cruiser's maiden voyage. Jolius must have been intensely jealous, but had his own scouting mission to perform.

He had met Jolius just two years ago, still flying scouts but now in charge of exploration of the whole third quadrant. His friend had looked fit and healthy, his red and blue Bermuda shorts tastefully set off by a lime green wide-brimmed hat as they relaxed from their duties, fishing in the oceans of New California in Liaququ. They were fishing for the local stinger, imported from the Empire world of Facece and thoroughly delicious. Somehow anything caught by your own hand always seemed to have more taste than commercial crops.

Jolius' high gravity background showed in the dense muscles which could not be hidden by the slight layer of fat accumulating around his midriff. There had been a great deal of fun poked at the growing expanse of flesh, but Jolius had mellowed over the years and the playful teasing was met with only playful cuffs in return. The brilliant white sun of Liaququ had baked the deck of the ship and the two men on it, but years of deep space work had turned their skins a deep brown and they had nothing to fear from its harsh rays. Navy men routinely kept up anti-cancer treatments along with a host of allergen-suppressants to be able to keep active on a wide variety of worlds.

It had been great to see the man again. Neither of them were getting any younger and both had positions of high responsibility. It was always a good idea to seize any opportunity to relax. They had caught three good fish that day; Jolius got two, but his own catch was the largest. The bright red and amber colours had shimmered in the sun. The succulent flesh had put a fitting seal on a glorious day when they had camped out the night with an impromptu barbeque on the beach.

Jolius' wife had driven out to greet them, with a few friends, and they had broken open a few bottles of Old Nova and sang ancient songs into the night. The holiday had been pretty good, though there was only that day of fishing; the native life broke through the farm perimeter the next day, so all tourist activity had to be curtailed. The Admiral and the Fleet commander had had to return to normal duty almost immediately, but it was nice to know that the old friendship still lasted.

Admiral Flaggherty looked into the warm sky, feeling a faint breeze on his cheek. The light of the sun seemed sallow in comparison to the actinic glaze of a hot F white like Liaququ, but it felt somehow 'right', as if the ancient sun of Earth was a memory buried deep in the consciousness of every human no matter what planet they were brought up on. In the same way, the deep green of the olive trees dotted around the rim of the amphitheatre seemed to exude a natural health which was somehow missing from Earth plants on many other worlds. There was no doubt that Earth was a comfortable planet. Flaggherty always enjoyed returning to the home of humanity.

He hadn't been too happy the very first time he returned to Earth. It was after his first space voyage immediately following his commission. The trip to the Empire had gone smoothly and the ambassador had been safely delivered with all due pomp and a suitable show of military strength. The shipboard gossip had been that

the appearance of a brand new Federation cruiser had played a valuable part in some Federation-Empire land negotiations.

That had been little comfort to young Derek Flagggherty who had almost faced a Court Martial as soon as his feet touched Federation soil. The Secret service had whisked him away from the Spirit of Amenitris and subjected him to an intense interrogation. He had been let off without charges after a couple of days, when it was clear that his contact with the Empire spy had been minimal at best.

It had been sheer good luck when he had noticed the girl he had known as Sophie Redbridge in a naval base on Democracy in the Zeaex system. The area had been and probably still was one of many hotly disputed systems. The presence of an Empire spy deep in the heart of the Federation command structure caused a tremendous stir. He was lucky that she had been going in a different direction and had not seen him. He had been able to alert the secret service and identify her then left the Feds to deal with the problem as they saw fit.

If he was honest, that was probably the first real break for his career, since it not only removed the earlier blemish from his record, but also brought him some favourable press. When he had risen further in the ranks and his security clearance had improved, he looked out the Redbridge dossier. He had not been allowed to move from the room where the high security screen was kept. A closed circuit monitor kept him under constant surveillance, carefully positioned so that he had to remain in view of the camera's blinking red glare, but the security screen remained invisible to the guards watching him.

The discovery of the Empire techniques for foiling DNA fingerprints had been a revelation to Federation scientists and he did not know how the security had been tightened up since then. There had been no obvious changes to procedures, but he suspected that there must have been a lot of frantic activity in some unseen laboratories throughout the Federation to come up with additional security measures. Derek despised the secrecy and cloak and dagger aspects which he had to deal with occasionally. He was much happier with open actions and always felt unclean after his brushes with the security boys and girls.

Apparently, Sophie had not been arrested, but used as a way of channelling false information through to the Empire. Derek had been relieved to read that last piece of information. He respected her in some ways, even now. She had chosen a dangerous career and he could not regard her as a traitor. After all, she was not really a Federation citizen, whatever her computer record might show. He was very relieved that she had been found though and neutralised so effectively.

The warmth of the Mediterranean sun was putting him to sleep, he realised. He had almost nodded off in his chair. That would never do! He looked over the colourful array of happy parents, and saw in one corner the arrival of a vid team, settling to the ground in their outside broadcast skimmer. Apparently his appearance was enough to warrant a thirty-second slot on a local news channel, or maybe they did this every year for the graduating class.

Seeing that there was still a large number of people to come into the amphitheatre, Derek allowed himself to sink back into reverie.

If the discovery of Sophie had cleared his record and restored him to good favour with the navy, his first real break must have been the capture of Darling Hanson. The pirate had been operating near Anyeth at the same time as he had been passing through with the Spirit of Amenitris. They would not have encountered the pirate and his flotilla, if it hadn't been for the tip off from Topaz.

As it was, they had quietly followed up a lead about some goldskin furs and easily followed a trail backwards to the pirates temporary base. Flagggherty had been on fighter duty when the pirates were encountered so he was amongst the officers who got to engage the pirates man to man and ship to ship. The fight had been sharp and fierce, but the individual pirate vessels were no match for the navy modified Falcons and Eagles. Flagggherty's ship had brought down one of the pirates on its own and had assisted in the final confrontation with Hanson himself.

Flaggherty still had a much worn goldskin rug decorating the wall of his stateroom in the Poseidon. Odd how you pick up personal treasures from the strangest of places. He had taken the skin from the control room of Hanson's own ship, when he accepted the man's surrender after he had retreated to his escape pod. The action against the pirates had earned Flagggherty his first field promotion, and re-confirmed his commitment to the navy.

The faint humming of a floating vid sphere interrupted his recollection. It hovered about six metres off the ground, spinning slowly in its own turbulence. He noticed that there were five of the recorders scanning the ceremony, floating unobtrusively over and around the gathering crowd. The operators were clustered at the banks of monitor screens, draped with wires and cords and optic links and microwave transmitters. The petal like segments of satellite transmitters unfolded at the back of the vid crew. Obviously this was not just a local transmission. By squinting Derek was able to make out the logo on one of the crew. She was a technician from Aymiai. Of course, they were covering the graduation of the system's richest heir, the Marlbron boy.

He thought back to his own early interviews. He had been petrified by the camera presence and faltered his way through the gruelling interviews in a stuttering and disorganised fashion. As his achievements mounted and his rank increased, he came to hate the vid reporters and sensationalist hunters, more avaricious than itorilleta. His first experience with a good interviewer had been with Walter M'banwe, just as the man was coming to prominence as a freelance journalist and reporter.

M'banwe had come along on a raid on a drug synthesis plant on an asteroid in the Daurila system. The reporter had been able to put him at his ease and his skilful control of the cid cameras had been completely unobtrusive. The two men had swapped stories and anecdotes over a couple of days, as they approached the pirate base, then M'banwe seemed to fade out of sight during the actual confrontation. Derek had reached the rank of flotilla commander by then and had been dreading having non-navy personnel under foot, but none of his fears had been realised.

When they had had to land on the asteroid to finish off the clearing out operation, M'banwe had been along, toting a rifle as well as his monitor devices. Later he related some of his hunting exploits to Flaggherty, and a firm friendship had developed. No one was more delighted than Derek when M'banwe won the coveted Altair medal for the documentary on the raid. Derek still had a signed copy of the original vid somewhere amongst his belongings.

Capturing Darling Hanson and breaking up the vicious drug operation had been high-points of Derek's career, but not all of his operations had been so glamorous or as successful. His ears still burned with shame when he remembered the total waste of effort spent at the request of the Guardians of the Free Spirit. He had received the emergency broadcast while he was just cruising around, showing the flag for the Federation.

The distress channel had wailed out its message, reporting terrible crimes and disaster. The entire flotilla had been recalled from the edges of the system and launched off in pursuit of the offender. The Guardians kept a continual stream of accusations and curses, demanding retribution for the troubles caused by a fleeing ship. Derek wondered what in space the pilot had imagined was happening when he noticed the five Federation navy ships fast on his trail.

The Iolanthe had jumped early from the system, but the Captain must have been unaware of the tracking devices of the navy ships. They soon overhauled the freighter and Derek had been ready to engage his full fighting force when the ship surrendered without a squeak. When he had a chance to look over the desperado's vessel, he was not surprised at the rapid capitulation. He was amazed that the tub had managed to take off at all, let alone make a hyperspace jump.

In fact, he had his engineers patch up Captain Jupiter's ship before they returned to the religious colony. When Flaggherty heard the charges read against Jupiter, he stormed out of the courtroom. It was not often he lost his temper, but something about the self righteous air of piety exuded by the church officials set his teeth on edge. He had ended up threatening to destroy the colony dome himself unless they let the Iolanthe free!

He had wasted days of effort and countless Federation credits employing five ships to chase down a two-bit trader who simply wanted a coffee machine repaired! In the end he had even managed to find a spare coffee machine on one of his ships, which he donated to the much relieved Captain Jupiter. As he had reflected at the time, any man who can stomach navy coffee couldn't be all bad.



The big break in his career had been the destruction of the pirate slave trading operation on Fortress Cousens, orbiting New California in Epsilon Eridani. The 'blue prince' Phildop IV had been bribing Corporation officials to let him establish a slave trading empire based at the orbital station. The operation was not illegal in itself, since the station did not fall under Federation law, but when the operation began to spread to nearby Federation worlds, the navy had been able to act.

Derek Flaggherty had strong feelings about the subject of slavery and had pursued Phildop back into the Empire. The pirate had tried to make several stands, calling on help from other groups who had formed into a cartel at one point and threatened to form a pirate navy. Derek had been responsible for breaking up the fleet before it could become a real threat. His final confrontation with the pirate chiefs in their captured cruiser had caught the public imagination. It had even spawned a mini-series on the Federation vid-circuit.

It was that operation, combined with a consistent record of achievement, which brought him promotion to Admiral at such a young age. He hoped that he had fitted the role adequately. It was a long time since he first received his stripes and now he was at the very top of the service. He only wished that he could spend more time out in the depths of space, instead of having to attend these wretched ceremonies. Damn these collars, why did they always itch so? He had decided long ago that he must have an allergy against diplomatic meetings. If only he could have a cup of coffee to steady his nerves.

Lester Marlbron gazed in open admiration at the man on the podium at the front of the stage. What a privilege to meet the man responsible for deposing the blue prince. He could still remember how his uncle Kharon had danced round the main room in glee when the pirate operation was smashed. His uncle did not talk much about his days as a slave, but the humiliation of the time had ingrained itself upon his uncle's character and it was one thing Lester was determined to fight against.

His heart swelled with pride at the realisation that he would be receiving his commission from the hero of Iohoay. As a young man he had read of the Admiral's exploits and escapades. He had early picked on Admiral Flaggherty as a role model for an ideal navy officer. He sat back in the stone seat, keeping his back straight and trying not to be distracted. The ceremony was about to begin. The last of the audience had filed into the amphitheatre and the vid cameras had all taken unobtrusive locations to cover the front tiers and stage. He felt a warm glow of satisfaction flow through him. Two hours from now and he would be firmly in the grip of the navy. The prospect filled him with pride.

He peered more closely at the men sitting on the stage. The two rear-admirals and the Lunar ambassador looked fresh and alert, eager to begin the formalities with short speeches, but something was happening there. One of the minor diplomats invited to attend the function and sitting next to Admiral Flaggherty was poking the Admiral in the ribs. Surely the man couldn't have fallen asleep? The sudden blare of trumpets from the band signalled the start of the ceremony. With a guilty start Admiral Flaggherty jerked to attention and rose with the rest of the officials as the first of the new graduates walked forward to receive his honours.