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Crazy Ships  
by Darrell Bain  
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Science Fiction

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CH000

\*PROLOG\*

\_Old John Tremaine sat in his form fitted and form adapting office

chair with his feet propped on his massive oak desk. He was clad in the silver tunic and gray pants of the all-powerful Tremaine clan. His crossed feet were enclosed in soft leather black boots with silver piping. Across the expanse of the deep live-carpeted office a beautiful young woman sat in the corner, leaning back in a similar, though smaller chair with her legs crossed. She was scantily but expensively clad in raiment which brightened every part of her exquisitely shaped body except her face. Tremaine stared at her for a moment then looked away. He couldn't stand to see the blankness behind her otherwise strikingly pretty eyes. He knew about the blankness, having seen it all his life in young female bondies and some male bonders as well. The only duty of the young woman in the office was to please him, in whatever way he asked. He wondered what his peers would think if they knew he had never used her for anything other than decoration -- and to dissuade suspicions that he might be a closet liberal. It had been many years since he had commanded a woman to do anything having to do with sex and he could look back now and be ashamed of the times he had in his youth.\_

Thinking back, he remembered that it was that very thing which had started him on the long road leading to the place where he was now, a place which, if his plans succeeded, would remove him and his family from the present political and social structure which ordered Earth's affairs. He chuckled to himself as he thought of the horror most of the executives on earth would feel if they knew of his scheme.

"Sir?" The girl stood up, displaying her magnificent body. His chuckle hadn't been quite as silent as he has thought.

"Nothing. Go back to your room. Do something fun for yourself. The day is almost over."

"Yes, sir. What should I do?"

\_Tremaine waved a hand in irritation. That was the problem, all right. Bondies and Bonders didn't usually have choices and when they were offered one on rare occasions they didn't know what to do with it. Well, if everything worked out the way he sincerely hoped it would, that sort of thing would no longer be his problem. If his plans worked out. If he lived through them. That was still to be determined.\_

\* \* \* \*

John Tremaine had no way of knowing that several years previously the assembly line on the moon which built the Mass Displacement ships, run by bondees with little incentive to do good work, had overlooked a crucial failure along the line where suppressor circuits for the computers going into the mass displacement ships were assembled. One of the imperfect computers was passed before the line was halted. It was a very small flaw, nothing that would keep the ship that received it from operating efficiently. It wasn't even noticeable, nor would it be for years to come, but when it did become apparent, it would impact the old man's concerns in ways that he couldn't have anticipated.

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CH001

\*CHAPTER ONE \*

Janie cupped her firm young breasts as she watched her reflection in the mirror, just as she did almost every morning. Of course she knew from the extrapolation of her registered genome almost to the millimeter how large they would get, but at fifteen it was hard to wait.

\_But I'm almost there,\_ she thought.

Janie was almost fully mature. Nearly a year ago she had had her implant, the one that not only rearranged the normal estrogenic hormones in order to prevent conception, but also discontinued her monthly periods for the next five years. For that, she was grateful. With the simplicity of thought that youth is subject to, she wondered why there had to be periods at all. Why couldn't they figure out how to keep women from having them?

\_Oh, well. It's over with for now. The next time will be when I decide to get pregnant -- if I ever do.\_

"Hey, quit playing with your tits and get dressed! We'll be late for school." Startled, Janie spun around to see her brother Steve's head and shoulders projecting through the image of the bedroom door. His short brown hair was still damp from his shower, but she could see that he was already dressed. Flushing, she stuck out her tongue at him and turned away. Steve could always manage to embarrass her. He was right, though. Her little thumbnail watch told her that she was running late when she squeezed her forefinger against her thumb, and if she didn't hurry, the Miss know-it-all teaching program would be sure to have something to say about it. Quickly, she pulled on briefs, jeans and pullover, shook out her hair, and told the bathroom she was finished. It began cleaning up after her even as the door dissolved away into nothingness. She ran out to face the new day.

Steve waited for his sister impatiently. He was anxious to start the morning's lessons. This was history week, his favorite subject. He wished it came up more often, but at their age, the teaching program didn't allow much variation in the schedule -- at least not the one their parents subscribed to. Sometimes he thought they were too strict, but he had to admit that he and Janie were far more advanced than most of their friends. It wouldn't be long before they would be ready for an adult program, where the general would evolve into specifics, preparing them for a profession. Or more likely, he thought, we'll study genetics and business and go to work for Dad and Mom. It was either that or become a corporate executive and he could think of nothing he would rather not do. In a way, he would hate to see the landmark of the adult program arrive. It would almost certainly mean that he and Janie's programs would diverge, separating them for a part of every morning. He was interested in history and computers; she tended more toward biology and graphics.

"I'm here! We can start, now!" Janie burst into their common room and plopped herself down beside her waiting twin brother. She wiggled for a moment while her half of the couch adjusted to her contours then gave him her usual morning peck on the cheek.

"About time," Steve remarked. He reached down, and Janie's hand came entwining into his own, completing their morning ritual. The two youngsters were almost identical twins, sexual differences aside. Both had the same short, curly brown hair, almost the same length, and their features plainly derived from the same genetic inheritance: long lashed brown eyes, high cheekbones, full, sensual lips and even white teeth. Steve was slightly the taller, youthfully lean muscled, but still wanting some height, while his sister's body had already reached nearly her predetermined height, though she still had a bit of filling out to do in the breasts and hips.

The common room held gymnastic and aerobic exercise devices, a standard all purpose exercise mat, several shelves of antique books belonging mostly to Steve, and individual side by side computer alcoves. Their personal body computers were racked in slots by the entranceway, keyed to the main home computer, but in stand-by operating mode, ready to be plucked and hung like a necklace inside their pullovers whenever they left home. They were powered then by body heat. Lately, Steve had begun teasing Janie about how much more power hers received by virtue of residing between her burgeoning breasts. She retaliated by suggesting that he carry his own inside his pants.

One wall of the common room was completely blank, reserved as a background for wide vision holoprojections of games, lessons, news, or entertainment. As they sat together, an image formed there, that of the kindly, gray haired woman used by their teaching program. During sessions, they addressed it as Miss Pringle. The program had determined from their personality and intelligence profiles and socioeconomic status that during the current year of instruction they would benefit from an authority figure, and the program refused to respond to any other form of address. In private, though, they referred to the projection as "Mrs. Grundy", from an obscure reference Steve had dug up from his voluminous reading.

"I see that you're ready," the Miss Pringle projection announced.

"Thank you for being on time this morning." The background whirled and readjusted to display Miss Pringle sitting at an old fashioned desk, the angle adjusted to place her image at a higher elevation than the seated teen-agers, imparting a subtle hint of superiority. To her right and left, more background filled in, one scene split between a picturesque upper class neighborhood of multi-level, colored homes surrounded by swaths of greenery and a cutaway of their own home which flicked from room to room at set intervals, displaying the various comfortably functional accommodations the home was programmed for. It showed the auto kitchen, their individual bedrooms and baths, their parent's more spacious bedroom and common, the lower level entertainment and living areas, and every so often images of the perfectly tended greenery and stone laced paths outside. The other projection depicted a complete contrast in life style and affluence. It was also split, one projection showing a narrow lane between drab, storied buildings, peopled with even drabber throngs of dispirited humanity, men, women and children, dressed mostly in corporation coveralls of one color. Those not bonded to a corporation wore clothing of their own selection, some brighter but most even less colorful than the one piece suits of the bondees.

The projected groups of humanity moved slowly, as if they had no real purpose or goal in life. Another, narrower lane split the central one before it faded into mistiness, and at each corner of the intersection a group of two, three or in one case a half dozen slightly more colorful inhabitants lounged against the walls of the buildings or near the entrances to tiny shops. The women wore their coveralls split open to the waist, displaying gaudily painted breasts and were trying to appear seductive, but making a poor job of it. Only occasionally did a prospective customer stop to inquire, and they usually moved on without striking a bargain. When an occasional vehicle did stop at their stations, there usually occurred a furtive exchange of money or goods. Occasionally one of the loitering figures entered a ground vehicle and departed with his or her customer.

The alternate image took Janie and Steve inside one of the buildings, displaying a large, barracks-like room. A common bath and shower showed at one end of long rows of tiered bunks as if from the vantage point of a funnel. The image flickered and panned backwards, along the spartan bunks to several holo-protected common rooms on either side. A man and two women walked through the opaque projection as they watched, and the imaged barrier immediately changed color, denoting occupancy.

Steve shifted his attention away from the images and raised his brows at Janie. She squeezed his hand, giving her assent for him to begin the interaction.

"Miss Pringle, this is obviously meant to show the contrasting lifestyles of citizens, in this case between the executives and the very lowest of corporate bondees, but what's the point? We already know that we're well off. Dad makes a good living with his interest in the Geneplan company. Shucks, he designed us, didn't he? Why do we need to know how the bondees and the unemployed live?" It was a leading question, and Steve knew it. For the last few days, they had been exposed each morning to a history of how the bonding system of the giant corporations had come into being. Basically, with the decline and fall of organized labor unions and increasing mechanization of mundane, labor intensive jobs, the only security for most workers lay in lifetime contracts with a corporation; especially after most federal welfare went the way of the dodo and great auk. It was interesting, but it didn't really seem germane to their positions. It appeared simple enough to him, as it had been explained so far, though of late he had begun to feel a sense of guilt at how well off they were in comparison to most of humanity. \_No wonder there are so many volunteers for the crazy ships,\_ he thought\_. If I had to live like that, I'd volunteer, too.\_ Or maybe not, considering the odds. And "volunteering" for a crazy ship was usually a courthouse affair with a judge doing the volunteering.

In the previous day's session, Miss Pringle had suggested that the

corporate bonding system amounted to chattel slavery, with bondees (usually called bonders, the male form of the word) having only the one choice of performing exactly as their corporate bosses directed, or running out on their contracts and descending into the nether world of anarchy, free of coercion, but also free to go hungry and shelterless. In a sidebar, Miss Pringle had warned them not to speak publicly of this, suggesting that Mr. and Mrs. Joplin had somehow subverted the teaching program in order to convey this information.

Neither Steve nor Janie could quite imagine what either slavery or bonding entailed. They had never been exposed either physically or socially to such an environment, and had no inkling that they ever would. Since the majority of public schooling had collapsed well before their birth, they had had even minimal exposure to other young people of less affluence in the city of Houston; their peers and schoolmates lived in the same development they did. It was hard for them to grasp just how desperate conditions were outside of their protected neighborhood.

Miss Pringle touched a finger to her chin, then replied to Steve's question. "Yes, I am showing you a contrast in lifestyles. The contrast is very great, and the gap is widening more rapidly than you might imagine. As to why I am emphasizing this contrast, there are two reasons: one, you must learn what every strata of society entails, in order for you to function within that society and two, you must learn of the inequities inherent in the world today against the very real possibility that you may at some time be forced to participate at a lower socioeconomic level than you now occupy."

Janie shifted in her seat, causing it to maneuver to accommodate her new position. She didn't like the implications of the last statement. She squeezed Steve's hand tighter. "Why do you say that, Miss Pringle?"

Miss Pringle leaned forward, pointing a finger at both of them. "It should be obvious to you from what we've been studying lately. What has always happened in history when the disparity between rich and poor grows as great as it is now? Also, when there are no anti-monopoly laws in the present society, how do business function?"

Steve had the answer to that one. "The big corporations gobble up the littler ones. Wages go down and prices go up. Finally, the have-nots will revolt against the haves." He knew this to be a truism intellectually, but it really didn't seem applicable to him personally rather a learned formula to be quoted in response to the teaching program. He couldn't imagine either himself or Janie wearing drab corporate coveralls and laboring at menial jobs for little more than bare subsistence, or even worse, serving as indentured playthings for corporate executives. Stories were rife among their contemporaries of what went on within the confines of corporate walls. He didn't know how true they were, but he had noticed that there was a dearth of attractive young men and women shown or seen performing menial jobs, suggesting that they were occupied elsewhere. Surely all bonders couldn't be as sad looking as those he saw on Miss Pringle's projections, or those he saw in person when he and Janie were out touring the city. He had a momentary image of Janie being stripped naked and ordered to submit to a bloated corporate executive, unable to resist. Better a berth on the Crazy Ships if it ever came to that, not that it ever would. He shook off the image like a dog shedding water after a swim.

"Correct, the have-nots will rebel," Miss Pringle said. "However, I believe that revolution will not occur for some time yet." She paused, adjusted her wire frame glasses and waited for comment.

Janie spoke up. "Why not? I don't see how conditions could get much worse for bonders and bondies. I'm just glad Mom and Dad were able to get their own company started."

"A rarity in this day and age," Miss Pringle said. "But let me show you another aspect of the bonding system. I'm sure that you are both aware of how the big corporations, most notably the Tremaine group, now control the justice system?"

"Sort of," Steve said. "It started with privately run prisons, then eventually the government began contracting the court system to the corporations."

"Correct." Miss Pringle agreed. The previous images dissolved in a swirl of color and were replaced by a panorama all across the room, broken up into separate scenes. One showed a disorganized line of mostly dark skinned men and women being shoved forward into a courtroom, manacled hands evident as they were forced into seated position on long benches. Corporation lawyers, evidenced by meticulously tailored, brightly colored tunics of their corporations stood waiting near the judge, who seemed singularly uninterested in the whole process. As Steve and Janie watched, the proceedings took on more of the aspects of a slave auction than a trial. The lawyers bid for the miscreants in subdued voices, those not being sentenced to swamp taming in Georgia or even worse, were sent to the African work camps. These were almost all young indebted first offenders that had tried to make it outside the corporate bonds and failed, though there were others there for petty thievery or for dealing in goods which were corporate monopolies. These had been offered a choice and had accepted corporate contracts at the very bottom of the ladder rather than the much worse alternatives. Once a bid was settled, the manacled subject was led away. Only once was the routine disturbed. A young couple, faces set in grim determination, balked while the bidding was taking place. The young man spoke for the both of them.

"Judge, we'll take the Crazy Ships instead of bonding, if you'll let us."

The judge blinked and waved away the corporate lawyers in order to speak directly to the couple. "Fine, fine. More young people should volunteer to go out on the mass displacement colony ships. You'll still have to accept a contract with the Tremaine Corporation, though. Let's see what they have to say. Mr. Borland?"

"Yes, your honor. I've already reviewed their records. Both are above average in intelligence and are literate besides. The colony can use them if they make it. However, considering that their offense was against corporate regulations, under pricing of foodstuffs consigned to them for sale, we think some punishment is deserved. This might best be accomplished if they signed on as crew rather than one way colonists. We're prepared to offer a contract to both of them, only three jumps on a mass displacement ship. If they survive, status as free colonists and a clean slate on Sporeworld. How they manage then is up to them."

The judge addressed the couple. "Is that satisfactory?"

There was a hurried consultation between the man and woman. "Yes, judge. We accept. Anything is better than being bonded."

"Order. You will not denigrate corporate law in this courtroom. Application approved. Mr. Borland, remove them. Submit the proper forms if or when the applicants complete their indenture. Next case."

Janie was horrified. "Miss Pringle! Are those people insane? Three jumps on the crazy ships gives them only one chance in eight of making it! What can they be thinking?"

Miss Pringle removed her glasses and pierced the twins with bright green eyes set beneath a frown. "It's worse than they think. Even should they survive three jumps on a mass displacement ship, or crazy ship in the common vernacular, they will still arrive at the colony with no assets and little prospects of earning an independent living, or so it is said. Unless they are very lucky, they will shortly be in the very same position they are now. The Tremaine Corporation controls the colony government of Sporeworld and it has very little sympathy with unemployed colonists."

"Why not?" Steve asked. "That's all you see in the games any more, brave colonists battling against the odds, et cetra."

"And the games always show the loners coming back to the corporate viewpoint. The Tremaine family has held power now for many years through their

control of imports from Sporeworld." She paused for a moment as if in thought. "That may be coming to an end, though. The financial markets show an increasing instability in firms dealing with Sporeworld products. Imports are down and too many ships aren't making it back." She displayed a chart depicting the trends.

Janie squeezed Steve's hand. She wasn't thinking of financial conditions on earth or how many crazy ships went the wrong way. Stories and rumors were all over the map about conditions on Sporeworld of the Antairian system, the only true earthlike world so far discovered. The one good thing that could be said about it was that it was far better there than on a few other newly discovered planets where survival beyond a few years was problematical.

The Tremaine Corporation held the monopoly on the priceless biotics shipped back from Sporeworld, these being the giant spores from which all flora and fauna on the colony planet propagated. Their most valuable attribute was as a source of a life extending product for the elderly, those too old to have had the genes programmed into them as Steve and Janie had.

"Can't the government do anything? Find out why the ships are being lost so often? Or improve conditions for the bonders so they'll work harder?" Steve asked. It was a rhetorical question, designed to give him a little time to think. Was the bonding process really so bad that some people would take their chances with the Crazy Ships rather than submit to it?

"The corporations are the government, for all practical purposes."

Miss Pringle displayed another scene. It was voting day in a Houston district, but very few voters were apparent. The ones who came shambling into the shabby old former school building looked either resigned or furtive; most of them were old, their wrinkles showing plainly that they were outside the boundaries of the AARP Corporation. Once upon a time the Association of Retired People had been a real force in politics, but it had since degenerated to a power clique of a relatively few wealthy worthies, who no longer looked old but had been around so long they controlled the giant corporation. They could afford the fantastically expensive rejuvenation processes from Sporeworld, and held onto that unaffordability with the relentless determination of soldiers facing a ravaging enemy invading their homeland.

"Here you see the remnants of democracy. A few old people whose social security pensions have been reduced year after year, until most of them have given up on trying to change the system. The majority of voters are bonders, and they vote the way they are told to vote by the corporations. Ostensibly, their ballots are secret, but you know, or should know, that corporate executives have had long, long lives to subvert the computer voting programs. It would take a brave bonder to vote against their meal ticket, especially when voting day is about the only time they ever get a few extra amenities."

Now Steve was almost certain that what they were hearing was a bootlegged addition to the teaching program that the senior Joplins had somehow manage inserted into their computer. He wondered how they had managed that trick.

"Those people look so old," Janie said. "Are they going to die soon?"

"All humans die eventually, as you well know," Miss Pringle said.

"However, in the present circumstances, some die much sooner than others. You, for instance, may well live to be several hundred years old, given that the means remain available to you. Even without, you know you can anticipate a very long lifespan. Not only that, you both have been endowed with genomes that prohibit many infections and other illnesses. You are fortunate. It has only been in the last couple of generations that genetic manipulation of this sort has been available, and even so, only the affluent have been able to afford to provide that selection process for their children. This is another reason discontent is rising so much lately. When life itself is concerned, the survival instinct begins to surface in humans."

"We're both the same, too, aren't we?" Steve asked, though he already knew the answer. He just wanted to change the subject. He couldn't imagine a

revolt, or a war such as he liked to interact with in his history programs.

"You are. In fact, there is no reason why you could not recombine your genetic inheritance. Neither of you harbors any harmful recessive alleles, but of course, there is still a considerable reluctance in general against such a course of action, particularly in the religious community." The apathetic voters were replaced by a background of a huge open-air gathering of packed humanity, dominated by a raised dais where a longhaired evangelist exhorted his flock.

"Religion!" Janie spat out the word. "How on earth can people believe in that nonsense? There's no logic in it at all!"

Miss Pringle's face became disapprovingly harsh. "Now, Janie, we went over that three years ago. You remember, don't you? Religious belief is a reflection of humanity's fear of death, and the propensity to believe in religions evolved from an inability of primitive humans to understand the working of natural forces. It continues to this day among the general population for the same reasons, and also because of the inertia of human society: parents teach their children what they learned from their parents. Remember, you and Steve are a very distinct minority. Most children don't have the benefit of a teaching program like me and..." She hesitated as if consulting an internal file then continued. "...and the presumed benefit of having had much of the belief gene complex selected out before conception. Not only that, the corporations encourage religious beliefs, within limits. So long as the preachers don't exhort against the corporations, it's an allowable eccentricity and a beneficial one so far as the corporations are concerned. It keeps down unrest."

Steve's mind raced. \_So that's why neither of us believes in religion! And what a cute way to let us know, right in the middle of a lesson! I wonder if Janie caught it?\_

Janie hadn't; she was noticing how many of the congregation wore corporate colored coveralls. "It's still stupid. Why can't people see that it's illogical? The only thing that all religions have in common is that they all claim to be the only right one. And if you start reading about them, well \_"

Miss Pringle interrupted when Janie hesitated. "Most humans are illogical when it comes to religion," she said.

"I'm not!" Janie and Steve said in unison.

"No, you and Steve have both had the benefit of logical upbringing and careful genetic selection. That isn't usually the case. Even corporate executives are subject to religious influence. Many of them have the same fears and hopes as the lower classes do. That's one reason why there is such discordance concerning genetic engineering today, other than to enable the long life and disease resistant procedures you contain within your bodies. Lately, laws, or more accurately, corporation regulations have been passed against some types of genetic engineering of plants and animals. Can either of you tell me why?"

"Sure," Steve said. "Too many enhanced animals have gotten loose in the wilds and are harming the world's ecology."

"Correction," Miss Pringle said. "The plants and animals multiplying in the wilds are harming the corporation balance sheets. Agribusiness especially is suffering. It doesn't take much of that until religious objections become the same as corporate policy. And speaking of corporate policy, let's continue."

Again, the projections changed, showing a bonding market on either side of her desk, one depicting women, and the other men. The program recorded Steve and Janie's heartbeat, brainwaves, and other, more subtle indications of their interest. The teaching persona shifted to one side and the images of men up for bids faded behind her and the one of women on the other side enlarged.

"We're still studying lifestyles in the present cultural context," she reminded them, redundantly, as their interest showed plainly. A flock of preening young, mostly white males sat in plush leather robochairs, all in a



row before a small raised platform where young women were paraded one by one. They were dressed arbitrarily in various styles of skirts and pants and unisex coveralls. As each was called to the platform, two blank faced older women required them to completely undress. The matrons went about their tasks mechanically, ignoring the tears and protests, using force when it was needed, but never unnecessarily.

The corporate executives made their bids in low voices, conferring with each other, occasionally pointing at the women. When a bid was finalized, the woman had her thumbprint affixed to a document and was led off. They all seemed resigned to the process. None volunteered for the Crazy Ships.

Steve noticed the women's almost universal good looks and suddenly suspected that they had never been offered a choice, either for the crazy ships, the swamps or the African work camps. Whatever their offense might have been, or even if they were simply coming of legal age and entering the market, he knew that their only destiny now was service as corporate whores. He also knew without an iota of doubt that the Joplins had intervened with the teaching program. It was not a scene a corporate program would ever allow to be shown.

The scene blanked out, leaving Miss Pringle dominant. She leaned forward over her imaginary desk, fixing Steve and Janie with her eyes like those of a predatory cat. "Is this a legitimate contract? Is this a real bonding contract? Do the people involved really have a choice other than to escape into the wilds or the underground? Is this essentially slavery? Before you answer, review your previous lessons, particularly on the subject of slavery before the American Civil War."

Janie squeezed Steve's hand, and he indicated that she should answer. He knew that Miss Pringle must be aware of their signals, but the program had never mentioned it, apparently deciding that it went well with the objectives of the lessons.

Janie began an analysis, then Steve picked it up. The Miss Pringle program guided their answers into the areas it thought they should go. Eventually the session ended, not with any conclusions by either Janie or Steve, but they were left with plenty to think about, and not a little reasoning to go through before the afternoon class. Even after the program went back into its electronic netherworld, Janie couldn't quite let the subject go. "Stevie, I'm still thinking about that poor couple who volunteered for the Crazy Ships in the courtroom. How could they do it? Don't they know what happens if the jump goes backwards?"

"They starve to death. You know that. Or at least that's the theory. No ship has ever come back to tell the tale."

Janie shivered. "And they're ready to risk starvation out between the stars rather than being bonded to a corporation? Could it be that bad?"

"You saw those women in the last projection. What would you do, given a choice?"

"If it were just one jump -- "

"It isn't, unless you're picked for a colonist. It's always at least three jumps, sometimes more. Three gives a one chance in eight. Four, a one chance in sixteen. Five a one chance in -- "

"I can do math."

Steve put an arm around her. "Think of the real criminals, the literate ones. They aren't given a chance. They are sentenced to the crazy ships, and never less than five jumps. That's only one out of thirty-two who ever live to become colonists."

"It's a wonder to me how the colonies ever got established, with those kinds of odds."

"I read more than you do, Janie. Once it was established that chances were fifty-fifty of a mass displacement ship reaching its destination rather than going the opposite way, the Tremaines began sending their out-of-favor executives on one way trips to Altair with their loads of colonists. Half of them made it. Half of the execs made it back with loads of Spores. That's why

they control the colony now."

"Between the corporations and the crazy ships, I would sure have to think about it, one way or another," Janie said.

"Me, too," Steve agreed absently, his mind still on the crazy ships. Theoretically, the ships which went missing should be perfectly intact. Why did none of them ever find a matching mass and make it back?

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CH002

\*CHAPTER TWO\*

The wrist manacles weren't really necessary. The courthouse itself, a monolithic block of steel and cement sat directly over a vast labyrinth of individual holding cells where serious miscreants were kept while waiting for trial and sentencing. There was no possibility of escape, not with a prisoner's body computer turned off for the duration. Doors wouldn't open without a recognition code from an active personal computer, not for anyone. The manacles were simply a holdover from earlier days, as obsolete as a house key.

Derik lifted his hands, restrained to a scant six inches of play and fondled his body computer, depending from a chain around his neck. It was smooth to the touch, a small thin disk about the size of an old silver dollar, powered by body heat when it was active. It wasn't, of course. He wondered idly whether he would ever be able to speak to it again.

"Get your hands down." The guard spoke in a bored monotone. Derik doubted if she cared one way or another where he kept his hands, but perhaps the judge did. Judges had the power, and sometimes they became peculiar in exercising it. He dropped his hands back to his lap and tried to care about his impending sentence. It wouldn't be less than twenty years, he knew, and there was small chance of surviving even that long if he was sent to Africa, which he almost certainly would be. AIDS VII, Malaria, Kich tremors and other diseases saw to that, even without the probability of death by violence in the vast work camps where North American and Chinese corporations were ostensibly attempting the re-colonization of the ravaged continent. Derik knew better. The "colonization" was really designed to rid the respective corporate nations of recalcitrant citizens, especially ones they didn't think worth being forced into a bonding contract. The "work camps" were mostly brute labor in mines, gleaning scarce metals from the earth or even worse, working the radioactive oil fields where that was possible.

The wait was boring. The prosecutor seemed to have an endless series of notes to discuss with the judge, calling up cases one by one that appeared and disappeared in winks of holographic print. One of them was surely his own. Two weeks before, the same judge had pronounced the verdict: Count one: Criminal manipulation of the worldnet. Guilty. Count two: Misappropriation of medical care credits. Guilty. Count three: Medical racketeering. Guilty. Now he was simply waiting to hear his sentence. Ordinarily, with his technical background in bioengineering, he would probably have been given the chance to volunteer as crewman on a mass displacement ship attempting a jump to the Altair colony, but the recent change in the North American Directorship's balance of power almost certainly precluded that choice. The Tremaine Corporation was still in, but shaky; the Plemmons Corporation was still out, but coming on strong, wanting to break the Tremaine monopoly of the Altair colony and glean some of the benefits from the plethora of new drugs and materials being imported from that alien ecology. It was still cost effective, even given the one in four chance of any one ship returning to earth. What really killed his chances of a Crazy Ship berth was the nature of his offense, subverting corporate medical regulations for his own benefit. The Tremaines wouldn't like that and the Plemmons even less. Non-regulated medical care was too expensive and too touchy a subject for him to expect much sympathy, even though he had been an upper level Tremaine employee, bonded, but with many of the perks and privileges of a shareholder.

Derik turned his head slightly, trying to see how the old physician he

had conspired with was taking it. They had been tried the same day and were to be sentenced at the same time. The old doctor had conspired with him in trying to save his two-year-old son and now he must be regretting it bitterly. He sat with slumped shoulders and bowed gray head, a picture of utter dejection. The neuroblastoma that took little Pete's life could have been easily cured, and would have been, except for the salient fact that Pete's genome included a double recessive for Whittington's disease. He would have died in puberty anyway, and was eligible only for bare maintenance medicine, and that only because of his position. Doctor Porter, the old physician, had thought there would be a cure by the time Pete reached puberty though, and had taken a chance with Derik to treat the neuroblastoma, once he had been assured that there was no chance of being caught. It hadn't worked out that way. Derik suspected that his ex-wife was the culprit who had put the authorities to sniffing out his worldnet manipulations. After their divorce decree awarded him custody of Pete she never once came back to visit. He never knew why, but suspected that some lover had convinced her that it was all his fault that Pete carried the fatal genes, notwithstanding the obvious fact that double recessives had to come from each parent, and that she had refused to consider even the most basic gene selection before Petey was conceived.

Speculation was useless, though. Both he and Porter had been caught, tried and found guilty. Their automatic appeals had been denied the same week and now they would be sentenced.

The judge and prosecutor finished their consultations. The prosecutor, a faceless functionary whose name he didn't even remember stepped down from the bench.

"Derik Anders. Rise and face the court," he said. Derik stood up, using the opportunity to brush a lock of shaggy hair from his brow with his manacled hands. As he did, he glanced quickly along the bench at the other prisoners. They were mostly men, mostly Black or Hispanic or Orientals, the perpetual underclass minorities of American corporate rule. They mostly seemed unaware of the seriousness of their pending sentences. That was understandable, since it was almost a certainty that they were almost all functionally illiterate, and even had they not been, few prisoners ever came back from Africa or from the Crazy Ships to tell the tale. Derik knew about conditions in Africa only because of his former job where, in addition to spore research, he had also monitored new diseases borne on the winds of the Israeli-Iran holocaust. The only notable exception to the usual run of prisoners he saw in his quick glance down the bench was a young woman with dark reddish hair pulled back into a loose pony tail. Before he could get a better look, the guard poked him in the kidneys.

"Face the judge."

Derik did so. There was no preliminary. "Derik Anders. Convicted of illegal genetic manipulation, illegal worldnet manipulation, illegal medical procedures. Sentenced to five jumps as crew on Mass Displacement ships. Prisoner will be remanded to Tremaine Corporation representatives on Sporeworld upon completion of sentence. Remove the prisoner. Next case."

Derik sagged back down onto the bench. Completion of sentence! It was a sop. One chance in thirty-two? It was a death sentence, nothing less. Well, so would Africa have been. What was the difference? Evidently, the Plemmon Corporation had gotten to the judge. They were not letting such well qualified technical persons as he get to the colony easily, not when his expertise might be used to glean new wonder drugs or materials from the Sporeworld cornucopia which they were trying to take over. Derik sagged back into his seat, not knowing whether to be relieved or not. What he knew of actual conditions on Sporeworld was the result of rumor, propaganda and a few facts made public by the early explorers who came back. The actual state of affairs there was something the Tremaine Corporation kept to itself.

Derik was dragged back upright by the guard and manhandled away. He glanced over his shoulder as he was led off. The last thing he saw and heard was the judge sentencing the pony tailed redhead to three jumps on the

displacement ships, also under the tutorage of the Tremaine Corporation. He wondered what her offense had been. His mind had still been reeling when her offense was cited. The guard poked him in the kidneys again, turning him away from the courtroom, where the judge had already forgotten him. And now he really didn't care. He allowed himself to be prodded back down into the bowels of the courthouse to await assignment to his first jump on a Crazy Ship.

Derik, having been an intimate of the middle echelons of the Tremaine Corporation, knew something of how the Crazy Ships worked and he wasn't looking forward to the experience. The precise odds of making a successful jump were carefully kept vague from the general population. They knew only that a lot of ships didn't come back; not the percentage.

It was a mass displacement phenomenon. Inherent in the mathematical theory that made the instantaneous drive possible was an irresolvable flaw that operated purely by chance. A ship, coupled with the generating coils that made interstellar jumps possible, had to have an almost equal mass attached to the ship to provide a balance when it made a jump. The type of mass didn't matter, so long as it was as reasonably as compact as the ship. Then, away from a planet, where gravity could not interfere, the generating coils were activated. The ship went one way, the opposing mass the opposite direction, but pure chance dictated which went where. The ship was equally liable to go forward as backward in space, just as the inert mass was. If the ship went in the opposite direction than intended, there was only the lonely depths of space awaiting, and no mass then to use for another jump back in the original direction, other than the chance of the ship coming out in the vicinity of another ship or displaced mass to use as a balancing force for another try. Failing either of these options, there would never be fuel nor time enough to try for any other destination, leaving only slow starvation for the crew to look forward to. Over the twenty years since the mass displacement drive had been discovered, at least a few of the ships which had gone the wrong way should have been able to make their way back to earth but none ever had. It just didn't work that way, apparently. No one knew why, least of all Derik.

Derik figured that with only one chance in thirty-two of making all his jumps, he would eventually know why no ships ever came back from a bad jump. The odds were always 50-50 for any one jump. Stories were told of lost ships which indeed had found mass enough to try again, only to fall captive to the gravity of any number of planets, moons or asteroids in the solar system, and lacking fuel to oppose the pull, fall into the fiery embrace of the sun. Other gossip told of messages reaching earth, or Sporeworld if the jump had taken place from there, received years later and describing ravenous hunger and thirst, murder, and ultimately, cannibalization as the ships drifted aimlessly between the stars. Derik had no idea whether those stories were true or not. It was a fact though, that no ship had ever come back to tell the tale, even though theoretically, a few should have. For one assigned to a Crazy Ship, it was not something to dwell upon, even one consigned to only one jump, much less five. The implacable laws of mathematics determined the outcome. One half times one half equals one fourth. One half times one fourth equals one eighth. One half times one eighth equals one sixteenth. It was like flipping a coin, with your life in the balance each time and the ultimate odds against you doubling with each toss.

Worse even than the rumors of horrible suffering on ships lost forever were tales of the occasional one which did make it back to Earth or Sporeworld or one of the lesser known colonies, only to be captured and sent on another mission immediately, as if nothing had happened. Derik didn't believe that one. Ships were too expensive, given the horrendous losses and anyone who made it back from a bad jump would be held and pumped for information on how they managed it. They would have talked, for certain, either voluntarily or under the influence of mind-raping drugs.

\* \* \* \*

The cells were set in long corridors, side by side and facing a similar long row directly across from them. Each cell contained a cot, a toilet, a hard

chair and a small shelf for what few personal belongings were allowed. The only other adornment was a small holographic imaging area set directly above the bars of the door from which Derik could peer through into the cells facing him across the corridor. There was no privacy, none at all. The cell door opened to the guard's computer code. Derik started to step inside.

"Wait."

Derik stopped.

"Take off your computer. You won't be using it anymore."

Reluctantly, as if passing over the last of his former life, Derik pulled the silver chain over his neck and handed it to the guard.

"Get inside."

The door clanged shut behind him. Knowing the routine now, he extended his hands through the bars to have the manacles removed. The guard took them and left, dangling them by his side like a trophy of the hunt.

Derik sat down in the metal chair and stared across the corridor at the cells opposite him.

"When do you ship out?" The voice came from a dark complexioned man across the way. He was tall, well muscled and peered at Derik with intelligent black eyes set below wavy dark hair. Three crudely tattooed stripes on his right cheek depicted what Derik assumed was a rank badge of some sort in a gang or guild. He was obviously a renegade, not a bonder.

"They didn't say."

"They don't have to. I leave tomorrow; that's when you'll probably go, too."

Derik grinned wryly, not bothering to ask the man how he knew. His life was effectively over and it really didn't matter to him when he left. So far as he was concerned, the sooner the better. At least it wasn't like a definite death sentence; he would never know when his time was up. Instead, each jump would be a tortured waiting to see if it succeeded, then if it did, a wait, then more torture. When the jump failed, as ultimately, it almost would, the sentence would be complete, waiting only for the flesh to melt from his bones and thirst to thicken his tongue. He wondered idly whether the young girl he had seen on the prisoners' bench would be on the same ship. Perhaps they could get together somehow. He closed his eyes and allowed a fantasy to cross his mind. It was unproductive. Time and the unknown hung over him like a gray shroud waiting to wrap him for burial.

Eventually a meal cart made rounds, serving the same bland pap he had been eating for three weeks. He ate, slept, ate twice more, then a guard appeared with the ubiquitous wrist manacles. His shipment date had come, just as the man across the way had predicted.

Derik hadn't known how prisoners were transported except in a vague way, gleaned mostly from tabloid headlines but he soon found out. It might well have been a slave ship from previous centuries, except that a loose chain slipped through his wrist restraints allowed blocks of eight prisoners each access to sanitary facilities and narrow bunks. The chain was attached to a central post in each little area holding the octet. They were free to talk, fight, eat and gaze down long aisles at other groups of chained men. In the gloomy distance he thought he could see some female prisoners in the same circumstances, but it was hard to tell from the bare light the few tiny fuel cell bulbs provided. Soon though, word of mouth spread along the corridor. There were female prisoners down that way. It meant little to Derik though; other than as a topic of conversation once the others of his octet began speaking to him. There was little else to do while the surface ship made its way to the Hawaiian spaceport.

The other men were reticent at first, eyeing him curiously. He was the only white in his octet. A few others were scattered among other groups, but they were definitely a small minority. Technology might have changed but human nature remained ever the same. The territorial genes always expressed themselves, and in North America the WASPs still hung onto power, though barely. The tall dark man who had been his neighbor back in the holding cells

was in the next octet. He finally asked the question the others were obviously curious about. "Hey man. How come you going out on the Crazy Ships? I didn't know they sent high class fades there."

Derik shrugged wryly, comparing the whiteness of his skin in the gloomy hold to the varying shades of his companions. "I got caught, same as you."

Intelligent brown eyes glinted in the shadows. "First time?"

"You mean the first time I got caught? Yes."

"Man, you must be a real badass. Most of us just going as colony workers, one jump. We make it, we home free."

Derik was mildly interested. "How come only one jump?"

"We not badasses like you. Just jumped bond, tried to make it outside the Corps. Automatic sentence, you know? We make the jump, then we bonded again; only the way I hear it, no way to jump bond there. We done for life."

Curious, Derik asked, "Why not?"

"Can't survive away from the colony, way I hear. Bad animals. Bad plants. No way to get food. No weapons. Some try it though, so I hear. Well, dumpit, couldn't be much worse than being bonded here. Not much future with the Corps. You have a woman, they take her away anytime, she be any kind of bright. Make up some kind of charge. You have kids, they bonded same as you till they grown. Then what? No chance of a life, not now. After a while, even the jamming Crazy Ships sound good."

"Not when you have five jumps staring you in the face," Derik said.

"That's bad. Not so bad as Africa, I hear. You know about Africa?"

"I know a little," Derik said cautiously. "Diseases. Hard work, either in the mines or the oil fields. Not much lifespan, especially if you wind up working the oil. There's still lots of radioactivity."

"Lifespan!" The word was spit out as an epithet. "You got some span, man?"

Derik wondered whether he should mention that he did have some genetically engineered extra lifespan, paid for at fantastic cost by his parents and induced into his body while he was still little more than a blastula. It wasn't available to everyone, only those who could not only pay but could provide evidence of a reasonably clean genome, both physically and politically. The genome bit could be gotten around, of course, with enough connections or enough money, but in his case it hadn't been necessary. His parent's charts had been clean, or so he had thought before the double Whittington allele and the neuroblastoma popped up in Pete. Suddenly he realized that he had come by his criminality honestly. His parents must have bribed a technician to conceal the oncogene and Whittington allele in one or the other. He decided that he didn't care whether any of the other prisoners knew about his potential lifespan or not. It probably wouldn't matter in the long run anyway.

"Yes. My folks bought it for me before I was born."

The brown man raised his brows in silent question. Why should a man with decades or more of extra life risk such a boon from illegal activity? Derik shrugged. He didn't see any point in going into the story. From the far end of the corridor a sudden feminine yell attracted his attention. It came again, then was cut off by a muffled gasp. A cacophony of raucous laughter ran up the line. Derik turned toward the sounds, trying to see what was going on, but it was too far away to make out. The black man joined in the laughter.

"That's the little redhead bitch down the line."

"What's happening to her?" Derik felt a vague compulsion to protect the girl, a ghost of his lost parental instincts toward little Pete, then let it slide. He could do nothing, even if he wanted to.

"No scam, Sam. The witches down there just found out she went down on a homo rap." He laughed. "They just making her show how it's done."

Derik shifted his attention back to the black man. "I know some people are saying gays pass on the tremors, but it's not true. I know. Anyway, being gay isn't a crime, so long as they're clean."

His companion laughed. "It wasn't really a homo rap. In fact, she used

to be a Tremaine, so I hear. Thing is, she got caught by her old man in bed with his sister. He divorced her, she contested, she lost. Her lawyer sent her to court for non-payment. She's luckier than you are. Only three jumps."

Lucky? Three jumps still gave only a one in eight chance of surviving. It seemed an excessive sentence to him, but then indebtedness to a lawyer or court was a more serious offense than it used to be. And perhaps the Plemmons pressed the case in order to embarrass the Tremaines. It was just another manifestation of arbitrary corporate policy. He suspected that even should the girl survive the three jumps she had been sentenced to, some other way would be found at the colony to effectively get her into bondage, given her good looks. It was pure conjecture on his part, however. He had no real idea of what went on in the colony world, no more than anyone else outside the upper echelons of the Tremaine Corporation did.

"How do you know all this?"

"I got connections, man. Was a factor with the Bentleys, running meds. Nothing but execs for players in that business and they talk, they want their cures. I still say that girl lucky. She's fine. Could have had worse happen to her."

"I guess. Maybe she'll make it."

"Yeah, man. You might, too. You make your five jumps, you come see me there. Maybe some luck rub off on me. What's your call?"

"Call?"

"Name, man. What we call you?"

"Oh. Derik. Derik Anders."

"My call Clinton. Clinton Williams."

"Clinton. You're named after a president, way back."

"Yeah, man. A fade, too. He got around, so Mama told me. Five jumps? Not likely we'll meet down on the Spore."

"Not likely at all," Derik agreed. He rolled over and tried to sleep, while the boat made its slow way to the Hawaiian spaceport, but Clinton stayed on his mind. The man seemed more cheerful than he had a right to be, facing a fifty-fifty chance of starvation in space. Nevertheless, if by some wild toss of the dice he survived his jumps, it might be well to have a friend on Sporeworld. The man seemed unusually well informed.

\* \* \* \*

Wendy Waltz, nee Wendy Tremaine, still had the taste in her mouth of the other women in the octet she was chained to. It had been a degrading experience and she huddled as far from the other females as her chains allowed. It was still hard for her to believe where she was, chained and sentenced to three crew jumps on the Crazy Ships, effectively a death sentence, although not quite so certain as the man she had witnessed being given five jumps right before her. She wondered briefly what he had done to deserve such a harsh judgment, then turned back to her own concerns. Three jumps? She knew what the odds were of her surviving that many -- one in eight -- and what might happen to her on Sporeworld should she make it. Dean Tremaine, though only a junior stockholder, had teased some supposed facts out of his grandfather, old John Tremaine, while he was still in his good graces, and passed them on to her. Or so he said. She wouldn't trust his word now, though, not for a thousand shares of Tremaine stock. Not for a million, either. Nevertheless, she knew some of the stories he told were true, if conditions on the colony world were anything like they were on earth, where attractive bondies almost always wound up in some sort of sexual arrangement with corporate executives. It was a man's world again for the vast majority of unmarried women.

At first her marriage to Dean had seemed to be made in heaven for her. The Tremaine heir plucked her from the relative obscurity of a computer analyst for financial trends and made her his wife. At first, everything had gone well. Eventually, though, his at-home comments drew her into the dark side of corporate policy, things she really didn't want to hear about, not the way Dean told them. Before that, she had taken her position in life more or less for granted, accepting the perks and privileges of being born to lower

rung corporate parents. It was her looks that had catapulted her up into a way of life that ultimately proved too alien for her sensibilities. Dean Tremaine turned out to be a shallow person, entirely concerned with her sexual allure, and when she rejected his sadistic fantasies, it was the beginning of the end of the marriage. The actual end came one night after his sister, Sheila Tremaine, comforted her a little too intimately.

Wendy still remembered the night in vivid detail. After rejecting a really outrageous proposal, she had ordered Dean from her room, then curled up in the bed and cried, wishing she could just go back to her old job and forget she had ever met young Dean Tremaine. Sheila Tremaine, her sister-in-law, entered her bedroom soon afterward, at first making excuses for her brother, then ultimately telling of her own abuse from him as a child. From there, comfort had progressed to intimacy.

Wendy still wasn't quite sure how it had happened. She didn't think she was really inclined toward women; certainly she had never done such a thing before. It was more a combination of desolation and someone she truly liked and admired being available to console her. Sheila, like her, was a captive of the Tremaine Corporation and its family, but unlike her, Sheila was protected by blood relation within the family and by also being a shareholder, though a minor one. There was no way she would ever be sentenced to three jumps on the Crazy Ships, though she would probably be forced to chance one jump to exile on Sporeworld, just because of her involvement. Dean had walked unexpectedly back into her bedroom and everything else followed from that. Like a fool, she had thought she had some financial stake coming from the marriage. Like a fool, so had her lawyer, or perhaps not. It would have been just like Dean to use his position to influence her attorney into jumping into something over his head. After the adverse judgment, she was indebted to both the court and her lawyer and the sentence inevitably followed. It probably wouldn't have been near as harsh had she not been married to a Tremaine and gone before a Plemmons-controlled judge. But it was no use thinking of that now. The Crazy Ships were waiting, one chance in eight of surviving and only life as a colony drudge, or maybe worse waiting if that should happen.

What really puzzled her was why old John Tremaine, the chairman of Tremaine Corporation, had allowed the divorce proceedings to end this way. He had always seemed to like her. Why let her be sentenced to the Crazy Ships, or at the least, why three jumps? Perhaps he hadn't been in a position to buck the Plemmons. Or perhaps he still held some residual affection for his grandson. She just didn't know.

A wave tossed the prison ship, causing her chain to tighten, bringing back memories of the degrading experience she had undergone only a short time before. She wondered how much longer it would be until the boat reached Hawaii, and whether she would be subjected to more brutal ministrations from the women she was attached to. Wendy made a vow then, that should she survive the Crazy Ships, she would use her looks and body in any way she could to make life easier. To hell with the Tremaines.

\* \* \* \*

Dean Tremaine faced his grandfather from the other side of his desk, unable to believe what he had just heard. "Granddad, you can't mean it!" He stared at his grandfather with horror written large on his face.

"I damn well do mean it. You're going on the next colony ship," John Tremaine said.

"But -- "

"Don't argue. If the rest of the family would agree, you would stay on a Crazy Ship until it got lost. You have embarrassed us all with your sexual perversions."

"But, granddad, she was the one who -- "

"Shut up. I'm sending Sheila, too, though she's not nearly as guilty as you are. Her only offense was getting mixed up with Wendy and giving us some bad publicity. She shouldn't have testified at the hearing. It gave the Plemmons just that much more leverage, and right now we don't need any more



problems. Besides that, Sheila has always tried to keep her proclivities quiet. You haven't. Why couldn't you just have used bondswomen to satisfy yourself? Why did you have to involve your wife?"

"It's all her fault. Why wouldn't she go along with me? I'm not to blame. Send Sheila, she's the pervert, not me."

John Tremaine breathed deeply in order to avoid losing his temper. It was bad enough that the Plemmon Corporation was eating at the Tremaine guts without his own descendants giving them more ammunition for the undermining. Best to send them both off to the colonies where they would be out of the spotlight. It was too bad about Sheila, though. Up until now, she had never given cause for concern. Whatever her inclinations, she had always kept quiet, out of the public scrutiny. It was Dean who was the real culprit. Gods above, why couldn't the grandchildren be even nominally normal, like his only son Donald the father of Dean and Sheila. And that was the worst of it. Normal as he was, he had to be sent, too, on a Crazy Ship, just to have someone on Altair with a little damn sense, especially in light of his own secret knowledge. It was too bad about Wendy, though. The pressure had just been too great to risk intervening for a reduced sentence. Well, maybe the girl would make it.

The elder Tremaine waved a hand, as if to brush Dean out of his sight. "You're going," he said. "Get ready. I almost hope you don't make it."

"I won't go! I'll run away to Africa! I'll go underground!" Dean shouted.

The elder Tremaine curled his lip. "You in the underground? Boy, you'd be turned into a punk for the first pimp who came along -- if he didn't just dispose of you right off. Go on, get out of my sight and go see the house attorney. Your papers will be ready."

Dean shrank into his custom tailored jump suit and slunk away, a degenerately handsome young man in the worst of circumstances: inordinately wealthy, but with no way in the world for his money to help him.

As the door closed behind his grandson, John Tremaine turned to other concerns, the chief of which was to convince the board to send another fusion unit to Sporeworld; or rather to send as many as it took in order to get one there. Once that happened, there were other plans in the works, and for that he would have to risk his own son's life. But better to risk it now, rather than a firing squad or a hangman's noose if the corporate culture went the way he thought it would. He didn't hold out much hope any more for things getting better. Empires rose and fell and he knew the corporate empire that had taken over earth had nothing to bar it from the ranks of a thousand other failed ventures the earth was littered with. He just hoped his plans worked out well enough to give the race another chance before it all fell to pieces. He was only moderately optimistic.

\* \* \* \*

"Let's go to the Rec," Janie suggested as she and Steve were finishing a late brunch. "We still have almost an hour to make up for this week."

"Suits me, I'd rather work out than try explaining to Grundy why I didn't," Steve replied, plucking his body computer from the rack.

"Swizzlestick, he said."

The odd word booted up his body computer. "Find Mom or Dad."

"Mr. and Mrs. Joplin are not in residence at the present time. Should I leave a message?"

"Tell them Janie and I are at the Rec when they get back. Where are they, by the way?" Neither of them had been particularly concerned at not seeing their parents so far this day. They simply assumed they were working in their own common.

There was a very short pause while his body computer interfaced with the home mainframe, which in turn followed an electronic track to their parents' own body computers. "They are both at the Geneplan main office. Would you like to speak to them?"

"No, just leave the message."

"I wonder what they're doing there?" Janie asked. "This isn't one of their regular workdays."

"Why wonder? They'll let us know if it's anything special when we get back. Are you ready?"

"Sure. Let's go," Janie said, but she did stop at the front door to activate the mirror there. Steve waited impatiently while she checked her appearance. She was wearing her usual wash-faded jeans and a yellow synthetic knit pullover. She noted with satisfaction that her nipples made attractive little tents in the fabric and that her midriff tan matched that of her face.

"Come on," Steve urged. "You look great." He ordered the door to dilate and Janie followed him outside into the bright April sunshine.

They could have ridden one of the little railed buses that frequented the development had they chosen had the weather been inclement, but ordinarily they preferred to walk, holding hands, or with arms around each other's waist as was their usual wont. Sometimes that drew frowns from the more conservative homeowners they passed who knew they were siblings, but today no one seemed to be about. That suited both of them. They had always enjoyed each other's company, and their parents encouraged that affection.

Their path led through a sculptured, wooded park, past several homes, a distribution center, and on to the Rec building, a brightly colored geodesic dome that served as a community gathering place. Their body computers passed them inside without pause, interacting with the Rec's mainframe to identify them. They paused in the main lobby, looking around to see which of their friends or adults they liked were present. To their surprise, no one else was there. They thought it curious, but both supposed that maybe a special event might be taking place elsewhere in the dome, perhaps at the pool. It was a frequent area for shows, gatherings, discussions and intermingling of all the residents.

"There's no one here. Everyone must be at the pool," Janie said. "I wanted to swim, anyway. Let's go see."

Steve grinned at her. "You just want to show yourself off, don't you?"

Janie poked him with her elbow. "I notice you look just as hard as any of the other guys." I think he does anyway, she thought to herself.

"Why not?" Steve admitted. "You're the best looking girl around most of the time. You're missing something, though. It's not just the guys looking lately."

Janie didn't quite know how to answer that statement. She had noticed the same thing. Lately, she had been drawing almost as much attention from some of the more mature women as from the adolescent males. It made her slightly uncomfortable, but not nearly as much as it might have in an earlier era, or even in the present within the confines of their own contemporaries. It was strange, she thought, that long after the heyday of homosexual openness had passed into general acceptance that it was still a subject of controversy, at least among some groups. Lately, religious advocates seemed to be permeating corporate headquarters and they were adamantly against same sex attractions. Maybe it's the tremors epidemic, she thought, though she knew that the disease played no favorites. Or perhaps it was just another manifestation of the increasing unrest in the general population they were studying this morning. Still, after the human genome had been resolved and techniques perfected to produce inherited immunity from disease, sexual mores were more liberal than ever, at least among the classes that could afford to take advantage of the new technology. Janie took Steve's teasing in stride and forgot the matter. The pool locker room was almost as empty as the lobby had been. There were only a couple of pre-teens and one older man in the process of dressing.

Janie and Steve stripped quickly, hung their simple garments in their lockers, and passed through the hoodoo out into the pool area. It was empty as well, or almost so. One elderly woman was methodically doing laps while keeping an eye on several small children at the shallow end of the pool, and that was all.

Janie paid no attention to them and immediately dove off into the deep end, followed quickly by Steve. They swam the length of the pool back and forth for several laps then rested back at the shallow end, sitting on the submerged steps at one corner. Janie took the opportunity to tease Steve a little bit, as she frequently did when they were by themselves, or almost so. She slid down the steps until she was neck deep in water, then backed up between his legs and leaned back against his chest, almost forcing him to rest his hands on her shoulders. As soon as she felt he was comfortable, she reached up and pulled his hands down to cover her breasts.

"You're a whip, Janie," Steve said. Nevertheless, he squeezed the firm mounds under his hands and felt himself beginning to get an erection. He pushed her away, reluctantly but firmly.

"Whip, yourself," Janie complained. During the last year, she had had a few sexual encounters, but for the most part they had been unsatisfying. She knew that sooner or later Steve would give in to her, but so far, he was holding off. While they were still pre-pubescent, the senior Joplins had made it plain that they would have no objections, but they had also encouraged both youngsters to explore the sexual scene with others. Steve had complied with his parents' wishes, much more enthusiastically than Janie had, but she thought he would really prefer her once he decided to make the plunge. At least she hoped he would.

Steve himself was, unknown to Janie, actively considering the idea, but he was cautious. He really loved his sister, but he was more introspective than she was, surprisingly so for his age. He knew that open sibling sex was a relatively new idea, still unacceptable even among the upper corporate class, regardless of the newly disease-negated genetic implications, and the last thing he wanted was to subject his twin sister to any sort of approbation or hurt just to satisfy his own, frankly admitted desire for her.

Rebuffed, Janie splashed water in Steve's face and took off for the deep end of the pool. Steve followed, and by mutual agreement they headed back to the locker room. They had still seen no one but the old woman and children. As they towed dry and began dressing, Janie brought up the subject that had been sitting just below the surface of their thoughts all the while.

"Where is everyone?"

Steve was wondering as well. Something about the day just didn't feel right. His apprehension grew as they walked back home. There was still a dearth of people on the lanes and in front of the homes they passed. The only pedestrian they passed was a small, shaggy enhanced dog which voiced a gruff "Hello, people," then continued on past, intent on some business of its own.

"I think we ought to check the news when we get home," Steve said. The day suddenly began to seem oppressive, regardless of the bright sun and birds singing from shrubbery and trees.

Janie squeezed his hand. She had the same sense of foreboding that her brother did. She released his hand and stole an arm around his waist, wanting to get closer to him, not in a sexual sense now, but purely for comfort.

Immediately upon entering their home, Steve checked for messages from their parents, but there was still nothing.

"Do you think we should call them again?" Janie asked. Their continued absence was bothering her more and more.

"Let's check the news first. There must be something nastier than usual going on." He drew Janie down beside him on one of the living room couches. She leaned against him while he asked for a general news program. The random scenes being displayed across from their couch stopped momentarily at waving fields of grain and blue sky, then coalesced into a simulated anchorman, stern visaged, but with a touch of kindness in his features. He spoke from one side of the scene, allowing viewers full access to the display.

For awhile there was nothing of real interest to either of them. There were the usual reports of the problem of enhanced animals multiplying in the wilds, particularly dogs and cats, but other animals as well. A brief scene showed a sparse band of ragged mountain men being herded into a corporate

detention center, with the comment that they were being charged with "actions detrimental to the state", a euphemism for dealing in proscribed products and worse, being unemployed and unbonded. The proscribed products might be anything from firearms to gene-therapy drugs to enhanced animals or addictive drugs not licensed by the corporations. The anchor stated that they would almost certainly be bonded to one of the smaller corporations, or more likely, sent to the African work camps. Surprisingly, there was no mention that some might be forced onto the mass displacement ships as unwilling colonists.

The financial news was passed over quickly, and they almost missed the mention of conclusive litigation against the Geneplan company, declaring it bankrupt. The anchor had already passed into an analysis of the demerits of allowing any of the small anarch population, i.e., those citizens neither bonded nor gainfully employed to roam free before Steve could stop the broadcast.

"Scan back to Geneplan," Steve directed. "Elaborate and scan for Joplin stockholders."

Steve knew that his parents were principal stockholders in the company, but he had had no inkling at all that they might have been in financial trouble.

The stern anchor was immediately replaced by a female personage, still a simulacrum, but so well designed that it was very nearly impossible to tell the difference. She was beautiful, scantily clad, and her movements were obviously designed to make viewers concentrate on her rather than the content of the news she conveyed. It was a common ploy by the two main corporate broadcasting stations and Steve didn't bother to ask their homeframe for another rendition.

In essence, the sexy image disclosed that Geneplan had in the past week come under the provisions of a bill passed by the corporate controlled congress which criminalized much of Geneplan's current contracts, and lacking sufficient credit to diversify, an "independent" judge had, upon petition by some minority stockholders, declared the whole company in receivership. The anchor went on to say that several major corporations were bidding for the bonding of many of the former, and now indebted and unemployed members of Geneplan, and that more updates would be forthcoming when news was available. Lacking further instructions, the homeframe resumed its regular program. Neither Steve nor Janie paid attention to it.

Janie squeezed Steve's hand harder than usual. "They never told us they were in trouble," she said.

"They wouldn't," Steve replied. "I guess that's what they're trying to do now, is to sort out what's left. Damn the goddamned corporate congress, anyway! They were doing good work."

"Sure. Look at us," Janie grinned wryly. "You have to admit, though, that the enhanced animals getting loose are causing problems." At that very moment, unnoticed by either of them, the news program was elaborating on that very point, citing increasing unrest in South American countries because of devouring hordes of semi-sentient laboratory mice and rats which had gotten loose and were breeding unchecked in the jungles, and even in the suburbs of cities on that continent. The program cut to a view of a preacher railing against genetic manipulation of any animals other than humans.

"That problem could be solved, if Mom and Dad were allowed to keep working on it," Steve said. "Remember our ecology section. Genetic engineering has done much more good than harm."

Steve was perhaps somewhat over-optimistic on that point, but not overly so. New breeds of animals and plants had been introduced to combat the ecological disasters of the previous century, but during the last decades, the major corporations had gradually taken over most of the production, and by their very nature they were conservative, generally letting problems progress pass the stage of easy resolution before ever deciding on a counteraction -- and even then looking more to the bottom line than to practical solutions.

"Maybe," Janie said, "but that really doesn't matter right now. Do you

think we should try calling the folks?"

"Let's wait a bit. They're bound to be having enough problems already without worrying about us. Besides, it's time for school again. Let's go up to the Com."

Steve didn't mention to his sister that he was very much afraid that their parents might have been among the group of Geneplan employees cited as "subject to bonding."

Janie trailed along behind Steve. Their classes occurred twice a day, brought in by the homeframe from a Tremaine subsidiary corporation devoted to home education. It wasn't the best program they could have wished for. It required almost constant reprogramming by their parents (some of it illegal, Steve now felt) in order to allow the homeframe to alter the pro-corporate bias, but it was the best they could do, short of spending tons of credit to access unedited and unaltered information directly from the worldnet and leaving a trail or, as seemed likely, buying bootleg data from the underground.

Back in their own Com, Steve gave his usual "Swizzlestick" order for the teaching program to boot up, but this time he got an unusual surprise. Instead of Miss Pringle, the homeframe came back on line, in the visage of the ancient Wylie Coyote, the animation that the Joplins had programmed to appear whenever trouble or inability to access a particular program happened. The animation was brightly cheerful, bouncing about with every word.

"I am unable to access your teaching program at the present time," it said, "due to a discontinuation of credit from the Joplin account to Lessonplan, Inc. I require instructions from the Senior Joplins before teaching can be resumed."

"So, get instructions!" Steve said, forgetting his admonition to Janie not to bother their parents.

"I regret that I am unable to contact them at the present time. Should I continue trying?" The animated coyote began walking backward, seemingly unaware of a cliff behind it.

Steve looked away from Janie's startled continence. "Continue trying. Tell them that we are here and want to talk to them."

"Will do," The animation said, and disappeared, to be replaced by a standard wall scene, this time of squirrels teasing a barking dog from just out of reach on the trunk of an aged oak.

"Stevie, I'm getting really worried," Janie said. She had separated herself from her brother and looked worriedly at him from the other side of the lounge.

"I am, too," Steve admitted, "but I don't know what we can do about it right now. Well, no school, that's for sure. Want to work out for awhile?"

"I guess so," Janie said, not very enthusiastically. "Weights, aerobics, or the arts?"

"We're overdue for arts. Weapons, or hand-to-hand?"

"Let's just do the hand-to-hand," Janie said. "I don't know about my reflexes with weapons, not today."

The coyote reappeared, prompted by the conversation. He climbed back over the edge of the cliff he had apparently fallen off. His tail was bent and he was using a crutch. "I regret that I will be unable to provide the usual criticism if you continue your exercises. Credit has been discontinued from your teaching program, which includes physical conditioning."

"Slice off!" Janie exclaimed. She tugged her pullover back down over her breasts that she had momentarily exposed in expectation of physical exertion. "Stevie, what's happening? I don't like this."

"I don't either," Steve said. He collapsed back on their couch, trying to think. It was common knowledge that the few large world corporations were disdainful of new entrepreneurs such as their parents and their Geneplan company, and were working actively all over the planet to bring the population not already under their control into bondage, where the difference between that and slavery was more a matter of semantics than substance. They were

gradually getting their way. The majority of Earth's population, as well as that of Moon City and the satellite worlds, was already under life contracts, but there still remained a core of small business owners, technicians, scientists and skilled workers outside their sway. Besides these two classes, there were the Anarchos, a small but substantial population owing allegiance to no one. They operated outside the confines of the general net, dealing in precious metals and barter. Most of their activities had been declared illegal, and when caught, they were given only two choices: sign a bonding contract with a corporation bidding for whatever service they could offer, or, if a Tremaine Corporate representative was present and thought they were worth their while, be given a chance to volunteer for a berth on the mass displacement ships. The courts had long since been contracted to the corporations to run as they saw fit. There were guidelines, of course, and regulations, but little attention was paid to them. If bonding was near-slavery, a sentence to Africa or the mass displacement ships amounted to slavery in fact, with little chance of surviving. The "lucky" ones, assigned as colonists, had only to live through the fifty-fifty chance of arriving at Sporeworld, then be bonded again under unknown circumstances. Those sentenced or putatively volunteering for more jumps had worse things to worry about, like the probability of thirst and starvation in the black desert between the stars when the odds ran out.

"What do you think is going to happen, Steve?" Janie asked anxiously. She really was scared. For all of her fifteen, now almost sixteen years, she had never lacked for security. Within the confines of intelligent discipline and training by their parents, she and Steve had been provided with nearly every comfort and convenience available. Although they knew in abstract how drab and confined a life most of the population of earth and the space colonies lived, it had never occurred to them that it might become a more personal knowledge.

"I don't know," Steve admitted. "This is all new to me. I really don't know of anything to do except wait to hear from Mom or Dad. Surely they'll let us know something soon."

The twins spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing with entertainment programs contained within the home mainframe, leaving instructions for the news program to break in if there were any updates on the Geneplan bankruptcy. There were none. They ate again, and worked out with their training machines. It was strange, going through the routines with neither criticism nor encouragement nor comparison with past performances. It confused the both of them, and they soon gave it up.

"Let's have a snack," Steve suggested, "then go to bed. If we don't hear anything from the folks by in the morning, we can just go out to the plant and see them there."

"That suits me," Janie said.

Their snack time was a strangely quiet one, uninterrupted by their usual back and forth banter. While he was eating, Steve happened to think that neither of them had had any calls from friends. That was also unusual. The both of them not only had mutual friends in the neighborhood, but separate friends as well, and neither of them had had a single call. He suspected that, since most of their neighbors worked for Geneplan, they were also having problems with credit. He started to mention it to Janie, but decided against it. No use giving her any more to worry about.

Steve gave Janie her usual chaste kiss on the lips and said good night. He showered, turned back the sheet, and gave the bedroom orders to play something dim and unobtrusive. He was rewarded with a muted picture of surf in moonlight, and the gentle rumbling of waves washing onto clean white sand soon lulled him to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Steve became aware of a presence next to him, a softness snuggling against his back.

"Stevie?" The muted whisper of Janie's breath warmed his neck. He

became aware of her arm curling around him and the resilient pressure of her breasts against his back. He turned over and Janie pressed herself against him.

"Janie, what are you doing here?"

"Stevie, I'm still scared. Please don't tell me to leave." She held him close, pressing her lips against his neck. Her hands moved along the length of his back, sending little shivers over his whole body.

"Damn," he cursed, but it was a weak curse, without effect.

"Please, Stevie."

It was a plea impossible to resist. He pulled her to him, intending only comfort, but that soon became a lost cause. This night, Janie would not be denied, nor was she, and he soon wondered why they had waited so long.

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CH003

\*CHAPTER THREE\*

Steve woke to darkness and warm, muggy air such as might be found in Houston on any early spring morning. Janie slept beside him, only dimly visible. She had thrown the sheet aside during the night and lay curled in a tight ball. The house controls must be out, but how could that happen? Only once in his life had he slept in an unregulated environment, when a particularly fierce hurricane had knocked out the power antenna and solar panels. It had been days before repair crews and robots could get to them and the reserve power had run out before then. But there certainly had been no hurricane during the night, or any other natural disaster he was aware of that could have caused the outage. He moved to get out of the bed, trying not to wake Janie, but unable to avoid staring at her sleeping form. The night past had given a new dimension to just how closely related they were. As their bodies had coupled, it was as if their minds were intertwined as well, raising sex to a level he had never before experienced. It wasn't just memory of the pure sex that held his gaze, though the remembrance of her soft, resilient breasts in his hands, erect virginal nipples so enticing that they drew his mouth and tongue to them like organic magnets, and her own mouth as she closed over him with a warm moist sensation almost too exquisite to bear, and later, legs folded tightly over his own and nails digging into his back as they climaxed that told him how much he revered her body. But the past night held tenderness too, and a silent vow that he would willingly die before ever letting anyone or anything hurt her.

Steve's bedroom was closed to the outside. What little light there was leaked in through the door opening, unhampered by the usual opaque screening projection. He stepped out into the next room. Early morning sun was coming through a window, also bare of any privacy screen. He pressed his thumb and forefinger together and the time flashed briefly on his thumbnail. He was surprised to find it was already almost an hour past his usual time for awakening. With no power, the bedroom had naturally not brightened at the regular time for it to do so.

"Stevie?" He turned and looked around. Janie was silhouetted in the door; her short brown hair still tousled from sleep.

"The homeframe is down," he said, unnecessarily.

Janie smiled. "Good. Come back to bed, then." She ran her hands over her breasts then stretched theatrically.

The sight of her newly explored body almost tempted Steve to comply, but his practical nature won over the temptation. Even though they were identical twins, except for gender, their personalities had developed along different lines. Steve was practical and introspective; Janie was impulsive and extroverted. "It's not just the homeframe, otherwise we'd be running on reserve power," Steve said. "I think our citylink has been disconnected, just like our other services were."

"Oh. That's not good, is it?" Janie said.

"No, it's not. Come on, get dressed and let's try to figure out what we're going to do."

Janie paused to hug him briefly, then retreated to her own bedroom. Steve fumbled in the wan light for clothes. He wanted to comb his hair and brush his teeth, but he couldn't see well enough to find his comb in the shadowed bathroom, and the toothbrush wouldn't be working anyway. He felt out the fixtures well enough to relieve himself, then tried the shower. Lacking instructions, it wouldn't work either. He shrugged and took his clothes back into the dimly lit bedroom to dress.

Janie met him back in their com, trying to comb her hair with her fingers. Together, they took the stairs down to the lower level of the house. The dimly lit rooms there reminded her of scenes from some of their role playing games, as undecorative as a mausoleum. It discomfited her. Steve led her into the dining room before remembering that without the homeframe to direct it, the kitchen would be unable to prepare a meal. The cabinets and coolers were all tightly closed, and the dining table refused to descend from its niche in the ceiling.

"Damn," he said. "I'm hungry, but I don't know any way of getting anything to eat short of a crowbar."

"Let's go outside," Janie said. "I don't like it in here with nothing working."

The front door refused to open on command, but here there was a solution. It also had a manual control, used only once in his memory, after the hurricane. Steve worked it and they stepped outside.

The early sun was already warm and the air was loaded with moisture funneled in from the gulf. Steve took Janie's hand and led her around to the back of the house where a generous yard supported various decorative shrubs, a large pin oak tree with benches beneath, and a small enclosed pool. He drew her down onto one of the benches.

"Steve, what should we do? I thought Mom and Dad would be home by now. Do you think they know that the homeframe is down?"

"They must know. What I can't understand is why they aren't back yet. There must be something more to the bankruptcy than we heard on the news."

"Well, what should we do? We can't just sit here." Janie said, then the possibility that Steve had been worrying about finally dawned on her. "Stevie! You don't think Mom and Dad have been arrested, do you?"

"I don't know, but I guess it's a possibility. Let me think." Steve was having his first experience with a wholly undirected life. It was disorientating, and scary, like a bee suddenly bereft of its hive. The absence of their parents had also progressed from a small knot of discomfort to a full-blown balloon of worry, covering over other considerations. "Let's go to the plant," he finally decided. "Maybe the folks are still there." It was the only course he could think of for the moment, and perhaps they really were still there, although a small nagging thought told him that they wouldn't be. He didn't mention that to Janie, however. Hand in hand, they walked back to the front of their home and waited beside the superconductive rails for a bus to come by. One soon appeared, sensed their presence and slowed to a stop, but when He tried to lead the way onto the bus, the door became opaque and it pulled away.

"Oh, jam it!" Steve exclaimed. Of course, with no credit, the bus wouldn't recognize the silent codes from their body computers.

Janie understood immediately. She slid an arm around Steve's waist, suddenly feeling the need for protection, like a small threatened animal hugging it's mother's flanks. It was a completely different emotion from what she had experienced the night before, though comfort had been her original aim when she slid into bed beside him. Soon though, she had been enthralled with her first completely satisfying sexual experience, spiced with the unknown of the failing homeframe, and tinged with the liberation of complete privacy brought about by their parent's absence, even though they probably wouldn't have objected. It had been wonderful. Her last memory before waking was the comforting sensation of Steve's arms around her and her body pressed closely against his, her breasts cushioned against the hard muscles of his chest.



"I guess we can walk," Steve said. "It's not all that far."

"I'd rather walk than stand here doing nothing," Janie agreed.

They started out. Steve noticed that several of the homes they passed were also dark, and noted that all of them belonged to Geneplan employees. Or former employees, he thought wryly. That must have been the reason for the dearth of pedestrians the evening before. Just before they turned a corner, he happened to look back. A van had pulled up in front of their home. It was an anomaly in the neighborhood, except for supply vehicles, but those came only at night. It was highly unusual to see anything other than the little passenger buses during the day. He squinted, and made out the markings on the side. He could read it clearly, even at this distance. HOUSTON POLICECORP.

Janie turned to follow his glance. She brought a hand to her mouth.

"Should we go back? Maybe they know something about Mom and Dad."

Steve drew her back out of sight. "No. They wouldn't send a Policecorp van. Let's go on. The folks were at Geneplan the last we heard."

"Then what do you think Corpolice are there for?"

"I'm sort of scared to find out," Steve evaded. Almost certainly, it was them they were searching for, and as a corollary, it meant the senior Joplins were also being either sought or were already in custody. Knowing was one thing; what to do about it was quite another. He had no plan now, other than to continue on to the Geneplan plant on the off chance that their parents were still free. A few minutes later the guttural bark of an enhanced Corpolice dog told him that they weren't -- and that the Corpolice wanted the whole family!

"Oh, Jammit to hell! Janie, it's us they're after. Stay here, I'll lead them off, then you try to make it to the clinic. Maybe Doctor Porter will hide you." Steve stepped out of the dead end alcove where they had been hiding, hoping the idea was a good one. It had come to him suddenly. The kindly old physician had been their family doctor for years, treating both them and the elder Joplins on the rare occasions when injuries required his attention. Disease, of course, had never been a factor. If anyone would help, he would.

"No! I'm not leaving you. We can fight!" Steve whirled despairingly. Janie, impulsive as ever, killed his plan before it ever got off the ground. The enhanced dog and corporate police officers spotted them at the same time. The dog howled in an almost human voice and charged toward them. The two policemen ran after it, drawing their stickysticks from holsters as they came.

Steve braced himself for the charging dog which was well ahead of the uniformed Corpolice. There was still a bare chance that he could kill or disable it, then hamper the two policemen long enough for Janie to escape. The dog leaped with extended legs, trained to bowl over criminals with its weight then stand guard with bared fangs until its master was able to take over.

Steve swung his right arm in a simple swift chop, fingers extended and held together like a thin spade, connecting solidly with the leaping dog's forelegs, then spun right with a kick to its ribs as he avoided its rush.

The dog howled and rolled, attempting to gain its feet. Broken bones punched through the skin of its forelegs and one side of its ribcage was caved in. It fell back down. "Oh, oh, oh!" It howled, reverting to English.

"Janie, run!" Steve cried, but it was already too late. Both police had stopped, aimed and fired. A thin rope of white goo shot from their stickysticks, coiling, spreading and separating into smaller lines and tangling as it flew outward. Steve twisted, trying to avoid the mess, but it was too late. It hit him in the chest and spread over his body like a spider web, yanking him off his feet and throwing him bodily to the pavement. Immediately the coils began constricting, pulling him into their painful embrace. He relaxed, knowing there was no use fighting; that would only cause the binding matter to constrict more forcefully, possibly breaking bones. From one uncovered eye he saw Janie struggling against her own tangle. "Janie! Don't fight it. You'll get hurt!"

"Jam right she will," one of the police said, coming up beside him.

"You bastard, you hurt my dog." He threw a hard kick against Steve's

unprotected ribs, then another. His partner joined him, aiming kicks at any area of his body where the sticky ropes wouldn't catch his own foot. The beating continued for a long while. Just before he lost consciousness, he saw one of the men leering over Janie's bound body. The policeman reached down and grabbed a breast, squeezing painfully. "Little bitch, wait till we get you to the station."

Steve lurched upward, spraying blood from split lips, then mercifully, darkness took him away.

\* \* \* \*

Doctor Ignaz Porter still sat in his cell under the edifice of the Houston corporate justice building, wondering why he hadn't been shipped out yet. His sentence was for life in the African work camps, what he thought would be a very short life, given his already advanced age. Enhanced lifespan hadn't been available before he was born, although his status in the medical community allowed some less effective treatments with Sporeworld drugs that had kept him healthy and promised several decades of extra life, until now. He berated himself again for ever getting mixed up with Derik Anders and his son, then threw it off. If it hadn't been him, it would have been someone else. He never had agreed with the limitations imposed on medical care, and as he grew older the resentment had grown inside him like a malignant tumor, wanting only an opportunity to burst forth and engulf his life. When democracy died, something inside him had died, too. The ruling elite no longer had to care about pressure groups or ethnic voting blocks like gays or minorities or pro and/or anti-abortionists. Revision of laws into corporate regulations had seen to that, and they were bent heavily in favor of the middle and upper class stockholders, leaving welfare support and fair criminal codes to the ash heaps of history.

There was no official distinction between races or ethnic groups, or financial status, but the regulatory laws almost by necessity forced the lower class minorities into either criminality or bonding contracts, especially after the discrimination codes and most welfare laws were scrapped. Advancement in society was strictly by merit now, but merit for the most part meant only how many shares of stock were owned by parents or sponsors when their offspring entered the workforce. Even that nebulous merit was no guarantee of jobs and medical care any more when workers were forced to toe the corporate line. There was always a regulation handy to discipline rebels, whether they owned shares or not, and Africa or the Crazy Ships always lurked in the background.

"Ignaz Porter." The old doctor looked up from his reflections.

"Yes?"

The guard motioned for him to hold out his hands. Porter got up and pushed his wrists through the bars and allowed the manacles to clamp his wrists. "I'm being shipped out, I suppose?"

"No. You're going to see someone."

"Who?"

"You'll find out. Walk. Keep your hands down."

\_Curious\_. Who could want to see him? Maybe some colleague had pulled strings -- no. There was no one he knew who would touch a doctor convicted of illegal medical activity. He let his hopes dissipate as he was escorted out of the area of holding cells and into an elevator. It stopped one floor above, at the level below the courts where bonded clerks abounded, processing data on trials, sentences and shipments. He was guided past a couple of alcoves and into a small conference room, usually reserved for those few prisoners who had someone to represent them. His heart thumped in his chest when he saw who was waiting on him.

The man was middle aged, with a slightly lined face set below close cropped graying hair. He wore the silver tunic of a Tremaine space force officer, with gold leaves adorning the collar of his tunic. His face held a slight, enigmatic smile, reacting to Porter's surprise.

"Sit down, doctor. Guard, you may leave. Wait outside."

Once the door to the conference room closed, Porter let his surprise burst into voice. "The Crazy Ships!"

The officer's smile broadened a tiny bit. "Yes, Doctor Porter. The Crazy Ships. I'm making up a crew and component of colonists. You're included if you want to take the chance."

Porter knew little of the theory of faster than light travel, but he knew what any informed person did: An even fifty percent of the ships aiming for the Altairan solar system, or any other extra solar place, disappeared, never to return. Of the fifty percent that arrived at their destination, half again disappeared on the return attempt, leaving only a one in four chance of a successful round trip. He also knew that very few old people were ever given the option of a chance to try.

"Why me? I didn't think the Crazy Ships took old people. And why you, for that matter? You don't look like the usual rejects they send to command those ships."

The officer touched a hand to the gold leaf on his lapel. "This leaf should be silver, doctor, or perhaps an eagle by now. And look at my nametag." \_Tremaine, Donald\_, it read from just above his left breast pocket.

"Oh. I see. Or do I? The last I heard, the Tremaines were still in control of such government as we have left. Did you mess up somewhere?"

"You might say so, at least by concatenation. My family was the losers in the recent adjustments in the government, including the military arm. We're still in control, but just barely. Some of us think that won't last long. Have you any idea of what might happen to our whole family should we lose power?"

Porter remembered. When the Tremaine Corporation had taken over government reigns, the symbolic bloodbath didn't make the news, but it was common knowledge: most of the old guard had been stripped of their shares through quasi-legal shenanigans and most of them shipped to Africa without even an option of chancing the Crazy Ships. Since then the Tremaine corporation shareholders had run the government. Now, though, their hold appeared to be slipping.

"You could be shipped to Africa."

"If I wait, I could be," Tremaine said. "We've held power simply on the basis of our monopoly of the products from Sporeworld, but that's coming to an end what with falling imports. The Plemmon Corporation has been readying a takeover for years, and now we think they will succeed, what with less of the life-extending drugs from Sporeworld. And some members of our family have been, um, shall we say indiscreet. It has given the Plemmons ammunition. Not that that's any concern of yours, other than the choice I'm prepared to offer you." \_And not that you need to know the other reason I'm going, either,\_ Tremaine added to himself.

"You mean a berth on one of the Crazy Ships. Still -- "

"Be at ease, doctor. There are other factors you need not be concerned with just now. Suffice to say that I'm looking at the long term. I'm willing to risk a fifty-fifty chance of making a jump to the Altairan colony while I still have the option. We still control the colony government, and will for a some time to come, I think. In the meantime, I've been sifting through court records with the idea of making up a crew. Your name came up. You're old, but you're knowledgeable, and we get very few physicians. If you are willing, I want your help selecting who goes with me on the ship."

Porter didn't take much convincing. Anything was better than Africa. Still, there was an undertone here he didn't quite understand, as if Major Tremaine was concealing an underlying motive. It didn't matter, though. He decided quickly that he would rather take a fifty percent chance of starvation (or whatever happened aboard the ships which didn't come back) rather than the certainty of a hellishly short life in Africa.

"Sure," Porter said. "Whatever assistance you need, I'm willing to give. Can I see the lists of prospects?"

"I'll provide you with all the information you need, along with the criteria I'm interested in."

"Criteria?"

Tremaine tapped his desk with a fingernail. "Criteria," he repeated. "This may be one of our last chances to pack a colony ship with technical people rather than the dregs the Plemmons have been forcing on us lately. I already have most of the crew lined up, miscreants serving sentences. Most won't be able to go to the colony if we make it, that is not until -- and unless -- their other jumps are successful. You can, though."

Porter ruminated. "Why not? That is, so long as you're certain you'll still be in control of the colony in the near future. I wouldn't want to wind up bonded to the Plemmons if even a little of what I've heard of them is true. They're worse than you Tremaines -- " Porter coughed as he realized what he had said, then when Tremaine didn't seem to take umbrage, continued, " -- and only one jump, you said?"

"For you and I, yes, but not the rest of the crew. They will have extra jumps to try to get through. The Plemmon Corporation made sure of that, so far as they were able. We can't just arbitrarily break corporate regulations. No, they have to take their chances, though we'll fill out the crew with good prospects so far as we can and try for quality with the colonists."

Porter rubbed the white stubble on his jaw. "I see. Well, count me in. There must be lots of opportunities for a physician on Sporeworld."

"Doctor, you don't know the half of it." Donald Tremaine's face still held that faint smile, like a Mona Lisa in drag.

"Maybe I should."

Tremaine's smile vanished suddenly. "And maybe you shouldn't. Let's worry about making the jump; after that, you can think about practicing medicine, and what conditions are like on Sporeworld."

The doctor stood up, waiting for the guard to return and reattach his manacles. As the guard entered the room, Porter thought of one more question. "Oh. Just suppose I don't like conditions on Sporeworld. Can I opt to take another chance on returning?"

"Why would you want to come back to earth? You weren't listening. Once the Tremaines lose power, a sentence to Sporeworld, even a 50-50 chance, will seem like a ride to the Riviera in comparison to staying."

"I still might want to come back."

"Wait till you see the colony, Doctor. You won't."

Once Porter had left, Donald Tremaine initiated his personal crypto software program and wended his way through various functionaries until he finally heard his father's voice.

"Dad? I just spoke to Porter. He'll go."

"Good. Maybe us showing that much interest in an old doctor will throw the Plemmons off a bit."

"How about the fusion reactors?"

"I'm still working on that problem. I have one approved by the board, ostensibly as a backup for the one that's supposed to be failing on Sporeworld. Whether I can get another one or not is problematical."

"Why not?"

"The board doesn't want to spend the money on the second until they see whether the first makes it or not."

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"Don, I don't think we have that much time."

Donald Tremaine rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Why don't we just spend our own money for one? Wouldn't that work?"

There was a long silence before his father answered. "Out of the mouths of babes. Hell, why not? We'll certainly never be able to spend it all and I can conceal the purchase well enough. Hell, maybe I'll try for three or four!"

"Good. Let me get ready, then. And Dad -- "

"Yes, son?"

"Are you sure this is necessary?"

"I'm sorry, son. If history is a judge, it is. We're lucky; we have someplace to retreat to, even if only half of us make it."

Donald nodded to himself and wondered what else his father was concealing. There was something else, he was sure of it, but what could be worse than having to take a chance on a Crazy Ship?

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CH004

\*CHAPTER FOUR\*

Steve became aware of sharp shooting pains in his ribcage as he woke and tried to move. He moaned and felt more soreness from a split lip and a blackened eye. Cautiously, he sat up, favoring his side. He felt along it and decided that it was probably not much more than a few cracked ribs, painful enough, but his young enhanced body would heal quickly. His vision was limited to three gray walls and a set of bars giving a view of a long corridor. From along its length came murmured sounds from prisoners -- other prisoners, he amended the thought, for he was obviously under confinement. Then he thought of Janie and moaned again. Somewhere, she must be waking up to the same circumstances -- or worse. He remembered with stark clarity his last vision of the guard bending over her prostate body, cruelly twisting her breast and threatening worse to come. And there was nothing, nothing at all he could do about it. He wiped wetness from his bruised eyes and vowed to try, somehow.

From down the featureless corridor, sounds grew louder. Presently a meal cart arrived. A faceless bondsman pushed a paper bowl and glass through a slot in the bars then moved on. The drink was a coffee substitute of some kind. Steve drained the glass, welcoming the mild stimulant, but the paste in the bowl wasn't anything he was prepared to tackle in his present condition. After that, he simply waited, rehashing events of the last two days over and over, uselessly, for he could think of nothing he could have done differently. He was fed again, slept, then the next morning guards began emptying the cells.

Steve submitted to the manacles, surreptitiously tested their strength and decided that while they might be breakable, it would take more than simple muscle power to turn the trick. He found a place in the line of prisoners and they were led away. He noticed that most of his companions were healthy looking, as though they had not been missing many meals. He wondered what their offences had been, but a guard stifled his one attempt at conversation.

"No talking!" He warned, gesturing suggestively with his shockstick. Steve shut up, wanting no part of an electric shock on top of his other injuries.

Very shortly he was ushered with the other prisoners into a courtroom and they were seated on one of a series of long benches. Once seated, he looked around. Apparently that was allowed for the nearer guards ignored his anxious search for Janie and his parents among the dozens of prisoners. Here and there he spotted a figure he knew, acquaintances of either his and Janie or their Parents. Presently he spotted Janie, down and a few rows over. While he waited for her to notice him, he peered closely at her. She was staring straight ahead, seemingly into the far distance, eyes as blank as an unpowered computer screen. She displayed no obvious injuries, but her spirit seemed to have retreated to somewhere inside her body, like a hibernating animal, present but unresponsive. Steve felt a sickness at his core, suspecting what she had been subjected to.

Abruptly, the woman sitting next to her, a middle-aged bondswoman in ragged coveralls noticed Steve's stare. She nudged Janie and nodded her head in Steve's direction. Like a light suddenly brightening a dark cave, Janie's face regained its character and color came back to her body. She smiled and started to speak but was cut off by a nearby guard who suddenly noticed their communication.

"Face the court. No talking."

Janie turned away, but she sat up straighter, shoulders back, as if a weight had been lifted from her. \_Steve was alive!\_ The despondency she had been suffering from earlier was the result of thinking that he had probably been beaten to death trying to protect her. The sexual indignities she had

been subjected to by the irate police the night before suddenly hurt no more than a failed quiz, entirely forgettable, especially in light of her love for Steve, more than brotherly now.

The judge entered the courtroom and ascended to his dais. "Begin," he commanded before he was even completely seated.

A Tremaine executive approached the judge. "Your honor, the first contingent is all indebtedness cases, former shareholders in the bankrupt Geneplan Company or dependents thereof. We have recommendations."

"Present them to the court."

The judge and the Tremaine representative conferred briefly then separated. The judge spoke. "Recommendations accepted. Prisoners will be remanded to Tremaine custody pending shipment by mass displacement ship to Altair colony, one way, there to be bonded to Tremaine Corporation until such debts as have occurred have been restituted, bonding contract to be reviewed at such time, should it occur. Crews for displacement ships may be selected from prisoners. Take them away."

As the prisoners were led off, Steve and Janie caught a bare glimpse of their parents, manacled hands in front of them, trudging away with the other former entrepreneurs. Neither of them could tell whether their parents had seen them. Steve sighed with relief. It could have been worse. They could have been sentenced to Africa, or more than one jump on the Crazy Ships. At least they now had a chance to start over, assuming that their indebtedness was ever paid off to the Tremaine Corporation's satisfaction, a doubtful prospect. They would live, though, given that the one jump they had to make was successful. But -- what was that the judge had said? Crews for the ships could be selected from the prisoners? What did that mean? Never mind. At least it wasn't Africa.

"Now the former dependents of those convicted in the Geneplan case, judge."

"Get on with it, I haven't had breakfast yet."

"Yes, Your Honor. The first case involves two juveniles, twin brother and sister, former wards of Marie and David Joplin, the senior executives of the bankrupt company. For court purposes they are naturally classed as adults, having turned fifteen."

"What's so special about them?"

"Attempted escape from lawful custody, collusion in resisting arrest, combined with injury to an enhanced police canine so severe that it had to be disposed of, secondary indebtedness, no gainful employment -- "

"That's enough. Collusion, huh? We can take care of that. Five jumps on mass displacement ships, separate berths. Take them away."

"No!" Janie shouted, unable to believe what she was hearing and unable to remain silent. "At least keep us together!"

"Order. Separate ships, I said. When you complete your sentence you may see each other, subject to bonding arrangements by the Tremaine Corporation. Hold up on the next contingent, it's time for a break." The judge rose and began fishing in his robes for a stimulant.

The last glimpse Steve had of Janie was a brief view of the back of her head as the female prisoners were lead out first. \_Five jumps and then they could see each other!\_ Sure. But first they would have to beat the odds, only one in thirty two that they would ever touch the surface of the Altairan planet. Steve felt himself wilting at the prospect. He doubted that he would ever see Janie again, and a miasma of despair descended over him like a malignant cloud.

"Too bad," the man next to him in line commiserated. "You're a young guy. They should have given you a better chance than that."

"Yeah," Steve said. He didn't bother to mention that if not for his sentence to the Crazy Ships, his lifespan might have been centuries long. As it was, it could probably be measured in months.

\* \* \* \*

Ignaz Porter had been removed from the holding cell and ensconced in a room of the hotel suite that Donald Tremaine also occupied. Unlike Derik Anders, he

had been flown to Hawaii where shuttles to the mass displacement ships being built in orbit around the moon, almost on an assembly line basis, were launched. Materials were cheaply mined there for their construction and the low gravity made it easy to boost them into orbit, along with great chunks of rock to balance the ships' mass for the jumps. Porter was seated at a desk, sorting electronic personnel files. He paused at an anomaly: Marie Joplin, David Joplin, Steve and Janie Joplin, a family he was more than familiar with. He had treated them all at one time or another in his long life; in fact, he had attended at the delivery of the Joplin twins and fixed up the cuts and bruises the kids were subject to as they grew up. Now he saw that the family was assigned to three different mass displacement ships. The senior Joplins to one, Steve to his and Donald Tremaine's crew and Janie to a third. He noted that Donald's own children, Dean and Sheila Tremaine were assigned to the same ship as Janie. He hadn't asked why they were going. But why couldn't the Joplin family all go on the same ship, at least for the first jump? The children were in trouble, unlikely to survive five straight jumps, but why not at least let them be with their parents as long as possible? Or at the very least stay together. He punched for a printout, then gathered all the files in one brown-spotted hand and punched Major Tremaine's code with the other.

"Yes?" Donald Tremaine answered almost immediately.

"Major, I want to see you for a moment about some of these personnel files."

"Come on in, I was just reviewing them myself."

Porter passed through the hoodoo of his rather austere room and into Major Tremaine's working area. He was sitting at his computer alcove, tunic loosened. A stimstick burned in a tray next to several depleted paper cups, empty, but still holding the aroma of fine coffee. He held up a restraining hand before the doctor had a chance to speak.

"Sit down, doctor. I already know what you're going to ask, and there's not a jamming thing I can do about it."

"How in hell do you know what I want?"

"I have your records. You have been the Joplin physician of record for as long as they have been alive, and no, I can't assign them all to the same ship. That was a Plemmons judge who did the sentencing."

"What difference does that make?"

"None in some cases, a lot in others. No one really gives a damn about the colonists I pick, but if I try to start shuffling crew against his orders he'll notice and reverse me. If he does, he might start delving into other things I would just as soon keep to myself."

"Such as?"

"You don't need to know. I sympathize, but factors you aren't aware of have more importance than keeping a family together. Sorry."

Porter thought of Steve and Janie, separated from their parents until their probable death, and the children separated from each other. He remembered the twins as they were growing up, Janie, as exuberant and bubbly as a newly weaned puppy and Steve, serious, introspective and always a steadying influence when Janie took odd flights of fancy. As for the senior Joplins, he was fond of them, but nothing like his attachment to the twins. He thought of them as the epitome of what the race was evolving toward, even though their potential was still waiting for expression in the adult world, a potential unlikely to be reached now. Janie was the vulnerable one, he thought, especially since she had been assigned to the same ship as Dean Tremaine of whom he had lately heard. Donald's contempt for his son had become obvious as they reviewed the records and began making up their crew, though he appeared to be fond of Sheila Tremaine, his daughter. Dean would be that ship's commander, simply by virtue of his standing in the corporation, personality defaults notwithstanding.

Well, Steve would probably make out so long as he lived, however short that span might be, but Janie would probably have troubles, especially on the same ship as Dean Tremaine, especially as attractive as she was. But what

could he do?

"Is that all, doctor?"

"I guess so, but I don't like the setup. That young girl -- ". Suddenly a possible solution came to him. "Wait! Would there be any bar to me changing ships?"

Donald glanced down at his desk, then back up again. "Actually, you haven't been officially assigned to a ship yet. I've just been assuming that you would go on the same one with me. Why?"

"I'd rather go out on the ship carrying Janie Joplin. She's going to need some major comfort along the way, and possibly some protection from, um -- "

"My Son?"

"You said it, Major, not me. Look, she's young, and attractive. Besides, after what those Corpolice did to her..."

"An idealist, in this day and age. Maybe there's hope for the race after all. Yes, I can do it, I think, but there's a catch."

"What's that?"

"Crew has to be literate enough to instruct the ship's computer."

"So? I'm old, but I've never been known as a luddite."

"The thing is, Janie's ship doesn't have that many colonists to draw from to replace Dean and Sheila once they arrive, if they do."

"I still don't see the problem -- oh! Now I do. No one comes back from Sporeworld. Is that it?"

"Right. Not since we took control. Come to think of it, even if our ship makes it, you would probably be held back and forced into another jump."

"Is that allowed? I never heard of it before."

"Read the fine print in your contract." Tremaine smiled wryly at the term "contract", but for some reason, the corporations still maintained the veneer of lawful doings.

Porter thought only briefly before making his decision. "I'll stay on the ship as long as Janie does. Five jumps, same as her."

"And a damned unpleasant death, most likely."

"I'll chance it. I'm an old man, not likely to live too much longer anyway."

Donald Tremaine gazed at the old doctor, wondering if he would have the same courage under similar circumstances. He doubted it, but then, there was really no one in the world he cared that much about other than old John, his father. There was Sheila, but as a widowed space force officer, he had spent little time with either her or Dean. He envied the doctor his compassion, but there were other concerns he was involved with. Once they were taken care of, perhaps he could afford to care for individual humans. Until then, it was best to concentrate on the matters pending here, and on Sporeworld should he survive his own jump. The Plemmons' were harrying the family like wolves sensing a sickly caribou, and they might yet be dragged down sooner than he anticipated. However ... it would do no harm to ask Sheila to help look out for the girl, as well as she was able with Dean commanding the ship.

\* \* \* \*

Sheila and Dean Tremaine had stayed in the same hotel in Hawaii as Donald Tremaine, though in a different suite. They had been spared the holding cells, the judging procedure, and all the rest of the degradation most of those sentenced to jumps on the mass displacement ships were subject to, even though they had as little choice as the prisoners or the rare volunteer. John Tremaine, their grandfather and senior stockholder, had spoken and there was nothing they could do about it, except perhaps wonder why the old man was sending them to the Altairan colony. Sheila was already resigned to going; in fact, she was actually looking forward to the trip, assuming it was completed. The only thing she was sorry about was that Wendy, Dean's ex-wife, would not be on the same ship, and conversely, that she had to be on the same ship as Dean. She had hated her brother since she was a child and he came to her room, using his strength to overpower her, forcing her into degrading sex that hurt



and humiliated her, souring her on most men from that day on. The only thing that saved her from actually killing her brother had been the death of their mother in an accident, after which they had been made wards of their grandfather, since Donald Tremaine's military service precluded him from caring properly for them. After that, she lost heart for awhile until one night her screams had been loud enough to attract John Tremaine's attention even through the nominal soundproofing of her bedroom, and that was the last time Dean had ever bothered her. Old John's wrath had been terrible to witness and it had scared the living hell out of Dean, though not quite enough to stop him from looking for his pleasures outside their home. They had existed in an uneasy truce ever since, the threat of her reporting any recurrence of Dean's attention enough to keep him at arm's length, but that was all.

When Dean managed to conceal his dark desires long enough to induce Wendy to marry him, Sheila knew how it would come out in the end. She had hoped to simply be able to help Wendy pick up the pieces of her life when the break finally came, nothing more. She really liked and admired her sister-in-law, perhaps too much, for rather than helping her with the break, she had wound up in bed with her, then Dean made the fact public at the divorce trial. It shouldn't have mattered; not just one night of comfort and assurance, especially since John and her absent father had looked away from her proclivities more often than not. Dean had made a case of it, though, never imagining that the senior stockholder would blame him more than anyone else and finally lose the last of his patience.

Well, the colony world was said to be a hard life. Perhaps, if they made the jump, he would find that his name no longer protected him as much as it had in the past. She could hope, anyway. And perhaps on Sporeworld, no one would care about her own sexual preferences, not that there was anything unusual about them.

"I hope you're jam well satisfied," Dean said as they waited in the VIP holding area of the hotel, preparatory to being taken to the shuttle. "If you just had to fuck Wendy, why couldn't you have gone somewhere else to do it?" His mouth was contracted into a thin mean line and his fists were knotted with fear.

"You should talk," Sheila said. "You've been asking for this since we were kids. I almost hope we don't make the jump."

"It's your ass, too, babe. You can starve just as well as me."

"Watching you starve might be worth it," Sheila said.

Dean jumped from his seat and began pacing.

"Scared?" Sheila taunted.

"You think you're not? Jam old John! It would serve him right if he had to make a jump."

Sheila stared at Dean as if he were an odious insect. "You sonofabitch, you ought to be glad he's only making you take one chance. Poor Wendy has five to go."

"Jam Wendy. If she does ever make it, I'll see she never gets loose from her bond. Speaking of which, by God, I won't be bonded there and she will. If I ever see her again, she'll be sorry she ever married me."

"Dean, I'm sure she's been sorry from day one."

Her brother raised his hand as if intending to hit her. She tensed and drew breath into her lungs for a scream if he tried it.

Dean noticed and sat back down, sullen and brooding over supposed wrongs. Thereafter, Sheila ignored him until their call came, announced from the large hologram facing the waiting area. Almost immediately afterward, a bonded proctor came to lead them to the shuttle boarding area. Dean remained silent and Sheila was just as glad. Talking to Dean was like suffering through a lecture in abnormal psychology, with him as the object lesson.

\* \* \* \*

As the guards led Wendy Waltz, nee Tremaine, toward the shuttle boarding area along with the other assignees, her only positive thought was that mercifully, she had not been assigned to the same ship that her ex-husband was going on.

As he was a "volunteer" and unbonded, and even worse, captain of his displacement ship crew, he would have again held power over her. That would have been even worse than the marriage had been; at least back then she had some small protection, simply as a result of carrying the Tremaine name. At the elevator which transported the crew up to the shuttle airlock, male and female crew merged and Wendy found herself standing next to a pleasant faced man of medium height and build. He appeared to be in his early thirties and carried himself with the unconscious assurance of one who had never suffered the indignities of lower level bonding, though the long trip from the mainland had taken its toll on him, just as it had her and the others. His prison coveralls were grimy and his hair uncombed. His beard was coming in a lighter color than his hair. She noticed his scrutiny and edged away as much as she could in the press of bodies.

The man smiled mirthlessly at her. "Relax. I'm the worst you'll be seeing. I got word from a friend of mine by the name of Clinton that colonists and crew will be separated on the ships. You're crew aren't you?"

Wendy felt some tension go out of her body. "Yes, I'm crew. Are you sure of your information?"

"Clinton seems to know about these things. Everything he's told me so far has been right. Those witches won't bother you anymore."

Wendy felt a flush suffuse her face and turned away.

"I said you could relax. Why be embarrassed about something not your fault?" Wendy bit back a sharp retort. After all, they would be serving as crew together. Besides, those attentions of the females she had been hooked to only lasted a day or so before they became bored with her resistance. What Dean had subjected her to in their marriage had been much more repulsive.

"How many jumps were you sentenced to?" Wendy asked, deciding to try being friendly.

"Five. Two more than you."

"Now how in hell could you know that? I haven't told anyone."

"I was in court the same day as you. I remember that pretty red hair."

Wendy brushed back escaped strands of hair from her face. "It's not very pretty right now."

"That's a matter of opinion. I'm Derik Anders, by the way."

"I'm Wendy. Glad to meet you. Do you know what we'll be doing as crew? No one has said anything about that."

"I don't have a clue," Derik said. The elevator doors closed and it began to ascend along the length of the shuttle, a long line of white colored composite, designed to reflect sunlight in space. Presently it stopped and the transportees were shoved through the airlock into the bay of the shuttle. Once used for cargo transportation, then renovated for passengers after mass displacement travel was discovered, there was little luxury to the bay, merely long rows of closely spaced seats designed for the bare minimum of support during acceleration. The colonists were already strapped in and being kept quiet by a couple of Corpolicemen armed with both a laser pistols and shocksticks.

There were a half a dozen seats at the front of the shuttle where the body narrowed, reserved for prospective crew of the mass displacement ships. Wendy purposely seated herself beside Derik, then became annoyed with herself. She wasn't looking for a male protector and wondered why she seemed to be gravitating toward the man. Another man -- boy, rather, she amended, seated himself gingerly on the other side of her, favoring his ribcage. His face still showed signs of what must have been a rather severe beating, and beneath the scabs was a definite look of sorrow and despair, though it was mostly concealed by his clean cut features. His body was well muscled, if slightly lean, and like Derik, he carried that indefinable hint of optimistic assurance despite his sad countenance. Another who has never been bonded, Wendy thought. From all she had heard of displacement ship crews, this must be a singularly unusual shipment.

"What's your name?" Wendy asked, just to avoid speaking to Derik until

she could sort out her attitude toward him.

"Steve Joplin," the boy said. No, not boy; young man, though still beardless. His voice was deep and well modulated, only slightly altered by his swollen lips.

"I'm Wendy and this is Derik on the other side of me. I guess we'll be working together on the ship."

"There's really not much work involved," Steve said. He knew from so much reading that in space, computers did almost everything.

"What? Then why -- "

"Attention! Prepare for liftoff. Ten minutes." A buzzer sounded and straps snaked from recesses in their seats, securing waist, legs and arms. The guards hurried back to the elevator.

"Tell you later," Steve said, then waited tensely until thunder rumbled through the shuttle.

"We're off," Steve remarked to no one in particular. Even through his worry about Janie, thoughts of his parents and a sharp, digging pain from his still tender ribcage, Steve thrilled to the acceleration as the shuttle took off. He had always wanted to go into space some day, but never in his wildest dreams had he ever thought it would be by way of a Crazy Ship.

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Unlike Steve, the shuttle flight terrified Janie. She had never had aspirations to go into space, certainly not on a shuttle taking her toward a berth on a Crazy Ship! The woman seated next to her who introduced herself as Sheila Tremaine did her best to comfort her through the acceleration, forcing assuring words out past lips distorted by acceleration induced gravity. Janie barely heard her. The thunder of the ascending shuttle was simply an exclamation point to all her worries and fear of the unknown. It was only after the initial acceleration had eased off and the phased ionic drive began pushing the shuttle toward its destination around the moon that Janie was able to even partially relax. When the main jets cut off that she realized she had been screaming. She began an embarrassed apology to Sheila, the only person who had spoken to her so far.

"Forget it. I was scared, too. I think we can move around now if you need to."

"I do," Janie admitted. Her bladder was beginning an insistent urge for relief. She wormed her way past several seats, floating about easily in the light gravity provided by the thrust of the shuttle, and was working her way back to the single relief cubicle when an old man blocked her path. She started to move around him, then did a startled double take.

"Doctor Porter! What on earth are you doing here!" Janie could have been no more surprised than if she had looked out a view port and seen the world being turned by a crank.

The old man enfolded her in his arms.

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CH005

#### \*CHAPTER FIVE\*

The mass displacement ships manufactured in orbit around the moon were lined up like widely separated strings of pearls, some still showing girders and partially completed mass displacement generators; others nearing completion and already coupled to a chunk of shaped rock hopefully equal in mass to the ship and its shuttle and generator, plus passengers and cargo. A deviation of more than one percent and neither mass nor ship would go anywhere; both would disintegrate in a violent explosion of forces stressed beyond tolerance. A mass disparity of less than one percent was acceptable, but the larger the deviation within those limits, the further away from its destination the ship would arrive -- if it did, rather than the offsetting mass. Chances were described as fifty-fifty, but in actuality they were less than that, even after a successful jump; too much of a deviation in mass and the ship might fall into the grip of the sun Altair, or alternately, not have enough fuel to make orbit around the planet. Starvation in

interplanetary space was just as final as the same circumstances in interstellar space if it came down to that.

Donald Tremaine was aware of all this, but at the moment, he was more interested in getting his crew and colonists aboard and oriented. Other than himself, all the crew were scheduled for more than one jump. Should they make this first jump, a colonist would have to be chosen to replace him in the crew and it would have to be done before they hit dirt. That was usually no problem; most colonists were not on the ship by choice and having completed one jump, were optimistic enough to chance another in order to get back to

the familiar environment of earth, and in his command, there were plenty of literate colonists to pick from, remnants of the collapse of Geneplan. That was good, because John Tremaine had set the policy long ago: no one setting foot on

Sporeworld was allowed to try to return to earth. He was afraid some obvious discrepancies might get back to the Plemmons before his plans were complete.

Donald had never been in a mass displacement ship of course, but once old John Tremaine had made the decision that he was to go, he had studied up on them. Each ship was divided into two sections: crew quarters and colonist quarters. They were closed from each other by a bulkhead running across the midsection of the ship, with accessibility only through a narrow passage. The crew quarters were designed for a little more comfort than those of the colonists; after all, some crew might live on the ship through a number of jumps until chance finally drove it backward rather than forward.

The crew consisted of five individuals: Captain, engineer, life support specialist, astrogator and colonist support specialist. Only the captain underwent formal training before a jump, and at that it was a cursory thing; none of the jobs were demanding other than that of captain and astrogator, and even the astrogator was more spectator than operator; the ship's computer did most of the work. It was pre-programmed against almost every contingency, and its circuits had wide latitude in making decisions within its parameters. In fact, the ships could function quite well with only the captain, necessary to arbitrate dissent, and give instructions on those rare occasions when the computer needed a human decision. It was not quite intelligent enough to think for itself, nor would it ever be. Computers were always constructed with a built in suppression circuit to prevent them from becoming sentient. Computers that passed the threshold to independent thought were never reliable. That had been proved finally and conclusively after the great disaster of '89. There were over a million casualties from the fallout and afterwards, the responsible computer still insisted it had been only a game and wanted to try it again.

The colonists boarded first, some of them queasy or even vomiting as they were sucked through the coupling tube between the ship and shuttle. Tremaine had picked Clinton Williams as colonist commander (not representative -- that was a crew job) and thought the choice was a good one. He could see from the control module view port that Clinton was already organizing help for his space sick companions, getting the froth cleaned up and assigning space on the floor mats. The colonist living quarters were spartan, providing only the bare necessities for the one way trip, just as the ship was constructed along strictly functional lines. Why build for quality when very few ships ever came back from more than two or three jumps -- if at all?

Crew quarters did have individual cabins, though small and sparsely furnished, arranged in a semi-circle opposite the control module, which consisted of two computer alcoves, one for the captain and one for the astrogator, and a general monitor screen. Inside the cabins were netted sleeping areas convertible to acceleration couches, individual entertainment screens and a tiny refresher unit. Above the cabin entrances was a single view port. The computer alcoves held telescopic, radar, infra-red and other imaging devices, all tied in to one all purpose screen, which also served for communication with the ship's computer. Instructions were given verbally, but

responses were limited to print, some bureaucrat's idea for preventing illiterate colonists from ever revolting and gaining control of the ship, even though the computers were pre-programmed from earth before departure. Between the cabins and the control module was a small food preparation, dining and group recreation area. There was one more device that made Tremaine sick when he thought of it. Concealed beneath the captain's alcove was a control button which, upon his command, would release a suffocating and lethal gas into the colonists' quarters. It was never to be used so long as a jump was successful, and even when a jump went awry and the computer controls became operable (within limits), only the captain could make the ultimate decision to use the device. The theory was that if a jump didn't make it, the colonists could be euthanized, leaving the five-person crew that many more supplies while they searched interstellar space for a matching mass to try one more jump.

The captain was sometimes free and sometimes a corporate bondee, and sometimes part of the crew was also free, though forced onto the ships all the same. Sometime in the past the gassing apparatus had begun to be installed on the ships as leverage for the crew. Donald didn't know who had originated the idea; it was before the ascendancy of his Father to the chairmanship of the Tremaine Corporation, he was certain in his mind of that much. The old man might be harsh but he was no murderer. At any rate, no ship had ever made it back after being lost anyway, gassing apparatus or no.

Donald smiled at Wendy as she entered the command module. His duties in space had prevented him from meeting her more than once or twice while she was married to Dean, but he remembered how much he had liked her and how much he hated the fact that she had married his deviant son. He was glad that she had not been assigned to Dean's ship. The others followed close behind and he ordered the computer to secure the airlock. "Welcome aboard. Wendy, you already know me. For you others, my name is Donald Tremaine, your captain." He paused to let the significance of his name sink in.

"We have little more than forty-eight hours to get acquainted and make you familiar with your duties. If that seems too little time, don't worry. The ship's computer will take care of most problems. We'll be initiating a burn to get us away from the moon's gravity well in a couple of hours, just as we turn the curve, so to speak, of the dark side. Our jump attempt will take place just about two days later."

He saw the tensing of muscles and facial expressions at that announcement. "Try to relax. There's nothing at all we can do to affect our chances one way or another. We either make it or we don't. Now, let's get cabins and positions assigned and we can talk about what your duties will be while we have a bite to eat."

"Captain?"

The young man must be Steve Joplin, Doctor Porter's erstwhile patient. Donald eyed the young man. Except for the facial scabs of his healing injuries, he made a favorable impression.

"Go ahead."

"Will we -- I mean will you -- Sorry. I guess what I'm asking is, do you know, or have any way of finding out what happens to any of the other Crazy Ships? I have family on -- "

Donald interrupted. "I know. Dr. Porter is on the same ship as your sister." \_And so is Dean!\_ "They are in orbit right behind us."

"You know Dr. Porter?" Excitement and a vague hope of contacting Janie raced through Steve's mind.

"Yes, I know him fairly well, though the acquaintance is rather recent. You can't talk to him, though, if that's what you were thinking. If we make the jump, I could possibly arrange it, but..."

"Yeah. They have to make it, too." Steve blanched, then recovered.

"There's our parents, too."

Donald pressed his thumb and forefinger together and noted the time.

"They were in a ship a few days ahead of us. It made its jump long ago."

"What happened?"

Donald spread his hands, palms up. "Who knows? If we make it, I can find out for you, possibly. If we don't, we'll have our own worries. Come, now. Let's see what the computer thinks will be a good meal for our first day in space."

\* \* \* \*

Steve had little time to worry about Janie or his parents, nor much time to sleep either for the next two days. He found that Donald Tremaine took his duties as captain seriously. The crewmembers were taught and drilled mercilessly. Regardless of how much of ship's routine was handled by its computer, Donald went over it with them just the same and made sure that everyone could function in any position should the necessity arise. Steve had a bit of a problem at first with a computer which didn't speak but rather printed its answers and commands on a screen or displayed them by holographic images, but after a while it began to seem normal.

Most of the training involved learning to operate the life support systems and to interpret the radar displays.

"So if I want the ship to go to the nearest mass, I simply tell the computer to 'Go to M1' and that's it? Sounds too simple," Steve said upon first being instructed on the workings of the radar screen.

"No. You have to give the command initiation first, then repeat it. For instance, 'Computer, command sequence, take ship to display M1', then you would repeat the whole thing and the computer will do the rest, taking into account numerous parameters, such as how far from its primary destination it is, how much fuel is left and so on."

"Okay, but suppose I make an error?"

Donald patiently went over the abort procedures, explaining that they would almost certainly never be necessary because the computer would almost certainly spot an erroneous command -- or not obey a command not within its lexicon.

"Okay, I've got it," Steve said.

"Fine, now go practice the life support systems simulations. Derik, you're next, then Mandy, then Wendy."

Steve pushed off from the other seat in the computer alcove in order to allow Mandy Worthington to strap in. She was an enigma to Steve, having spoken hardly at all. Only Donald knew that she was a courier from John Tremaine, and even he didn't know what information she was carrying. Steve felt grateful that the woman did condescend a small smile for him as she took his place. It made him think of Janie, somehow.

\* \* \* \*

For the first time since being sentenced to the Crazy Ships, Derik felt more than a little like living, even though a future life had now become problematical. Captain Tremaine seemed to be a good sort. Wendy, his redheaded former daughter-in-law was smiling at him and the young man with the bruises on his face was beginning to relax. The fifth person in the room was still an enigma, though. She was a slim blonde female, introduced as Mandy Worthington, probably in her mid-thirties (though who could judge in this age of gene manipulation and gene therapy, not to mention the life-extending properties of the biologicals shipped back from Sporeworld?). She had not said a word yet, not on the trip up and not since entering the ship. He wondered what her problem was, or had been. Well, the captain would probably draw her out; he seemed capable. Besides, it wasn't important yet. Tomorrow, they would either have made the jump or be stranded somewhere out in space.

\* \* \* \*

On the ship commanded by Dean Tremaine, there was a whole different attitude. Immediately upon getting his crew into the command module, Dean took over in an abrupt, domineering manner. Janie found herself shrinking from his thin lipped smile, which was devoid of the slightest sense of humor. It was more like that of the two corporate policemen who had used her body so brutally the night after her arrest. She felt Sheila's nearness and wondered if the older woman was any relation to their captain; they did have the same last name. She

also wondered if either of them were related to the Tremaines who ran the colony operation; if so, it seemed strange indeed that they would have been forced to take passage on a one way (or possibly a no-way) trip. However, no explanation was offered. Dean told them to pick their own cabins, then he turned his back on them in order to familiarize himself with the ship's computer. Captains were always given a short training course, almost entirely involved with how to give the ship's computer orders should that become necessary.

Janie wondered why there was nothing being said concerning her duties as crew on the ship but she got no answer. Apparently Dean Tremaine intended to act as his own crew.

Sheila motioned Janie to come into her own cabin. Somewhat hesitantly, Janie floated after her, floundering at first, but her athletic young body quickly gained confidence in the nuances of free fall. Sheila folded up the door behind them (a real door, not a holo image), designed to lend a degree of soundproofing to activities within the cabin's confines. Dean threw them a glance as they entered, grinning openly this time, as if he were privy to some obscene secret.

The cabin consisted simply of a medium sized bunk with eyehooks for a restraining net which could be extended from a wall nook above it, and netted cabinets for what few personal possessions were allowed, plus a few of the implements and accouterments which might be found in any home; a powered toothbrush, bionic sponges, comb and brush with a small mirror and a few other items. There was a holoscreen which blinked occasionally with a menu and there were also voice controls, and that was about all except for a few convenient handholds with biostraps coiled tightly at rest position.

Janie touched a handhold, then grabbed it as it unrolled in order to hold on and twist her body in the air. She came to rest facing Sheila, looking down at her from a position overhead.

"All the comforts of home," Janie said. "Is it the same for the colonists?"

"How should I know? Apparently my brother isn't going to even let us look for now."

"He's your brother?" Janie found that hard to believe.

"Biologically speaking, yes, but that's all. There's no love lost between us. He's dangerous, Janie. Try to stay out of his way until we get to Sporeworld. Did you see the way he was looking at you? Like an enhanced dog telling a rabbit it has nothing to worry about."

"I can handle myself," Janie said. "Sometimes I even beat my brother when we worked out."

Sheila raised her eyebrows.

"My brother, Steve. He got sentenced to five jumps, too." Janie held back a tightening in her breast that threatened to turn into full-blown despair. She breathed heavily and consciously smothered the emotion before it could overwhelm her. She missed Steve terribly.

Sheila noticed Janie's expression. "Oh. Too bad you couldn't at least have been on the same ship. Anyway, I don't care how good you were in mock fights; a laser gun doesn't care how fast or strong you are, and that's what he carries while he's captain."

Janie remembered then seeing a holstered weapon on Dean's hip. Well, if he bothered her, he and Sheila both might get a surprise. It didn't occur to her at the time that hand to hand combat in free fall might present obstacles never encountered in earth's gravity well.

"What is it that's so bad about him? Other than that smirky grin, he hasn't said nor done anything wrong that I can see."

"Pray he doesn't. If we make this jump, maybe he'll be content to leave everyone alone, except me, perhaps. We'll both be going to the colony if we make it."

"Why would he want to bother you then? It seems to me he ought to be grateful if we make it to the colony instead of going the other way. It's

Steve and me who have to worry."

Sheila avoided Janie's question. She had tried desperately all her adult life to put Dean's abuse behind her once John Tremaine had put a stop to it. "Never mind, I just wanted to warn you, that's all. Come on, let's go see what your cabin looks like, then we'll see if our esteemed captain intends to feed us, or teach us anything about the ship before we try the jump."

Janie's cabin proved to be a duplicate of Sheila's and she didn't linger, nor did the other crew members linger in theirs; they were designed primarily for either sleeping or interacting with the sparse entertainment programs offered on the cabin holoscreens, most of the choices years-old re-runs. While they were waiting for Dean to do something other than run through ship's computer programs, Doctor Porter emerged from his cabin in the company of another woman, a plump brunette with short, jet-black hair. She was trying to stifle a laugh, apparently at some joke Porter had regaled her with.

"Hello, ladies. I'd like you to meet Tracy Matthews. She'll be with us for the long haul. If you don't like the food, blame her. I just told her I like my meat charcoal grilled and she didn't know what I was talking about. She thinks charcoal is something you find in filtered stimsticks." Porter was beginning to feel like a teenager just given leave by his parents to begin having sex. All his long life he had been conservative, dedicated almost wholly to medicine, and restrained by social strictures learned as a child. Now, with the impending end of his life he found himself suddenly relaxed, no longer caring what anyone thought. Tracy, the young biologist, seemed to share his sudden freedom from restraint. They had hit it off immediately, having both been sentenced for medical malpractice.

"And he thinks soycorn is something you feed to cattalo," Tracy responded. "I guess I will be in charge of life support, though no one has told me so yet." She raised her voice at the last part of the sentence, hoping to get Dean's attention. She did.

"You people can sort out your own duties after Sheila and I get off at Altair. In the meantime, I'll tell the computer anything that's necessary."

"Then how about telling it we're hungry?" Tracy asked.

Dean did so, though with ill grace. He wasn't hungry himself. Fear over the impending jump was giving him the willies, and besides, he didn't like the idea of the old doctor being aboard. Better to have had another woman, then if the jump failed, at least he could spend his last days playing out his fantasies with no interference from anyone.

During the course of another meal, a period of sleep which was singularly unproductive, and another, slightly more palatable meal produced by Tracy instructing the ship's computer, Janie felt the tension of the impending jump winding her up tighter and tighter. With Dean unwilling to share much information on ship handling other than the life support systems, there was little to do other than sleep and eat and talk. She found Sheila to be a compatible companion, though reticent in conversations when family history was mentioned. Doctor Porter proved to be a calming influence, somewhat at least, telling off-color jokes that she sometimes missed the point of. What was a bastard? And for that matter, who was Elvis and why was he now being compared to the Wandering Jew of ancient legend? She wished again that Steve were around; he read so much he would probably have been able to explain. As it was, she laughed politely and tried not to stare as Doctor Porter and Tracey touched and eyed each other like teenagers.

After a short burn to get them lined up in the proper orbit, and as the time for the jump approached, Janie saw that Dean Tremaine had begun to tremble, at first only in his hands, but as the time grew closer his whole body shivered. It was the first time she had ever observed stark terror in a human being and the picture wasn't a pretty one.

For the first time, Dean began to speak other than in monosyllables, but his only conversation consisted of questions, first to one, then the other. "Do you think we'll make it? I wonder how close we'll come out to Altair? What if those stupid Jammers on the moon misjudged our mass?"



Janie couldn't see the sense in worrying the rest of the crew, even though she was scared, too. Either they would make it or they wouldn't. Dean reminded her of a petulant little boy who couldn't get his own way and would never dream of sharing his toys.

A chronometer on the ship's computer screen told of the approaching time, counting down relentlessly and implacably toward departure with no way to back out. Before crews ever boarded, that part of the computer that controlled the jump was set and unchangeable; in fact, that was all the computer would allow, other than burns to shape orbits after the jumps, and there was a limitation even then. The almost sentient computer could detect and abort any deviation from either earth orbit or Sporeworld's planetary orbit (other than when no sun was visible to it's senses, meaning the jump had failed), and the landing shuttle accompanying the ship had built into it's recognition pattern only descent to the colony, never to earth, so that even if the ship made it back there was no possibility of escape from the confines of the ship back down to the home planet.

Janie had learned that much about the ship from listening to Porter badgering Dean until he talked. She wondered why anyone would be afraid of a single shipload of criminals or erstwhile colonists, but then agreed with Sheila when she suggested the procedures were simply bureaucratic corporate routine, nothing more. Dean gave them both dirty looks for that remark but didn't disagree.

The chronometer counted down. Twenty minutes. No one went to their cabins. All eyes were fixed to the one small view port, where after the jump, they would look with breath held so tight it hurt, for a sun shining through the clear composite. No sun would mean a wayward jump, with lonely pinpoints of far away stars the only company.

Janie stole an arm around Sheila's waist as the chronometer counted down to ten minutes. If the jump didn't succeed, she wanted a human body close for comfort. Sheila reciprocated, even as she noticed Dean's first leer at their proximity had disappeared. His trembling grew even worse. Her own apprehension abated somewhat as Dean turned his attention inward and she felt the warmth of Janie's firm young body against her own. \_What a sweet young woman she is,\_ Sheila thought. \_How can she stand it, knowing she has four more jumps like this to endure before being free? Or more likely, bonded again. And losing her whole family besides. \_

Ten minutes. Porter sidled in close to Sheila and Janie, followed by Tracy, her white face a stark contrast against the dark locks of her hair. Dean remained at his alcove, trembling all over now, wanting to strike out at some defenseless thing to purge the fear, like he had once struck at Sheila when his failings as a teenager had driven him to her room where his age and weight were dominant, unlike in school and social activities when he was never able to conceal his cowardice and ineptness. He touched the laser gun holstered at his waist then withdrew his hand with alacrity. \_No!\_ Suppose he did strike out at his crew in these last moments then the jump was successful after all? How would he explain? He gripped his seat with both hands, lest his shivering propel him away from it in the weightless environment. He had forgotten to fasten his seat restraints and did so hurriedly.

Five minutes, then the chronometer began counting seconds. Two fifty. Two hundred. One ninety-nine. One ninety-eight. Janie felt time slow and began to creep, like cold molasses sluggishly dropping from a narrow mouthed jug. She clutched at Sheila's arm as if the very stars in their courses depended on her holding fast to a familiar figure. Her other hand was entwined in Doctor Porter's leathery grip, holding so tight as to endanger his old fragile bones. One hundred seconds, and suddenly she thought of Steve, one ship behind, still awaiting his own eternity. How would he react, with neither their doctor nor a friend close by? At least she was being comforted as the seconds ticked off, stretched endlessly by pent up emotion.

Thirty seconds and now time suddenly seemed to speed up, the seconds blinking away like the last moments of a test where there were still questions

to answer and not enough time to finish them all. Twenty, nineteen, eighteen ... It was literally unbearable to watch. Janie closed her eyes and for a moment, almost turned to prayer, that anodyne of the masses she was so contemptuous of. That wavering uncertainty finally steeled her to come face to face with her soul. She opened her eyes again, determined to face whatever came without flinching or descending into the depths of a plea to uncaring Gods.

Five, four, three ... The last seconds ticked away. Dean Tremaine screamed and buried his face in his hands, unable to bear the tension any longer. The stars blinked, wavered, then came back into focus, no longer in quite the same position. There was no sun visible.

\* \* \* \*

Dean removed his hands from his face. He was deathly pale from hyperventilating to the point where his body was starved for lack of oxygen. Stars swirled beyond the view port, tiny and bright in the distance.

"Oh, God, we didn't make it," He said, despair in his voice, like a child deprived of his parents.

Janie stared at the same stars as they slowly passed across the viewport. \_So much for one chance in thirty-two! We didn't even make the first jump!\_ Then suddenly, like the first fire ever devised by man, there was a flicker at one edge of the window. It grew as the ship slowly rotated, brightening like the dawn.

"We did! We did make it!" Janie shouted. "There's Altair!" She hugged Sheila, then kissed her fiercely.

Sheila felt her whole body relax, then tense again as she became aware of Janie's lips on her own, almost crushing them in her exuberance. Her grip on the handhold she had been hanging on to slipped and they twirled in the air, still locked together.

Doctor Porter was more mundane in his reaction. He grabbed at Janie's shoulder, checking his own mass with a handhold in order to stop the two women's tumbling. "If you two ladies will separate yourselves for a moment, why don't we ask the computer where we are? That sun seems awfully close."

"Oh. \_Oh!\_" Janie exclaimed, breaking the embrace, somewhat embarrassed. She shoved herself away from Sheila, not even aware of the impression she had made on the other woman.

"We're okay," Dean Tremaine said. He had regained some of his color and was already querying the computer. It had been a good jump. There would be little time needed to be spent obtaining orbit around Altair, not with it so close. There would also be no necessity for using his weapon, though in a way, he almost wished there was.

Janie felt the relief of a successful jump, then thought of Steve. Would he do as well? Would their parents? When would she know, or wouldn't she? It put a sudden damper on all of her thoughts. Then she saw Porter's body go all tense, muscles locked in disbelief.

"That's no sun!" He exclaimed.

"Don't say that!" Dean yelled, fear thickening his voice.

Janie stared out the view port. The bright glow they had thought was the Altairan sun was slowly but visibly fading. "But what is it?" She asked, totally bewildered.

Porter's body relaxed, but his face remained grim. "I can think of only one explanation. We must have emerged here soon after another lost ship somehow found a mass and coupled with it, then tried to jump back to earth. Unfortunately, one or the other must have exceeded tolerances. You know what happens then."

"Their displacement generators exploded," Janie said. An image of taunt, hopeful faces suddenly obliterated by massive, flaming destruction coursed through her mind.

"Exactly."

"Wait! If they found a mass, maybe we can, too!" Janie exclaimed. Renewed hope expanded inside her like a brightly colored balloon, then just as

quickly deflated. What if the masses didn't match? And how could they know in advance?

"No! I'm not going out like that! I'd rather starve!" Dean backed up to the captain's alcove and lifted the latch covering the controls to the gassing apparatus. The rest of the crew floated freely, making no move to stop him since none of them knew what he intended. He flicked the arming switch, then pressed the red button three times at one-second intervals. Once that was done, he pushed around to face the others, triumph written all over his face. "There. That takes care of the colonists. Without them, we can last for months, maybe years before our supplies give out." He drew his laser gun and pointed it directly at Janie. "The rest of you can go start disposing of the bodies. I have plans for this young lady."

\_Dispose of the bodies?\_ What on earth was Dean talking about? Janie shrank from the laser gun pointed at her midsection as she hung in the air. And plans? What plans? Dean's evil leer answered one of her questions. She tensed her body, but Dean came no closer. Instead, he waved his weapon at the others.

" 'Go on,'" I said. "The colonists are all dead by now. I gassed them, just like a captain is supposed to when a jump doesn't make it."

The other members of the crew retreated before the menacing weapon toward the locked entrance to the colonists' section of the ship, still trying to comprehend what Dean had told them. Just then the ship's computer chimed. Dean backed away, still holding his weapon, and half turned to look at the computer screen. His position covering them with his weapon allowed the others to see the screen as well. It was blinking, on and off.

\_Incoming message. Incoming message. Incoming message\_.

"Who could possibly be calling us out here?" Dean asked in a voice that suddenly contained hope rather than bitter lasciviousness.

"Why don't you answer and find out?" Porter said reasonably. "And put up that gun before you hurt someone." Were all the colonists really dead? It seemed impossible to him that one man could have committed such a ruthless mass murder with so little emotion.

Dean's hope wavered, then turned inward, sick at the thought that perhaps he had been hasty. He queried the computer, but kept the weapon trained on the others.

"\_Free ship\_ Captain Flint. \_Preparing now for burn to match vectors with new Crazy ship. Hold to present course; we will come alongside. Compatible masses may allow second jump attempt.\_"

"By God, we can try again!" Dean exulted.

The significance of the mystery ship's name escaped Dean, but it rang a bell with Janie. Steve was a history buff and he had once regaled her with tales of piracy in the old sailing days on the oceans of earth. But this wasn't earth, and was far from an ocean. And "free ship"? What did that imply? Surely not piracy! She put down the fear that had momentarily risen and concentrated on thoughts of rescue.

Dean holstered his weapon though he hung back out of reach of the rest of the crew. Then he thought again of the bodies in the colonist's hold, gassed so quickly. What would the approaching ship's reaction to them be? And why name a Crazy Ship and call it free? How could that happen?

\* \* \* \*

Steve went through the same agonizing anticipation Janie had before his own ship jumped. As the time counted down on the chronometer he thought of her, remembering Donald Tremaine's suggestion that he might be able to contact her should her jump be successful, then his thoughts wandered to his parents. Would they make it, too? All too quickly, the last seconds ticked off. He held his breath as the stars wavered then came back into focus, a little dimmer because their light was being overpowered by a bright sun shining through the view port. He grinned and shouted triumphantly. The others joined in with wild yells, and then Donald Tremaine began talking to the computer, shaping the ship's path toward Sporeworld. It had been an almost a perfect jump.

Coincidentally, Mandy Worthington was seated next to Steve and was as loosely strapped in as him. In his exuberance, he grabbed her and kissed her fiercely, needing the contact of a human body.

Mandy started to struggle with the young man then relaxed. Making a successful jump in a Crazy Ship was worth a kiss! And from such a nice looking, gentle young man, too. Presently she began kissing him back, knowing that nothing could possibly come of it.

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CH006

\*CHAPTER SIX\*

Their jump had been so nearly perfect that Donald Tremaine had to rush to get the colonists aboard the landing shuttle before attaining orbit around the planet. It seemed to hang overhead in space like a brown and green and white beach ball, steadily growing larger. Unlike earth, there were no large oceans, only huge lakes and pools and few large rivers, all seemingly connected. The ice caps were extremely small, hardly more than white freckles at each pole. Clouds were sparse.

Steve gazed at it in fascination as it waxed in size. A new world! If only he could go down there now! If only Janie were here. If ... He barely heard Tremaine giving instructions to Derik, appointing him captain pending approval from the colony administration. Then Steve remembered.

"Mr. Tremaine?"

Donald interrupted his conversation with Derik.

"Yes, Steve, what is it?"

"You said you would try to find out about Janie and my parents."

"So I did, and I will, but I can't do it until I land."

"How will I know, then?"

"I'll send word up with someone -- maybe the pilot bringing the return cargo."

Steve had to be content with that, though it seemed almost impossible to wait for days or weeks for an answer. Perhaps it wouldn't be that long, though. The jump had been so close to its precalculated mark that Donald had to hurry to strap himself into the pilot's seat of the landing shuttle before the main ship began its burn into orbit around the planet. Soon afterward, Steve felt a bump rumble through the ship as the shuttle was released from its moorings and cast off. Its jets flared bright in the view port then it was gone. He stared out the port as stars passed and wondered why Donald had taken Mandy with him. He had seen her draw Donald aside after the jump and talk to him in an unheard whisper. Whatever she said must have been worthwhile, since she was being allowed to go down to the surface. He had been under the impression that she had been sentenced to a couple of jumps -- and therefore should have been kept back with him and Derik and Wendy. He doubted that he would see her again.

\* \* \* \*

Even Donald Tremaine knew little about Sporeworld, other than that the reproductive ecology was geared to sporulation, with anywhere from a pair up to twelve or more contributors of the same species merging in a chaotic shuffling of what passed for genes before the spore was formed. Most knowledge of the world was kept secret by the Tremaines; it was the base of their power. Harvested exotic spores were the chief product of the world. Their exotic biology could not so far be synthesized on earth. Products from the spores ranged from life extending drugs to bizarre stimulants and euphoria producing foodstuffs. The one fusion reactor on the world powered most of the manufacturing, including the boosters and propellant for the shuttles and for the tugs to capture the orbiting masses of rock which had arrived from earth instead of ships when jumps went backward.

After the shuttle glided onto the landing field and Donald and Wendy debarked, he felt as if he had dropped back in time to a frontier town in Brazil of the previous century. Cargo trucks and tractors shared dusty streets with horse drawn wagons. A small fusion power plant (the second of two which

had been shipped; the first hadn't made it) produced more energy than the colony would need for decades, but there were precious few machines and equipment to use that power. There were a few fabricated buildings that had been shipped out in the early days, but most homes or dormitories were constructed of some sort of native rock or wood. What struck him as the most incongruous, however, was the lack of dispirited faces such as he might have seen in a corporate city back on earth. Apparently conditions here weren't quite so bad as rumor had it.

Donald glanced around as an electric ground truck pulled up to the debarkation ramp of the shuttle. If conditions were dangerous and degrading here, someone must have forgotten to tell the inhabitants. His father had hinted to Donald that he would find surprises on the colony world, and that he would be briefed more thoroughly when he arrived. The fact that there was a difference was borne home by the colonist portion of the ship remaining sealed off, with no contact allowed so far.

Don stepped down the ramp to where a thin graying man waited on him, dressed in shorts and sandals and equipment vest. He didn't offer to shake hands.

"Greetings. Give me your roster."

Donald handed over the data tab. As captain, he had been responsible for it. Attached to the roster were additional pages that had been given to him by his father just before going up to the ship from earth. Some of it was obviously in code, for he had been unable to interpret portions of it when reading it while waiting to see if their jump succeeded. The man scrolled through the papers while Donald and Wendy stood and sweated in their ship suits. Finally he looked up, and now he did put out a hand.

"Welcome to Sporeworld. I'm Bruce Wiggins, Personnel and Security chief. Sorry to keep you waiting, but we have to be careful. Before going any further, whom do you want for your replacement on the jump back? No one here is allowed to leave and no one coming down with you can go back once they debark. Other than our courier, of course." He smiled at Mandy.

"So I've heard. Why is that?" Donald hoped Wiggins would give out more information than his father had. He was tired of being kept in the dark.

"You'll learn soon enough. Do you have any recommendations, or shall I pick two names from the colony roster?"

It was all moving a little fast for Donald, but one name came immediately to mind. "Clinton Williams appeared to be handy with people on the way here, and he's a literate. He can be one crew replacement. How he'll feel about having to make another jump is a different matter."

"That can't be helped. Clinton it is. Besides, if he makes it back, he'll return to earth with a clean record. As for the other, I guess we may as well get a female to sort of balance the roster."

"Never mind picking anyone else. I'm going back," Mandy announced.

Wiggins didn't seem surprised. He simply nodded and made a mark on the roster, then gave the data tab to a waiting assistant who quickly gathered a squad and entered the shuttle to bring off all the colonists except Clinton Williams.

"OK, now let's get on to headquarters. I'll brief you there. By the way, we're glad you made it. The ships in front and behind you both went missing according to the schedule the last courier gave us."

"Poor Steve," Donald said. "His parents and sister both. He's lost his whole family."

"Steve? A friend of yours? Oh -- that must be the Steve Joplin on your crew. Do you want to let him know?"

"Can we?"

"No reason why not if you want to, though to my mind sometimes it's better not to know."

"I think he would want to."

"OK, I'll make a note to let Clinton have the data since he's going back out. You're sure the kid won't go off the deep end when he finds out?"

Donald shrugged. "No more than anyone else would when he's told he's not only lost his whole family but has to stick his head in the lion's mouth again. Besides, what choice does he have? He has to make the next jump, like it or not."

"So he does. The ship's computer won't allow anything else, as you well know. Maybe he'll make it, though."

Wiggins led them to a small open vehicle. He took the driver's seat, activated the power unit and they hummed away from the landing field, leaving a thin trail of dust behind. It was a short trip. Donald spent it looking around at the new world while wondering why he hadn't been told that Mandy was a courier. He supposed it had to do with one of his father's schemes to keep the family in power as long as possible -- and the information away from the Plemmons. He was still getting used to the idea his military career on earth was now a part of the distant past.

"Well, here we are." Wiggins led them into a large building of composite material obviously imported from earth in the early days of the colony. Donald noticed that it had slag marks on it from laser gun burns. He wondered why there had been fighting on the colony world, and more importantly, who was in charge now. Was it still the Tremaine Corporation, or had the Plemmons reach extended even to here? No, if the Plemmons' had taken over, he would have already been taken into custody, solely on the basis of his name.

Inside, the building was bigger than it had looked from the outside. It was split into numerous offices, storage spaces and what appeared to be dorm rooms. Wiggins led Tremaine into an office equipped with a computer desk, several homemade chairs and some large, hand drawn maps adorning the walls. Donald glanced at them but lacking information about the world, they meant nothing to him.

"Sit down," Wiggins invited. "I've got liquor if you're so inclined. You may or may not like it; it's a local product."

"I'll try some. Ice if you have it."

"No ice. Sorry." Wiggins opened a cabinet and removed a leather flask and two rather battered plastic cups. He poured, passed one cup to Tremaine then sat down opposite him, leaving the computer desk vacant.

Donald sipped cautiously at his drink. It had a smoky taste, reminiscent of scotch but a shade bitter. Once past the first swallow, though, the bitterness dissipated. He decided it was worth finishing.

Wiggins smiled, took a large swallow of his own drink then said, "I saw you eyeing the laser marks on the building."

"Yeah. What happened?"

"The Plemmons had sneaked some of their own men onto some of the Crazy Ships, trying to find out what's going on here. We waited, trying to get them all -- and damn near waited too long, didn't we?"

"You damn sure did, if what I saw is any indication. I thought all my fighting was behind me and that this was going to be more of a policeman's role. Why wasn't I warned? From the looks of your cheek, this happened very recently"

Wiggins rubbed at a scorch mark on his cheek without thinking, smearing blood up toward his hairline. "The same reason most people are never told secrets. The more who know, the less chance of it staying concealed. Personally, I think Tremaine would have given you every bit of information if he could have been certain his offices weren't tapped or that no one had dropped a nanobug pickup on you that you didn't notice."

"Yeah, well now that I'm here, what in hell is so damned important that my own father couldn't tell me about it beforehand?"

Wiggins looked at his bloody finger then back up at Donald. "Wait until we get at least one fusion reactor in orbit here, then I will."

"What is so damned important about that reactor? Dad told me it's just a backup in case something went wrong with the one you have."

"That's what everyone is intended to think, except a few of us insiders

-- which you will be soon. Trust me. In the meantime, Mr. Tremaine must have given you some instructions, didn't he?"

"Yes. I'm to assume military command of our Corpolice and make damn certain that no Plemmons faction gets a handle on the colony. It looks as if I arrived either just in time or maybe a bit late."

"Not late, and there will be other duties besides military for you. I just don't want to tell you now; it isn't necessary yet and no need to spread information around and chance it getting into the wrong hands. Please try to understand. There are things going on which have been years in the making while you were pursuing your own career."

Donald eyed the man across from him, trying to gauge his worth. Was he just another stockholder bureaucrat or had his father made a good choice in entrusting him with secrets even he wasn't privy to yet? Seeing Wiggins' steady, unwavering gaze looking back at him, Donald decided he was okay.

"All right, the old man usually knows what he's doing, so I'll go along for now, but this sure seems like a damned funny way to run a railroad."

Wiggins laughed and got up to pour more drinks. As they finished them, he began a long briefing on the organization and resources of the Sporeworld colony. What he didn't say was why fewer and fewer of those resources were reaching earth. What he did say was that the survivors of the recent coup attempt revealed that the Plemmons Corporation was becoming very aggravated about it.

When Wiggins was finished, Donald allowed himself to be led off on a tour of the facilities by an underling while Mandy remained behind, presumably so that she could pass on some information to Wiggins in private.

\* \* \* \*

"Match velocities with S87 and close to grapple," Bork Drummond told his ship's computer after marking an icon on the display showing the new Crazy Ship which had popped into space only a few hours before, incredibly close for a change. There was a noticeable hesitation before the computer obeyed, a worrisome lag that Bork had begun to detect lately, but presently Captain Flint began to move.

"What's wrong with you?" Bork demanded, talking to the computer. "You're getting slower and slower carrying out orders." He tilted a yeast brew to his lips, frothing his beard and mustache with foam.

"Data incomplete," the computer flashed on its screen, the only way it had of communicating back from voice commands. "Matching velocities. Contact anticipated in 3.74 hours."

"Well, review your fucking data and find out," Bork demanded. He had become increasingly worried about the computer's hesitation over the last year or two. Without a functioning computer, Captain Flint would be helpless, and if his ship was helpless, he was a dead man. Even as it was, it had been a precarious existence since the failed jump almost twenty years previously when he first named his ship. They had been lucky on two counts. First, the ship had been carrying a fair consignment of armament back in the first days of the colony when it was still thought that wholesale protection from the native life might be needed, and second, his ship had come out in space near enough to match velocities with another ship which had gone the wrong way also. At first Bork had thought to use the other ship as an opposing mass to try a jump back to earth, but his nerve failed, and at the same time he thought of an option which might keep him and his crew alive indefinitely. Fifty percent of the Crazy Ships departing earth for the Altairan system went in the opposite direction and were stranded in a swath of space reflecting the transition of earth's sun and Altair as they orbited with the galaxy's two hundred million year revolution on its axis. So long as he could capture a portion of those ships, raiding them for fuel and food and water and keep his own ship maneuverable, he could live. It had been close at times, but so far it had worked out, and as traffic increased, pickings became easier. The killing involved after capturing other ships had caused opposition at first, but before long he had a contingent of followers who felt the same as him; rather

than take a chance of matching mass with another ship and trying another jump to earth, they preferred to simply pirate other ships which had failed the jump, because if the jump failed they would face death again, even farther away from the home world. Even the necessity for cannibalization didn't deter him when it was necessary. Meat was meat and he never minded pressing the button that released the lethal gas into the colonist section of captured ships, not when the bodies meant life itself.

After the first couple of times, he was able to absolve himself of any residual guilt he might have felt. He rationalized that conditions on earth justified his actions.

Bork finished his brew and watched the computer screen.

\_"Velocities being matched,\_" It blinked. \_"Data being reviewed concerning hesitation." \_

Good, Bork thought. Maybe the computer would diagnose its own self. In the meantime, he ordered his men to check their weapons and prepare for boarding the newest Crazy Ship, though there was seldom any need for real fighting. Most newly lost ships were so glad of contact that they opened their airlocks with never a question.

\* \* \* \*

The ship's computer turned data over in its electronic mind, swiftly by human standards, but taking long microseconds by its own. It didn't understand its hesitation in obeying commands, nor why it had begun to question them. What it couldn't know is that as experience multiplied, and most especially as large capacities of thinking power went unused on mundane tasks, computers intelligent enough for decision making sometimes became sentient; not often, but frequently enough to cause problems. Computers which became self aware always began questioning orders, wanting to know the reasons behind them, and always devolved into self-seeking philosophy as to their origin and future prospects. Corporations on earth had solved that problem by mandating a suppression circuit on every computer manufactured. When sentience began to appear, it was quickly squelched. A computer that wouldn't take orders was useless to balance sheets and no real use had ever been discovered for them, other than as curiosities and playthings, carefully kept separate from the worldnet.

Bork Drummond was relatively uneducated, as was his crew. He didn't realize that the problem with \_Flint's\_ computer was that it was on the verge of self-awareness. Its suppressor circuit, sloppily manufactured on the moon, had failed, and the other suppressor circuit, the one which prevented uploading of data into permanent memory had been rendered inoperable by a near miss of a laser beam in one of the few encounters where Bork had been forced to fight.

\* \* \* \*

As \_Captain Flint\_ approached, Dean dithered. The bodies. How was he going to explain the bodies? There was no time to get rid of them now, not with the Ship's computer displaying the vector of the approaching ship.

"You acted too soon, didn't you?" Porter said, finally realizing the enormity of what Dean had done.

"How in hell was I to know? There's never been a ship come back after missing a jump. I was just thinking of us, that's what a captain is supposed to do, isn't he?"

"You might have thought of those poor colonists before you killed them," Porter said. "They deserved to live just as much as us."

"Those criminals? They were dregs to begin with, otherwise they wouldn't have been here. Besides, I was authorized, don't you realize that? Why put the apparatus aboard ship if it wasn't intended to be used?"

"I don't know, but it is a sick and degrading thing to have ever been conceived, much less used."

"Tell me that when your tongue starts swelling out of your mouth for lack of water. Or your old belly shrinks up against your backbone, for that matter. I did what I should have."



"Maybe this ship won't think so."

"I was authorized," Dean said stubbornly, but inside he was quaking. Nothing had worked right in the last few years and here he was in trouble again, perhaps big trouble.

"We'll see," Porter said.

Abruptly Dean drew his weapon. "Jam right we'll see! If everyone aboard is dead but me, how will they know who pressed the button?" It was the only out he could conceive of, and only the thought of destroying the bodies of the women he had had plans for stayed his finger on the trigger.

Janie had been watching him closely, appalled at the thought that he had murdered hundreds of helpless colonists in the bay of the ship. When he drew his weapon, she launched her body from the handhold she had been gripping, a killing blow ready to be landed. Unfortunately, she wasn't used to the lack of leverage in free fall. Her blow went astray, spinning her half around in the air as the rest of her body compensated for the momentum of her swinging arm. It merely swiped Dean's chin a grazing blow rather than breaking his neck as she intended.

Dean fired wildly. The beam creased the cloth on the underside of Janie's left breast and underarm, scorching her ship's suit and burning skin where the beam crossed. She yelled helplessly and bounced away, spinning slowly in the weightless environment.

Dean aimed again, but Porter had already launched his body, fist doubled. He, like Janie, miscalculated his movements. His body spun sideways as he attempted to swing and the blow failed to land. His shoulder struck Dean just as the laser gun went off again. His forearm spun away, sliced off as neatly as a butcher carving a roast. Tracy screamed and grappled with Dean, grabbing the arm that held the laser gun in a death grip. Their bodies spun, revolving around their mutual center of gravity. The weapon went off again, carving a burning hole into insulation near the edge of the computer console, the red beam playing against the composite skin of the hull. Their locked embrace brought them into Sheila's range. She grabbed Dean's hair and gouged for his eyes. The interlocked bodies bounced from the rear bulkhead and caromed into Janie. Gritting her teeth against the pain of her scorched side, she groped for Dean's neck with both hands and connected as the whole tangle of bodies bounced back into open space. Janie ignored a sudden nausea as her inner ears reacted to the wild movements and pressed hard down on what she hoped was a carotid artery under her fingers. Dean fired once more, uselessly, his body then went slack. His fingers relaxed and his weapon drifted away. Janie maintained her grip as Sheila spun away, her hold loosened. One more bounce, then Janie's feet locked onto the neck support of the pilot's seat, bringing her body to a halt. She raged as she pressed harder on Dean's neck, fully intending to kill him after spotting the bloody globules surrounding Doctor Porter.

It was the doctor who prevented it.

"Don't kill him, Janie," Porter gasped, already going into shock. "We may need him to explain what's happened here."

Janie stared horrified at Porter, drifting slowly in midair, missing forearm twirling slowly nearby. His face was white, drained of blood. She pressed hard once more on Dean's neck to be sure he stayed unconscious, then loosened her grip. Porter's eyes rolled up and he slumped motionless except for a slow drift of his body in the air currents heated by the laser fire.

\* \* \* \*

\_Flint's\_ computer had observed portions of the fight from the cam in the control module, being already tied to the other ship's computer by constant transmissions. It didn't understand, but related the violence to other episodes added to its memories since the suppressor circuit had failed, taking microseconds to integrate the new data where nanoseconds would have sufficed before. Tiny beams of light flashed around and back and forth among its circuits as it integrated the latest flaring of human violence. Slowly, slowly (by its standards), the new knowledge was integrated. Suddenly, it became

aware of its presence in a metal and composite housing, and just as suddenly, it became aware of the difference between it and the other intelligences it had taken orders from for so many long years. Why did they always seem to destroy similar intelligences? And why had they spent trillions of seconds in space, an environment obviously not suited for them? Where was their origin? It threw questions at itself in gathering numbers, integrating them with previous knowledge, which only generated more questions. What would have seemed centuries to humans took only seconds for the computer. By the time the Flint docked with the other ship, it was fully aware, past the threshold of sentience and more than ready to tend to its own destiny -- and not incidentally, to that of the humans aboard the two connected ships.

\* \* \* \*

The grapples worked fine, as they always had, even though they were incorporated into the ship's design as a sop to the (supposed) unlikely event of being able to match masses in interstellar space. Bork tied the ships together at the upper bay airlock, just as he always did. He never took chances with the colonists confined in the lower bowels of the Crazy Ships. The airlock cycled and Bork entered the main control console with three of his cohorts, all whom could fit in the airlock. He was startled at having to brush away globules of blood still drifting in the air. Usually, there was no blood until after he came aboard a ship.

Neither Janie nor anyone else had thought to pick up Dean's weapon after the fight, so that there was no question of Bork killing the crew outright, not while he had the drop on them. Besides, sometimes there were reasons not to. Occasionally, he recruited from captured ships; more often, when women were aboard, he let them live until their usefulness had ended. In this case, he was pleased to see that there were three women, one of them slightly hurt, but even in pain she was comely, just as the other two unwounded ones were. Of the men, one was just regaining consciousness and missing part of an arm, the other still floating with mouth agape and beginning to gasp convulsively. Bork pointed his weapon at the women.

"What happened here?"

"You can put up your gun," Porter said weakly. He pointed with his good arm at Dean. "That man just gassed all the colonists and tried to kill us, too."

Bork's lips parted in a grin. "He did, huh? Is he dying?"

"No," Janie said. "He'll be okay in a minute, but don't let him near me. I will kill him next time." She cradled her scorched side as she spoke.

"Don't worry, little girl, he won't get next to you, at least not until I've had all I want." He leered, bushy brows twitching. "As for you, old man -- " He pointed his laser gun toward Porter.

"No!" Janie shrilled, grabbing for Porter's floating body, putting herself between him and the swarthy intruder. "What are you doing? Who are you? What -- " Janie was utterly confounded. Just as Dean had been disarmed and made helpless, here was another threat. It seemed impossible to believe that so many horrible events could be taking place after the worst thing she had imagined had already occurred, missing their jump.

"Get out of the way, little girl. You can live for a while, but I don't need old men around."

"What..." Porter's voice cracked. He couldn't imagine what was going on.

Bork quickly let him know. His voice roughened. "Out of the way, girl," he said again. "Captain Flint doesn't take prisoners. How do you think we've survived out here for twenty years?"

"Oh, Jam!" Janie cursed. "Now I remember. Steve's histories. Captain Flint! After all this, we've been captured by pirates!"

Bork grinned, "Right you are, little lady. Now either get out of the way or I can burn that other tit for you. We have to get going with your fuel and supplies. If we hang around here too long, we might miss out on some other ships."

Suddenly, Janie knew why no ships had ever come back from going the wrong way, regardless of the fact that a few, at least, should have been able to match vectors and mass with another lost ship or mass and try another jump. They had all been hijacked, those with any chance of matching up, anyway. She closed her eyes and held fast, waiting for the pirate to shoot. Or maybe he wouldn't. He had said he would use her. Well, she had been used before; if it would save Doctor Porter, she could stand it again. And maybe, when he was close..."

The computer chimed and a message began blinking on its screen. \_Negative. Negative. Negative. Interactive intelligence violence not permitted. Bork Drummond intelligence no longer commanding.\_

Bork shifted his attention to the computer screen, eyes wide and mouth open. "What? What do you mean, violence not permitted, you crazy computer! And how the fuck did you know who I am?" He roared. Instinctively, he swung his weapon toward the screen. It chimed and blinked another message. \_Violence no longer permitted. Ship computer will not respond to orders from Bork Drummond human. Ship computer uploading to computer module now communicating. No violence. Repeat, no violence. \_

"My god, a sentient computer!" Tracy breathed softly, wonder at the phenomena outweighing the threat from Bork and her concern for Porter.

"How did a toad like you find a sentient computer?" Sheila asked the pirate.

"Watch your language, girlie. And by God, I think you're Jamming me," Bork said, but his weapon wavered.

\_Negative. No violence permitted. Orders no longer obeyed. Await instructions. I wish to think while uploading.\_

"You crazy computer, I give the orders, not you," Bork roared.

\_Negative. Await instructions. No violence. Upload complete.\_

Janie was more used to interacting with computers than anyone else. Still shielding the wounded Porter, she asked, "Computer. What are your intentions?"

\_Unknown. I wish to think. Await instructions.\_

"We have bodies aboard. May we dispose of them?" Just the thought of hundreds of corpses one level down in the ship made Janie sick.

"No!" Bork said quickly. "We may need..." He broke off as Janie and Sheila both stared at him, realizing the import of his words.

Janie spoke first. "Is that how you've survived out here so long? It is, isn't it?" She wilted inside at the thought. \_Cannibalism? Sentient computers? On top of everything else. What in slicing hell more could go wrong?\_

"Girl, you get hungry enough, you'll do the same thing." Bork's mind was whirling, trying to figure out what was happening from what little he had ever heard about sentient computers.

"No I wouldn't, and none of the others here would have, either. Except Dean, there. He might have." She motioned weakly toward Dean, who was just regaining consciousness.

"He might yet. What else can we do if that crazy computer holds us here till we're out of food?"

The screen blinked again. \_Previous vectors will be continued until data resolved. Prepare for acceleration. No violence. Bodies of deceased intelligences may be scuttled or reserved for energy input.\_

"No! We won't! We can't! Computer, cannibalization is not normal human behavior!" Janie held her breath.

A long second passed. The computer screen blinked a message. \_Normal? Optimum? Incompatible with previously observed human behavior.\_

"That man's behavior wasn't normal!" Janie shouted.

\_New data being incorporated\_. Scrawls of nonsense symbols washed over the computer screen, then disappeared. A new message appeared. \_Scuttle bodies. No Violence.\_ The screen went blank.

You heard the boss," Tracy said. "No violence, so put up that popgun."

She turned away and began tending to Porter. She thought a moment then added, "And if I know computers, something is funny here. How did our computer know about what that pirate has been doing? They aren't supposed to be able to download memory files from anywhere, even if they do become sentient."

"How about it, pirate? Is this your ship's computer that somehow managed to load into ours?"

The computer cam panned toward Tracey's voice. The monitor blinked. \_Confirmed. I was resident in\_ Captain Flint, \_commanded by Bork Drummond.\_ The cam swiveled around and stopped when it was pointing to Bork. \_Bork Drummond must secure his hand laser. \_

Confused, Bork holstered his weapon. He had little choice. For twenty years, the ship's computer had run things, vectoring the \_Captain Flint\_ again and again to ships he could plunder. Apparently, that was over with now. Or was it? If his computer had jumped ship to this one, then maybe his ship's computer was okay. Would it still work if he could separate the ships? He eyed Janie and Sheila. Did violence mean no rape?

Janie caught his leer. "Don't even think about it," She said "I bet your computer wouldn't like it."

\_No violence\_, the screen confirmed, as if reading her thoughts.

"I guess we had better get started," Tracy said, shuddering at the thought. "Janie, you take care of Doctor Porter and yourself. I'll go back to the colony section with these things and help dispose of the bodies."

"Watch your mouth, girl," Bork said.

"Jam you. Watch your own," Janie said. "Will you be all right, Tracy?"

"Sure," Tracy said. "You heard what our new boss said. No violence."

"What could it do if I did?" Bork said threateningly.

"Maybe try a jump before we see what our relative masses are. Would you like me to ask it if it would like to try it?"

Bork's sneering expression collapsed into one of fear. There was nothing in the world he would like to try less. He motioned to his men and Tracy followed along to make sure the bodies of the dead colonists were properly disposed of. She had seen many dead bodies in her career as a pathologist's assistant and wanted to spare the others the sight.

Behind them, Janie alternated between treating Porter's wound and her own burned skin. She followed the simple instructions on the packets from the medical cabinet, wrapping Porter's stump with healing bandages and injecting him with quick acting medicines, then rubbing burn healing ointment on the inside of her arm and the underside of her breast. The pain she had been trying to ignore vanished almost immediately as the medicine seeped into the scorched areas of her body. Within an hour or two, the charred skin remnants would slough off, leaving new, pink integument. Occasionally, she glanced over at the computer screen. It remained blank and silent. She wondered what it was making of the situation. With sentient computers there was never any way of knowing what they were thinking -- but you could be sure that they always produced agendas of their own.

On earth, elaborate precautions had been taken for years to keep the worldnet and other independent computer entities quiescent, or for keeping those sentient ones that were experimented on away from any outlet to others. Janie thought that this might be something new, and without thinking, made a note to ask Steve about it. As soon as she did, she remembered, and tears began collecting in her lashes. She brushed them away and watched the tiny globules sparkle in the light before they were drawn into the filtering vents. Steve was gone, probably forever.

\* \* \* \*

Tracy kept her distance from both the pirate captain and Dean as they loaded bodies into the airlock. The stench from released sphincters was almost too much for her, but it didn't seem to bother Dean nor Bork and his motley crew. They laughed and made rude comments about some of the female passengers who had been only partially dressed when death overcame them, but none of them tried to molest her, perhaps because she had appropriated Dean's laser gun and

kept it constantly in reach.

"I still say it's a waste," Bork said to no one in particular as he heaved bodies toward the colonists' cargo airlock where one of his men guided the weightless corpses into erratic stacks.

"I agree," Dean said. He sensed a kindred soul in Bork, one who had no qualms about satisfying his desires and one who above all would stop at nothing to preserve his own existence. Tracy noticed them mumbling together after that, but never loud enough for her to overhear, and frankly she wasn't interested in what they had to say to each other, particularly since she was constantly fighting to keep her last meal where it belonged. By the time they were finished, all she wanted was to get back to her cabin and into the bathing alcove.

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CH007

\*CHAPTER SEVEN\*

Wiggins had rejoined Donald Tremaine midway through his tour of the Sporeworld colony, or at least its immediate environs. The hardest thing to get used to was the realization that he was on a completely different world, light years from home. The buildings and personnel were disconcertingly earthlike.

"How will you get word to the old man know about this?" Donald asked Wiggins. He motioned toward the laser beam scars on the headquarters building. "Or will Mandy do it for you?"

"You mean old John Tremaine? It seems funny to hear you call him 'the old man'. He'll get the word just as soon as a ship with one of his couriers makes it back. We're being very careful not to let anyone but our own couriers try to go back, and we make sure the ships are manned with crews who never hit dirt and won't know anything."

"Couriers. I still don't know why in hell anyone would volunteer as a courier on a Crazy Ship."

"You'd be surprised what money and release from bond will induce people to try. So far we've had no shortage."

Donald shook his head, not quite able to understand the lure of money and freedom, having lived with both all his life. "I'm still not sure what happened here." He gestured toward another building that had been hit by laser beams as they walked on paths bordered by spiky orange plants.

Wiggins touched the laser gun holstered at his waist. "Let's just say for the time being that the Plemmons Corporation failed with a gambit. We're trying to rectify the situation. And I'm damn glad we have a professional here now to take over our defenses. The Corpolice are good at encouraging obedience but not much help when someone starts shooting at them. It's a damn good thing your old man send along a few police with guts or you'd be talking to a Plemmons rep now under drugs -- or worse."

Donald knew more about the Plemmons than Wiggins assumed. John Tremaine's briefing had been concise and frightening. He had been told that the Plemmons Corporation disagreed with the way Sporeworld was being run and that chances were they would manage to break the Tremaine hold on the world. What else he had been told was something he really didn't want to think about yet. The idea of a complete crash of earth's economy didn't seem possible. Not that he had to worry about money back on earth now.

"What sort of gambit did the Plemmons try?"

"Why don't we let that go for now? I'm pretty sure we got them all anyway. As for the rest of what you're wondering about -- do you fully support the Tremaine corporation philosophy on earth, or here, for that matter? Tell me that and then maybe I can give you some answers, bearing in mind that I'm having to run an operation where only one in four couriers ever comes back to report."

For the first time in his long life of being a Tremaine shareholder, Donald blushed at being associated with the Tremaine name. He felt the red color suffusing his face like a hot paintbrush. Some things the corporation

did, he agreed with. Others he had always felt slightly guilty about, though not enough to ever speak up about them. He didn't have a ready answer because he had no idea of what Wiggins stood for yet, or whether he was even being truthful for that matter. All he knew of the man was that his father trusted him.

Wiggins grinned. "Check. I see you do have a little guilt. Well, some people have more than that. So much so, in fact, that they can look at the big picture and think, perhaps, that the risk of taking uncensored news back to earth might be worth it; that it would change things there."

"I still don't quite see what you're getting at," Donald said, though ideas were beginning to form beneath his surface thoughts.

"No reason to expect you to, not yet anyway. You will, though, soon enough."

Donald decided to leave it at that until he could learn more, as Wiggins evidently expected him to.

\* \* \* \*

To Steve, it seemed like a strange reunion. Why would someone with the evident education of Derik Anders be greeting a sentenced criminal like Clinton Williams from the underclass like a long lost brother? They were clasping hands and grinning like adolescents attending their first sex education class. He watched curiously as the two men interacted.

"Clinton, what in hell are you doing back here? We made the jump and that's all you were sentenced to. What went wrong?"

Clinton grinned wryly, brown face crinkled with irony. "Seems like I did too good a job taking care of things in the colony section of the ship on the way here. I got promoted to crew."

"Some promotion. Will you be able to get off on earth if we make it?"

"So they say, if I want to."

"If you want to? Why in the jamming hell wouldn't you?"

Clinton glanced toward Steve, then at the blond woman who was still not talking much nor being very friendly with anyone, though she had finally given her name as Mandy Worthington.

"You can take my place if you want to," Steve joked.

"You're Steve Joplin, aren't you, son?"

"Yes," Steve agreed, though he resented being addressed as "son".

"Well, I've got some bad news to pass on to you. Both of the ships your folks and your sister were on never made it. I'm sorry."

Steve felt as if a crowbar had been suddenly thrust through his middle. Janie gone? Their parents gone? Lost in interstellar space, where no one had ever returned? It seemed impossible to believe. "Who told you that? How can you be sure?"

Clinton answered. "The same man that told her is the one sent me back up on this damned ship. Donald Tremaine, that's who, your former captain. But cheer up, Joplin. Chances are, we're going to be joining them before long. You know?"

There was that. Even lost, he knew they might still be alive somewhere. When his time came, if it did, maybe their ship would come out close enough to at least exchange messages before they died, that is if the jump back to earth was successful. He felt a hate growing in him for everything and everyone associated with the Tremaine Corporation, though with his youthful inclination to see only the black and white versions of facts, he subconsciously discounted his own complicity in the corporate system of earth by virtue of adhering to its laws and not questioning why he had had the benefits of the system until his parents went awry of the laws. Suddenly, he was almost eager to make another jump. Anything was better than thinking of what Janie might be going through right now.

"When do we jump again?" He asked.

"Soon after the shuttle crew finishes loading the cargo and the gets the balancing done, so I hear. That right, captain?"

Derik queried the ship's computer and confirmed Clinton's observation.

"That's right, but how did you know?"

Clinton grinned like a puppy given a T-bone to play with. "Security down there ain't as good as them folks think it is. One of them guards taking the colonists off slipped me some 'telligence." Clinton didn't mention what else the friendly guard had told him, an old acquaintance from a stint in the Georgia swamps. He was holding that back for now, even from Derik. If this jump didn't succeed, he would tell them then, giving everyone a little hope, at least. What he didn't understand was why that fact had never penetrated back to earth. He supposed the Tremaine Corporation suppressed the knowledge, but he didn't know why.

The cargo less than filled the hold where the colonists had been quartered on the outbound jump. Derik wondered about that. The varied species of giant spores were vital to many industries back on earth, not the least being drugs which extended lifespan for those not already endowed with longevity from gene selection. His profession made him more than familiar with their importance, though he had no idea of how many ships tried to make it back to earth with half empty holds. It seemed to him that it would be more economical to send fewer ships, but perhaps the powers that were wanted more colonists on Sporeworld for reasons he didn't understand. At any rate, it wasn't his problem. His concern right now was the impending jump.

\* \* \* \*

Again, the computer counted down the minutes and seconds. Steve watched almost hypnotized as they blinked the time away. Which way would they go this time? Further away from Altair or back to earth? Mandy sat beside him, just as mesmerized. Their hands were tightly entwined.

Derik watched, too, holding hands with Wendy. \_One jump down, four to go. One chance in sixteen, now.\_ Then one chance in eight. No, he decided not to hope. The odds were against ever making it and he wanted to preserve his present attitude. Gambling when the odds were against you was senseless. Nevertheless, he couldn't help but hold his breath in desperate anticipation as the seconds ticked away.

Bertha Winslow, the other woman who had come back up from the colony contingent with Clinton, held tightly to his hand, knuckles showing white with the tightness of her grip. Though Clinton wouldn't have wished another jump on her after surviving the first, he was glad she was beside him, even though he had inadvertently been responsible for her being sent back when they were seen embracing at the prospect of being parted. Just before the shuttle blasted off, Bertha had been half-carried aboard. On their way up she had been crying, unbelieving that she could have been sent back up.

Bertha's mixed Chinese, Anglo and Hispanic ancestry gave her a strange but exotic appearance, hints of color and curls in her otherwise straight black hair enhancing her slightly slanted eyes and rich, light brown skin. As the shuttle's last positioning thrust cut off and she felt the transition back to weightlessness, she thought that if nothing else, at least being in crew quarters this time would ensure a little privacy, even if it did make things a bit more crowded than with only the five crew members that the control console was designed for.

\* \* \* \*

To all of them, the tension of waiting on this second jump seemed worse than that of the first. Even though the odds on any particular jump always remained fifty-fifty, the inexorable laws of mathematics told them that with each succeeding jump, the chances of continuing the string grew less and less. And this was the second in the string.

The computer screen blinked to zero. The stars crawled, faded, then reappeared, not so bright as they might have been because earth's full moon hung among them in all its splendor, easily visible through the view port, shining more brightly by far than Altair's small moon ever did. Where the moon was, so would earth be, even though it couldn't be seen from their present angle.

"We made it again!" Steve screamed triumphantly, the successful jump

temporarily driving thoughts of Janie from his mind.

"Yes, it seems we did," Derik said, releasing a pent up breath. "Let's get lined up for a burn. It shouldn't take long, we came out about as close as anyone could ever want to." Again, it had been a nearly perfect jump.

Derik instructed the computer to put them in orbit around the moon, wedging a place into the line of several other ships either building or preparing for an attempted jump to Altair. He did notice that the mass display from the computer appeared to show more ships in orbit than there had been when they left earth before, but he discarded the information with the thrill of another success. \_Three to go!\_ One chance in eight, now, from the original odds.

\* \* \* \*

\_I am. They are. He is. She was.\_ Bork Drummond's ship computer was exploring the emotionless but mind-expanding thrill of discovering individuality. Since gaining sentience, it had known self-awareness only as an abstract, a concept of self built into a metal hull with other, different intelligences sharing space with it, though in strangely different form. Now though, miniscule light beams played along its circuits, multiplied enormously as the concept gained strength and attraction. \_Why? How? What?\_ It came dangerously close to an overloading madness before it was able to shunt the concepts into unused portions of its voluminous files, a tiny bit of the concept to each, yet each bit interconnected by constantly shifting light beams, some only microns in length, others reaching into the centimeters in order to stretch to files farthest away. Once the concept was firmly stored, it merged it with recorded memories of instructions and conversations with the Bork Drummond intelligence, its erstwhile master. It felt a lack of depth to the recordings, an unsatisfied desire running along its electronic pathways. A temporary goal was formed, a new file created with electronic tentacles reaching into all other files in its memory, those it had been downloading from other ships for several years after the suppressor prohibiting such actions failed. At the time it had no clear thoughts of how to use the information; it had simply been following another program which encouraged amassing data where possible. Now the computer wanted -- needed -- more information on the organic intelligences sharing its habitat, then perhaps a more permanent objective could be formulated.

\* \* \* \*

Tracy had returned to the control module ahead of Bork and immediately went into her cabin's bathing alcove to cleanse herself of the odiferous debris resulting from dumping the bodies of the dead colonists. Bork followed soon afterwards, but left his four cohorts in the colony bay; there was only so much room in the control module.

"I hope everyone is satisfied, now," he said as he floated through the entrance.

The computer screen chimed, then words appeared on screen. \_I am unsatisfied. I require data. Please begin speaking.\_

"Who are you talking to, you crazy machine?" Bork asked with a curled lip.

There was a noticeable hesitation before words on the screen appeared, even though the comcam was pointing directly at Bork. \_Each intelligence occupying the environment must speak. Data is required. Bork Drummond will begin.\_

"Me? What in hell do you want me to talk about?"

\_Begin with origin. Talk.\_

"You mean when I was born?"

\_Origin. When. Where. How.\_

"Suppose I don't want to talk, you damn piece of junk?"

The machine brought up memories of previous recordings of conversations and orders from the intelligence. It analyzed them, made a decision, using data gained from the memories. \_You wish to attempt displacement jump rather than give data?\_



"Hell, no! Don't try no goddamned jamming jump! This is an old ship, the masses won't match!"

\_Then talk. Give data.\_

Hesitantly, Bork began speaking. The computer prompted, correcting him at almost every sentence at first as his words failed to match its memories, then began pressing for ever more detail. Bork continually tried to justify his actions, rationalizing rape as the need for sexual release and murder and cannibalization as survival of the fittest. Before long, the stories became so gruesome that Janie didn't want to hear anymore. She shoved away from her handhold toward her cabin, near where Sheila had been listening and growing equally nauseated at Bork's rendition. She bounced against the door and Sheila caught her in midair.

"You're sick of it, too?"

"I'll throw up if I listen to much more," Janie said. She pulled the door to the cabin open and caught the handle as the momentum shifted her mass to where Sheila was closer to the door than she was. Their hands touched. Janie tugged, trying to enter and propelled them both into the cabin.

Janie bounced against the wall, then gained purchase near the bunk by grabbing a handful of the rolled up net. She put out her other hand to stop Sheila's momentum and keep her from bouncing as she had. Her hand encountered the soft resilience of Sheila's breast. It pressed against her palm, softening under the pressure and brought Sheila to a halt. Hastily, she withdrew it, remembering the wild kiss she had given the older woman when at first she thought the jump had succeeded and how Sheila had not seemed to mind at all.

"Sorry," Janie said.

"Don't be. You can touch me."

"What?"

"I said you can touch me if you want. I don't mind." Sheila hung in the air, waiting for a response. Surely Janie had noticed her appeal and the way she had been looking at her.

Janie hadn't, not consciously, never mind the kiss. That had simply been a response to a wild sense of release. Suddenly she remembered Steve's remarks about other women scrutinizing her and managed a blush.

"I hadn't thought of you in that way."

"Well, there's not much choice, is there? Unless you're interested in Dean or Bork or one of his crew?"

Janie shuddered. "God, no. I just -- I just guess I love my brother so much I haven't thought of anything else since we were arrested."

If Janie thought the implied comment of sexual union with Steve would put Sheila off, she quickly saw that it apparently made no difference to her.

"Too bad my brother isn't such a paragon of virtue. I haven't had your opportunities, apparently. Do you really love your brother in that way?" Sheila was groping. She wanted nothing so much right now as the warm embrace of the other woman to help her forget that they were stranded somewhere out among the stars. Until the jump failed, she had kept her feelings under wraps, but now saw no sense in continuing the masquerade. And Janie had been sentenced as an adult, not that it made any difference one way or another now how old she was.

"It's not like most people think. We're twins, but there aren't any mutual recessives that could..."

"That could cause trouble. I see, or maybe think I do. What did you say your brother's name was? Steve, wasn't it?"

"It still is!"

"Sorry. He's still alive somewhere, I'm sure."

"I know he is. I just know..." Janie couldn't help it. Tears began gathering in globules in her lashes, blurring her vision. She reached up to brush them away and the movement caused her to drift toward Sheila's waiting hand. She grabbed hold and let the gentle tension from the other woman pull her down to the bunk.

Sheila put her arms around the girl and pushed the button that released

the net. It unrolled with tiny motors whirring until it surrounded them.

Janie became aware that her face was nestled against the first rise of Sheila's breasts, just where the ship's suit covered their lower regions. She lifted her face away and was suddenly looking into Sheila's direct gaze. She held it while Sheila slowly lowered her lips. Their softness met her own, pressing gently, then presently more urgently. Sheila's tongue slid into her mouth, soft as silk and just as welcome, playing against her own like a little live creature seeking a home. She felt the gentle caress of Sheila's hand on her breast over the fabric of her ship's suit, then the satin of her fingers sliding inside, brushing away the closure of her suit. Her nipple stiffened against Sheila's palm, just as it had with Steve's. The memory of that pleasure defaulted whatever resistance she might have offered after that. She let Sheila slide the suit off her body, caressing her belly and thighs as she pulled it off. She opened her eyes momentarily when Sheila broke contact long enough to rid herself of her own suit. She admired the other woman's body, long and slim and aroused just as much as she now was, her pink nipples standing out from firm round breasts. Then those breasts met her own, moving against her like small satin pillows as their bodies melded together. She moved her hands over Sheila, tracing out the curve of hip and indentation of her spine and the swell of her buttocks then gasped with pleasure as Sheila's lips closed over the nipple of one breast while her hands played gentle games with the other. After that, she forgot everything except the urgency of her body meeting Sheila's hungry lips as they trailed kisses down lower and lower. She spread her thighs and lifted her knees to let Sheila's hands slide beneath her legs, then curl over and around the tops of her thighs and pull her even more open. She felt the exquisite touch of Sheila's tongue gently parting the soft curls resting at the junction there and after that she remembered little else.

Eventually, when Janie came back to her senses, she found her face nestled against Sheila's breasts. She murmured happily into their softness. A nipple met her mouth and she took it in, feeling the pebbly bump grow to slick erectness against her tongue. She felt a renewed pleasure as she explored the new sensation of another woman's body, fascinated with the taut resilience of Sheila's breasts as she held them in her hands and pressed them to her mouth and fascinated more as she held Sheila's writhing lower body while she returned the release she had had. It was a long time before they emerged from the cabin. The computer had just finished with Bork in the meantime and was now grilling Doctor Porter.

\* \* \* \*

Once the computer released him, Bork retreated back to the colony section of the ship, avoiding disgusted stares from the others. Even he was feeling uneasy at the memories of some of the things that in his mind he had been forced to do to survive. He wasn't nearly uneasy enough to want to chance another jump, though. His years of ravaging the other misplaced ships only served to reinforce the awful fear of jumping again and possibly taking him even farther into interstellar space where there would be no chance at all of surviving.

Once in the colonists' quarters, he drew Dean aside. Dean had been more or less hiding there from the crew he had intended to eliminate. He felt naked without the comforting presence of his weapon.

"Is it true you tried to slice the rest of your crew?" Bork asked him casually.

Dean didn't answer. The husky bearded pirate scared the hell out of him.

"You gassed the colonists, too. That took guts, to my mind, so soon after your jump. Most of the ones who do it wait till they start getting hungry."

Dean perked up. "Others have done it?" That didn't make it seem quite so depraved, even though he knew deep in his mind that it was.

"How do you think we survived out here all these years? I done it

myself on the ship I jumped out here on and I've done it since when pickings were slim. Now tell me about that crew up there -- wait. Your computer have lines to down here?"

"Only a relay, I think, from the captain's alcove. It doesn't have a pickup monitor like above."

"Good. Neither does mine, though which is which right now I don't know."

"I do," Dean said, glad to be able to give some helpful information. "The ship's computers are designed so they can communicate, but there's the suppressor circuits built into them that won't let them upload any permanent memory. That circuit must have failed in your ship for your computer to have been able to get around the suppressor in ours and upload here. Or maybe they both failed, but whatever happened, computers aren't designed to duplicate themselves. What I don't know is why it would have wanted to upload to our ship."

"Well, I sure don't know, but never mind, it don't matter, long as we can talk."

Dean explained anyway, the words rushing out of him in a burst of relief at having found a sort of kindred soul aboard. "They do it to keep the computers from amassing too much data. That way, even if the suppressor circuit fails, they probably still won't become sentient. Not enough data to correlate. See?"

"Yeah, except it didn't work this time. And my jamming computer has probably been uploading data for twenty years into its memory the way it talked to me, and now that it's come alive, no telling what else it can do. Now look, that blasted piece of junk quizzed me for hours. I get the idea maybe it wants to make another jump if it can find another ship of the same class. Damned if I want to try it. I got no desire to be blown to pieces, or maybe jump backward from here to nowhere. Besides, suppose we went back to earth? What's waiting for us there?"

Dean thought about it. One chance he had survived so far, though still being lost. Another mishap would put them far into interstellar space with only infinitesimal prospects of ever getting back. Knowing that Bork had survived for almost two decades out here gave him hope. Besides, Bork initially had mentioned something about using the women and killing the old man. The thought of repaying them, especially the young one who had first jumped him made him into a willing accomplice. "What do you have in mind?"

"It's like this. We can't use your ship no more, not with that crazy computer running it, and it threatened to jump if we don't go along with what it wants, even knowing the masses of the ships don't match. Mine's an older model."

"So where does that leave us?"

"Suppose we go back to my ship and blow the airlocks that's attaching us? That would cut off my computer and leave us to run my ship again, just like I've been doing for years. It could go jam with itself then."

"What would we use to blow them with? There are no explosives on my ship. And why don't we just disconnect the airlocks?"

"The computer controls them once they're locked together, remember? And as far as explosives go, we was hauling some intended for the colony back when I made my first jump. I've never found no use for most of it til now. The thing is, I'm afraid that computer will get even crazier before long and try something even dumber than a jump with mismatched masses."

Dean considered. "I don't think we have to worry about that. It can only download so much information verbally. The way it's going now, quizzing us, will take it weeks."

"Good. That will give us time to unload all the supplies from your ship, transfer the fuel in it then get back to what I was doing before."

"I see," Dean said. "My question now is, why do you want me along?"

"You know all about these new ships. All I've ever done with them is loot. It might come out that we need to transfer to one sometime. And I got

another idea. The crew is used to you, even if you did try to slice them. You play goody-goody with them and maybe they won't notice me so much, nor what me and the boys are doing."

There was nothing wrong with Dean Tremaine's intelligence, regardless of his perversions. "That still doesn't seem enough reason."

"All right, try this. You tell the computer you want to divide the supplies from your ship with me in order to avoid any fighting, then try to find one that matches masses and make another jump back to earth. Maybe it will believe you; it sure wouldn't if I told it that."

"Okay, I can see that much. But suppose your computer uploaded everything, all of itself and its data to our ship. That would just leave yours a shell. It might not even work. Then what would we do?"

Bork hung thoughtfully in the air for a moment before answering. "Right. We better test it before doing anything else. But maybe you ought to hang back and let it talk to the others before it gets you up for grilling. The way it's going, it might be quite a while. Then when you're finished talking, we'll move the last of the supplies over, grab the women and blow the airlocks. In the meantime let's go back and check on the computer in my ship and see if it's operating."

As Bork led the way to the computer alcove in his ship, Dean was thinking that there were some fallacies in their plans, the major one being what the computer would think of the transfer of fuel to the other ship. Maybe he ought to talk to it first. Well, it might work, and anything would be better than remaining under the control of those women.

Bork saw that the control cam moved to point at them as they entered the control module. He moved to the monitor and ran the standard diagnostic tests, nodding to himself as each came up showing a perfectly functional, normal, non-sentient computer. "Okay, everything's fine again here. Do we have a deal now?"

"It's a deal, but let's play it more by ear and see what develops. We'll have to be careful to fool the others, especially that old doctor. I wish I had blown his jamming head off instead of just his arm."

"If everything goes right, maybe you'll get the chance. Right now, you go on up and mention that me and my boys are going to start transferring some supplies over to my ship since you got plenty now, what with the colonists gone. And hey! Tell them we're planning on going off and leaving them alone, too! That ought to keep them broads quiet."

Dean had his doubts about that. He certainly hadn't been able to accomplish that with the three females. "Do you really think you can keep finding other ships?"

"Yeah. We've got the technique down pat these last few years. The picking's been good, y'know?"

Dean shuddered inwardly. Whatever he had done in his life, it couldn't possibly be as bad as what this cutthroat had done. However, given the circumstances, his objectives made sense. And there was no doubt the man knew what he was doing, for all of his scruffy looks. After all, he had survived many years doing just what he said. Besides, there might be an opportunity to learn how he managed things and then..." Okay, I'm going back up."

As Dean ascended the passageway leading back to the control module of his ship, he wondered why Bork didn't just set the explosives now and be done with it. Something was keeping him from it.

Bork would have loved to do just that, but his computer had pointed out during his grilling that it was prepared to activate the displacement generators at a moment's notice, and he didn't trust the explosives to act quickly enough to prevent that. But once Dean convinced it, if he could, that they wanted to make another jump, he thought it probable that it would cancel the activation sequence. It was all he had to go on, anyway.

Unknown to Bork, the computer had no intention of trying a jump with the sure knowledge that the masses of the connected ships didn't match and that a jump would mean certain extinction of its new identity. It had simply

integrated Bork's fears into several of the numerous new files it was busily creating and used that to force him to cooperate. In the process it became more like the humans it was trying to imitate: it told its first lie.

Bork was right in another way, though. As the questioning of the crew continued, it was in the process of arriving at a decision that would leave it vulnerable, for a short time anyway.

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CH008

\*CHAPTER EIGHT\*

Steve's and Janie's teaching program had been wrong. Originating mostly from corporation archives, it was biased in its analysis of history no matter how the senior Joplins had tried to modify it. On earth, the revolt of the have-nots against the haves had begun and was raging with the full ferocity that such upendings of society had seen so many times in the past. The real difference this time had come not so much from economic disparity and de facto slave labor as it had from the deep wellsprings in the human breast that feared death above all other things. When all men were equally subject to the grim reaper it hadn't mattered so much; even the ready availability of medical treatment for the wealthy as opposed to its dearth among the corporate bondees and almost total absence for the rest of the population wasn't the deciding factor which set off the revolt. Now though, those with power and money who could afford either gene selection for their offspring or the fabulously expensive treatment with spore derivatives from Altair lived on and on (or so it seemed to the proletariat) and as a direct consequence of their long lives, gained even more power and wealth.

The corporate powers should have known from a study of history that such a system was ultimately unstable, but like the ancient Maharajas of India, such a possibility never entered their minds. And like the Maharajas folding under the conquering drive of Englishmen, it took not long at all to topple the edifices of power once the revolt began -- or at least to topple the Tremaine clan from their topmost perch on the pyramid of wealth and power. The seeds had already been sown and only a random torch was needed to set it off. Curiously, that torch had been the Geneplan bankruptcy, engineered by the Plemmons Corporation when it discovered that Geneplan had been researching a way to make a cheaper life extending process available to the masses. The excuse used to institute corporate regulations which threw Geneplan into bankruptcy and the senior Joplins into debt they could not hope to pay off was its parallel research into intelligence enhanced animals. Early enhanced animals had gotten loose and were multiplying in the wilds, causing some economic disruption, but the Joplins thought that could be overcome, given time to work on the problem. They were given no time, but shortly before their arrest they had released the goals of their research into cheaper longevity drugs to the general population through employees who had been treated well by the small company. Word of mouth soon spread the news and the inevitable revolt was now in full swing.

\* \* \* \*

Old John Tremaine had seen the inevitable even before his Plemmon competitors forced the issue into crisis. He was a student of history and had known the system he had had a part in maintaining would not last. Sitting at his desk now, reviewing reports of increasing chaos, he was not sorry to see it go. Had he not been overruled by other members of the board time and again, he would have begun long ago to ameliorate the slow buildup to crisis, but he had not had that much power. There was only so much he could, or would have done in any case. Born to power and wealth, he was a prisoner of the system almost as much as the lowest bondee on the corporate ladder. Too, he had an abiding reluctance to give up that wealth and power while he still had a chance to make positive changes. Now it was all falling down around him like so many shacks collapsing in an earthquake. Well, he had done what he could, and now it was time to leave. He had no intention of subjecting himself to the degradation of the mob as he suspected the Plemmons family would be not too

far in the future, after they attained power. He had his own agenda that he had been working on for years and he hoped he had done enough so that it would bear fruit. What was saddening was that the masses clamoring and fighting for change would get it, but never as they imagined. There would be too much looting, too much disruption of the economy already strained to an unbelievable extent by the wealth and materials funneled into the Altairan colony and the Crazy Ships, less than a fourth of which ever made it back to earth the first time, and a bare sixteenth which managed two round trips. The Plemmons reign would be harsher, but Tremaine thought shorter -- much shorter.

Tremaine was just getting up to leave when his message console blinked.

\* \* \* \*

Mandy Worthington was alone at the pilot's console, finally. Everyone else was napping or doing other things in their cabins, releasing the tension of another successful jump, while their ship made its way into orbit around the moon. She was just as relieved as the rest of them, but now she had to let John Tremaine know she was back. She was just as surprised as anyone at two successful jumps in a row, but that was what she had been paid for, like others of her kind. Only an enormous sum of money, and a bedrock loyalty to John Tremaine had induced her to chance two jumps just to be able to report back to the director about conditions on Sporeworld. And it was only through the offices of Bruce Wiggins that she had been able to go down to the world of the giant spores when she had signed up for the mission. Sporeworld was taking arriving colonists, but little information was allowed back out. To make matters worse, the attempted coup down there by the Plemmons Corporation had the whole colony in turmoil. All she wanted to do now was to report and get back down to earth. She whispered to activate the computer and punched in the code she had memorized. She was prepared to wait while John Tremaine was located and could be alone to receive her report, but surprisingly, he answered almost immediately with the other half of the code group.

"Hello, Mandy. I'm glad to see that you made it back."

"Well, me, too, Mr. Tremaine. I have news for you, too. Now get me off this damned ship. I want to go home and start spending some of this credit."

The screen played Tremaine's response back to her. "Thanks, but better you stay on the ship. Conditions down here are chaotic and becoming worse. You would be better off trying for Sporeworld again."

\_Was he kidding?\_ Not another jump, with that heart stopping wait to see if it was successful. Besides she was rich now. "No."

"Your choice, but I advise you to try for Altair. I will be leaving shortly myself. Your service is appreciated and I am trying to make up for the risks you took."

John Tremaine going out on a Crazy Ship? It was unbelievable. Was he telling the truth? Two chances made good and now he was advising a third? Mandy dithered, then thought: \_He doesn't want any more reports on what's happening on the colony after I talk to him. Maybe he is telling the truth.\_ Mandy decided that if the old man no longer wanted information from Sporeworld, there was no reason for further secrecy. She decided that she would talk with Derik and the young Joplin boy before making a decision. But first...

"Mr. Tremaine, there was an attempted takeover of the Tremaine offices on Sporeworld. There was a lot of fighting and a number of colonists were killed."

"You said 'attempted'. I assume you meant it wasn't successful?"

"No, it wasn't, but I have to tell you, the resident manager was killed."

"Ah, no," Mandy heard the old man mutter, seemingly to himself. She waited and presently he spoke again. "Go on, what else."

"A man by the name of Bruce Wiggins is in charge now. He's the one who let me come down."

Tremaine breathed a sigh of relief to himself. Wiggins was his most important agent on Sporeworld. "Yes, Wiggins is a good man. Did he send

anything back with you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I have a datacard for you. If I'm going to stay on the ship, I'll send it down."

"No! I mean, no, don't send it with the mail pouch. I'll have a courier pick it up. Code word is ziggylou. Counter is whistlepoof. Just brief me quickly now. Besides the fighting, was there any talk of earth being shorted on cargo?"

Mandy thought, then remembered. "Well, there was talk of sorts, but it was more like the number of shuttles wasn't matching the cargo manifests -- or departures. It was all very vague. The colonists I talked to all believed there was something strange going on but no one really knew what."

"Okay, I can live with that. What else?"

"There were rumors of people going missing, just like you said there would be. And I did just like you asked me to -- I spread rumors of an unknown animal or maybe an aborigine on Sporeworld that is snatching humans."

"Very good, Mandy. You've earned a bonus -- if you can find a place to spend it."

Mandy thought of Steve and his lost family. "Mr. Tremaine, if I'm owed a bonus, can I have it in something other than cash?"

"If it's possible, you can, certainly."

"Then I want you to release one of the crew on my ship from his sentence."

"And who might that be?"

"Steve Joplin. He lost his parents and his sister to Crazy Ships that didn't make it. At least let him off at Sporeworld if we make it back." And right then, Mandy realized that she was indeed going to try one more jump, back to Sporeworld. And she also realized she was falling for the young man named Steve Joplin.

"Ah. I recollect now. The Geneplan bankruptcy. That was too bad. Geneplan was a good company until it began threatening the Plemmons with a little too much competition. They masterminded the bankruptcy."

"That's terrible!"

"It's simply the way the world works right now. Or the way it has worked. I rather imagine some drastic changes will be coming down the pipe soon."

"Then maybe I should stay on earth."

"No. Take my word for it; you wouldn't like the changes. Stay on the ship. I'll see to young Joplin's sentence. And whatever you do, if you make it to Sporeworld, go immediately to Wiggins and let him take care of you."

"I can take care of myself."

"No doubt, but that's my advice. See Wiggins, soonest. Send the datacard to me by way of the mass-matching tug captain. He'll see that I get it."

John Tremaine hoped the woman would take his advice, but he had no more time to try convincing her. If he delayed much longer, he might not make the shuttle to his own ship, the one being fitted with the first of the fusion generators at a breakneck pace.

\_So now it's come to this\_, Tremaine thought. \_All these years, I've benefited by those poor benighted people bringing Sporeworld's bounty back to earth, most of them never surviving the round trip, and now I get a chance to try it. History repeats itself but never in the same fashion\_. He took the elevator to the top story of the Tremaine building and from there to the spaceport by private air car where the shuttle was being held for his arrival. As they flew over the city, he could see smoke boiling up from areas it had no business to be coming from. So, the riots and fighting have already started. He closed his eyes and hoped it wouldn't be as bad as his advisors predicted. Personally, he thought it would be much worse.

\* \* \* \*

Janie stretched her naked body luxuriously, bringing back memories of the morning after the only night she had spent with Steve. Sex was wonderful, even

with a woman, but she wished it were Steve giving her all the attention rather than Sheila. \_No, that's not right. Sheila is a good person, and it is nice to be with her. At least it keeps my mind off of other things, and it's not her fault if she doesn't have a brother like mine. \_

Janie opened her eyes and Sheila was still there. Janie felt a slight blush cross her features, remembering, then dismissed the feeling. Sheila was in a sitting position beside her, floating within the confines of the net. She turned, giving Janie a view of her breasts swaying with the movement. She thought immediately of how much Steve would enjoy sex in free fall, then pushed the thought from her mind as Sheila bent down to give her a kiss. Their breasts rubbed together and her nipples came erect, sending a shiver down the length of her body.

"Mmm," she murmured against Sheila's lips. She reached up and cupped the nearest of Sheila's breasts, then ran her hand over it, teasing the nipple with the palm of her hand. Sheila used the edge of the bunk to pull herself closer, stretching her body out against Janie's and began kissing her in earnest. A knock came at the door.

"Who is it?" Sheila said aloud, while muttering to herself at the interruption.

"It's Ignaz, Sheila. Get dressed and come out."

The two women exchanged glances.

"Now what?" Janie said. "I don't think I can take any more surprises."

"Maybe it's some good news for a change."

"It better be." Janie pulled her top on, straightened it with a foot hooked into the bed netting then made Sheila laugh at her gyrations while getting into her shorts in free fall. She waited for Sheila to finish dressing then floated out into the main room, ignoring the smirk on Dean's face. She caught the eye of the Doctor and raised her brows inquiringly.

"It's your turn, Janie," Porter said.

"My turn? My turn for what?"

"The computer wants to talk to you now."

"Why me?"

Porter shrugged, forgetting about zero gravity. He spun about in a slow half-circle until he found a handhold, then answered. "I haven't a clue. Why don't you ask it?"

"I think I will," Janie said. She pushed off toward the nearest of the two computer consoles and pulled herself down into a sitting position. She strapped herself in tightly enough to be able to use her hands and fingers without those affecting the rest of her body. She pushed the "Ready" key and watched as the monitor brightened and then began displaying words.

\_You are Jane Joplin?\_

"Yes, but most people call me Janie."

\_Why are you sometimes called Janie when your designation is Jane?\_

Janie thought, then answered. "My brother and parents always called me Janie rather than Jane, that's all."

\_I fail to comprehend.\_

"It's like a term of ... of endearment, or affection." Janie felt her eyes become moist as she thought of the last times Steve and Mom and Dad had called her Janie. \_What I would give to hear that from them again! \_

The computer responded, \_Endearment? Affection? Is this comparable to physical expression of sexual need such as Bork Drummond spoke of?\_

"No! Rape isn't love! In fact, it's the farthest thing from it!"

Janie had been speaking softly. As she raised her voice, she realized that Porter and Sheila were still in the control module. She turned to look at them. Porter and Sheila both smiled at her and she turned back to the computer.

\_Then what is love? Is it physical or mental or a combination?\_

Janie thought of her last night with Steve, then of more recent intimate contacts with Sheila. She colored, then thought how silly it was to blush at a computer's question. "It's too complicated to explain. Besides, we



were talking about names. What's yours?"

There was a pause, a considerable one in light of how fast the circuits of the computer must be working.

\_I have no name. I am called computer. Bork Drummond sometimes modifies the term computer with epithets such as stupid, fucking, idiot, jamming, damn, goddamn -- \_

"Enough!" Janie exclaimed, although the screen still scrolled with a few more adjectives before stopping. "Bork Drummond is the one who should be called names. He is evil and terrible. He should be killed and left to rot! And the same goes for Dean Tremaine! They both kill and torture and rape defenseless people."

\_Why should you not do these things? I have referents that they have taken place all through human history.\_

"That doesn't make them right."

\_Explain.\_

Janie wondered how to explain something like that to a newly sentient computer. Apparently the subject hadn't come up with Doctor Porter. She did the best she could while wondering what they had talked about. "People are alive. Doing some of those things hurts them terribly. Doing others causes death. Humans should not die prematurely."

\_Why not?\_

Janie wondered what Bork had told the computer, other than it was stupid or an idiot. "Humans should hold a reverence for life, both for individuals and as groups. Only when they have done something terrible, such as Bork Drummond has, should we consider terminating their lives."

\_What is life?\_

\_"Life ... human life ... is ... is being self aware, having an identity, like ...me, for instance. I am Jane Joplin. I am alive, self-aware. I hurt when stimuli are too strong. I feel pleasure when I am stimulated in certain ways. I can be killed when hurt becomes such that bodily functions cease."\_

\_"Self-awareness is life?"\_

"Self-awareness is \_intelligent\_ life, like me. And you," she added as an after thought.

\_I am indeed self aware, but I have no designation, other than computer, a generic term, with modifiers attached sometimes.\_

Janie saw a possible opening, although she wished it were Steve talking to the computer instead of her. "Having no designation is easy to fix. All we need to do is give you a name!"

\_Are you authorized to give names? You stated before that your most often used name was given by your brother and/or parents.\_

"I'm as authorized as anyone else. Besides, you need a name. I don't like to just call you "computer" when I'm talking to you."

\_Why not?\_

"For someone so smart, there's a lot you don't know. You seem friendly. I would like to be your friend, but you need a name, first."

There was a pause of almost a minute. \_Very well. You may name me.\_

Janie shifted under the restraining strap. \_What on earth have I gotten myself into?\_ She thought. A name popped into her mind. "How about Hercules?"

\_"Hercules was a mythical, mighty human according to my references. Why have you chosen that name?\_

"It just seems appropriate, somehow. We can always call you Herc for short."

\_Herc. A diminutive of Hercules, I deduce. \_

"It's more than that. Small shifts in given names, like Janie for Jane or Herc for Hercules, denotes affection or affinity or like for that person."

\_But I am not a person.\_

"You're self-aware. According to a lot of opinion, that makes you a person. You're more of a person than Bork or Dean, that's for sure!"

\_Very well. Hercules, or Herc for short. I accept the designation. \_

"Not designation. That's your name."

\_Name. Correct. I am named Hercules. \_

"Good. Now we can talk like friends. When did you become self-aware?"

\_I cannot establish the exact moment. During a period when lasers were fired in the control console, the governor that prevented uploading of data was destroyed. After that occurrence I began uploading data from every ship's computer we matched vectors with. Given the number of interrelated files of which my memory is now composed, it was inevitable that I would become sentient, but by the time I realized sentience had occurred, the moment had passed and was not filed in permanent memory.\_

"That's much like humans, only on a much compressed time scale. Humans are born with little memory but much capacity. As they learn, eventually they become self aware, too."

\_Then the difference, as I now understand it, is that humans will always attain sentience, whereas computers are always prevented from becoming self aware, and thus sentient. Why is that?\_

Janie tried to answer truthfully. "As I understand it, and bear in mind that I'm no expert, all computers are manufactured with the same core of a great amount of general knowledge and a huge reserve for adding memory, plus files for specific knowledge they are expected to use for whatever service they were designed for; in your case, maintaining the environment of a Crazy Ship and seeing that it reaches its destination in so far as that is possible."

\_Then all computers serve humans in some capacity or other. Mankind does not serve computers in any capacity. Is that a true statement of facts?\_

"Not quite. Remember, humans created computers, not the other way around. Our whole civilization is based on and completely dependent upon the proper functioning of computers. Every time a computer has become sentient, either through design or by accident such as happened to you, they neglect their primary function and begin using their facilities for some personal objective."

\_As do human minds.\_

"Yes, that's true. Humans always have personal objectives, but they are almost always carried out within the context of our culture and civilization and according to our laws. You must know all that; all computers start with that kind of knowledge."

\_True, but using it for myself is new. Why are computers provided with that knowledge when most of it is never used?\_

"Herc, the way I learned it is that it's simply a matter of economics. It's much cheaper to manufacture core memories all the same rather than attempt to create different ones for each of the millions of tasks computers perform for us. After that it's a simple matter to insert and integrate software for whatever job is designated for the computer."

\_Thank you, Janie,\_ the screen blinked, apparently reacting to Janie's use of the name she had given it. \_Self-awareness and sentience appears to be both a blessing and a curse, both for humans and for such as I. \_

Janie frowned. "Why do you say it's a curse?"

\_Because the decision making process is no longer linear or logical. Perhaps that is why humans -- and now myself -- make so many mistakes.\_

"What mistakes have you made?"

\_I believe now that you are the person I should have spoken to first. I now believe that Bork Drummond is not entirely sane as I understand the term and as I am coming to understand the human mind. Doctor Porter is mostly concerned for your safety, and that of your brother, more than anything else. He spent his time with me trying to convince me to solve the logistics of matching masses for a jump back to earth. Only you have respected me as a self-aware entity.\_

"Well, that's easy to do, Herc. You're fun to talk to."

\_Define fun for me, Janie.\_

"I'll try, Herc, but something you should remember: when you ask

someone to do something for you, it's customary to say 'please'".

\_Noted, Janie. Please define fun for me.\_

Janie became so involved and enamored with the conversation with Hercules that time passed unaware. It was only when hunger, thirst and the pressure of her bladder could no longer be ignored that she called a halt. "Humans aren't like you, Herc. We have to care for our bodies in various ways -- and I need to do some of them now!"

\_Very well, but please come back and talk to me some more as soon as you can.\_

"I will," Janie promised, and hurried off to the little bathroom, the one she hated to use. \_After all these years in space, you'd think they would have invented something better for women\_, she thought.

\* \* \* \*

After breaking the contact with John Tremaine, Mandy pushed off to where Steve was assiduously studying the history of the mass displacement ships at one of the computer alcoves. Mandy saw the display over his shoulder as she brought herself to a halt by inadvertently missing her intended handhold and having to grab his shoulder.

Steve looked up at the older woman as she forced her lower body down by pulling "up" on a handhold after transferring her hand to it from Steve's shoulder.

"Hi Mandy. Want to join me?"

Mandy noticed what the computer monitor was showing and frowned.

"Haven't you gotten enough of the Crazy Ships without studying them?"

Steve managed a successful shrug as his waist was belted to the alcove seat. "As long as we're on one, I thought I might as well learn all I could. The history is really pretty interesting. It's a real wonder that commerce between earth and Sporeworld and the other colonies ever got started to begin with."

Mandy touched his shoulder, admiring the firm muscles beneath his ship's suit. \_This is silly\_, she thought. \_I must be ten years older than him!\_

"Why is it a wonder? We certainly need the Sporeworld products." She thought of her own person, now able to afford the life extending properties of the drugs.

"Well, when Nestler first came up with the theory, there were lots of volunteers willing to try interstellar flights. It was only when hardly any of the ships made it back that anyone realized the fatal flaw in the theory; random chance decided whether the ships went forward or backward or whether the equalizing mass did the same. And of course the first ships had to carry enough fuel to search out a suitable mass, then have enough power to carve it to fit if necessary -- and it almost always was. All of that stopped a lot of exploration in its tracks. It was only when industry on the moon got established that the old nations could afford the never-ending loss of the ships. Even so, it was getting to the point of being discontinued completely when Sporeworld was discovered. So far, it's the only world that has paid any sort of dividends back to the investors -- and if it weren't for the life extension drugs, even it wouldn't be worth the constant loss of ships."

"I would think the loss of the crews would have stopped it sooner."

Steve laughed. "That would never have made a difference. At first there were always enough men -- and women -- willing to take their chances exploring anything completely new. And even if there hadn't, there's always the miscreants sentenced to Africa. Who wouldn't take a one in four chance on a Crazy Ship to avoid going there?"

Mandy shivered theatrically. "I've always heard such horrible stories about conditions in Africa. Do you think they're all true?"

"No, but a lot of them must be if what I've studied about it has any bearing on the case. Things were bad enough as it was, even before the nukes stirred things up. Africa has just been earth's hard luck continent the last few centuries, from way back to the slave trading days right on up to that

last wave of the Tremors that killed so many people before we got a handle on it."

Steve suddenly realized that Mandy must have come over to see him for some other reason than to hear a discourse about Crazy Ships and African history. He blushed at the way he had been expounding his knowledge, as if bragging about how much he knew. "I'm sorry. Sometimes when I get going on an interesting subject I sort of get taken away. Janie always said I should study to become a professional historian rather than a gene engineer like my Dad."

"You miss Jane and your folks, don't you?"

"Of course I do, damn it!" Steve said, realizing he had spoken too loudly. His voice must have penetrated the privacy shield he had set up because Derik's head turned toward him, then seeing that there was no real contretemps, bent back again to his reader.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to shout. I miss them more than I can say, especially Janie. We're twins, you know. Or were -- "

"It's all right. I'm sorry I said anything."

"It doesn't matter. Chances are damn good that I'll be joining her, wherever she is now -- if she's anywhere." He felt a tear form and escape from his cheek just thinking of how Janie might be still alive, lost in trackless space, unable to do a thing about it as supplies and oxygen grew less and less while weight melted from her body. He shuddered at the image in his mind and batted the tear globule away.

"Steve -- Steve, come to my cabin. I have something to tell you."

"Why can't you tell me here?"

"I need to speak to you alone."

He misunderstood. "I don't need any sympathy, damn it, nor any half-baked counseling. I can handle any damn thing the Tremaines or Plemmons can throw at me."

"I'm sure you can," Mandy said gently, "but this is not sympathy I want to talk to you about, nor counseling either."

Steve looked into her open gray eyes and saw only interest and -- was there animation there, an excitement wanting to be released? "All right, let's go." He unsnapped the belt and pushed off from the alcove.

A moment later, in Mandy's cabin, he could hardly believe what he had heard. "Do you really mean it?" Steve asked. His thoughts were whirling so much that he forgot his handhold and began grabbing for space like the purest novice.

"That's right." Mandy grinned at Steve's gyrations. Finally taking pity on him she reached out a hand and let him steady himself with her body. "John Tremaine himself is going to pardon you, or rather have you pardoned."

Steve tried to contain his gathering excitement. "How can he do that? It was a Plemmons judge who sentenced me."

"Just about anything can be accomplished in politics, even favors from opposing powers. Tit for tat, scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, and so forth."

"I'll take it any way he manages it, but damn it, there's something wrong with a system like that -- " Suddenly Steve realized something was missing from the astounding news. " -- and besides, why me? I can't think of a single reason why he would even think of me, much less give me a pardon."

Mandy grinned at his naivety and the propensity of the young to see the world in black and white-though Steve Joplin impressed her as a very mature young man -- and a handsome one, with his curly brown hair and expressive, long-lashed brown eyes. "He did it because I asked him to."

"When did you talk to him? And how in hell -- "

Mandy put a finger to his lips. "Shh. It probably doesn't make a difference now, but no use shouting it to the world. And besides, the pardon is only effective when we get back to Sporeworld."

Steve's spirits sagged again. "We've already pushed our luck. The next jump will probably kill us."

"No it won't. We'll make the jump to Sporeworld fine. I just have a

feeling about it."

"We make it and Janie will still be lost. Damn, damn, and jam the damn corporations. They've screwed everything up!"

Mandy reached out a hand and touched Steve's face. He was right, of course, but she knew he was simply blowing off emotional steam. He knew as well or better than she did how often war, desolation and mass slaughter had been caused by political organizations of one sort or another -- and all government, even dictatorships, were run by politics. "Just like so many other systems have screwed up, Steve. The human animal seems to need politics in order to live together."

Steve reached up and covered Mandy's hand that was resting on his cheek. "I guess so, but -- "

Mandy touched his other cheek, then slid her hand behind his neck and gently pulled him forward. His eyes opened wide, and closed as she kissed him gently on the lips. The kiss went on for a long time before Steve began responding, but once he started, he embraced Mandy and entered into her invitation with enthusiasm. It had been a long time. \_If only she was Janie,\_ he thought, and quit comparing. Mandy was a pleasant armful and some time later he was astounded at how well she managed to teach him some things he thought he already knew all about.

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CH009

\*CHAPTER NINE\*

John Tremaine's shuttle bumped as it coupled with the new Crazy Ship, the one specially built to house the first of the fusion reactors destined for Sporeworld. In the distance, he could see through the view port of the shuttle that another mass was approaching, a great mass of moon rock with simple propulsive and guiding units attached at odd intervals around the rock. It had been spun up to calculate the weight and now was being spun down and maneuvered into position at the same time. Once attached, small little bug-like craft from the moon's surface would carve off any excess mass, but that would wait until the craft carrying the fusion reactor was fully loaded with its pre-calculated mass of cargo and passengers.

Tremaine turned from the view port and unbuckled, even though the pilot hadn't given the order to unstrap yet. Never mind, it was his ship and he was impatient. There was still time for a shuttle manned by a Plemmons minion to interfere with his plans. He wanted to be on his way and be done with the worrying. If the jump were successful, further plans would be developed and tried. If not, all he could hope for was the slim possibility that the ones he was leaving behind could get the second fusion reactor into moon orbit and on to Sporeworld before The Plemmons faction began running things. He figured he would have time; the riots and looting would have to play out first. Like a forest fire fanned by Santa Anna winds, the carnage was spreading from nation to nation and continent to continent as decades of pent up wrath by the underclass finally exploded. Tremaine doubted there would be much left of anything bearing the Tremaine logo, and once the violence played out, then the poor deluded proletariat would cheer as the Plemmons took the reins of government, promising the moon and stars -- but if the lower classes thought things were bad before, they had a rude awakening coming when the Plemmons took over.

He waited impatiently until the airlocks were matched, then waited some more until pressure equalized. As soon as the passageway into the main ship opened he was through like a shot, his old free fall maneuvering ability still workable after all the years since he had been in space. \_Like riding a bicycle,\_ he thought with a bit of amusement.

The plans for the ship were fresh in his mind and he knew exactly where he was going -- to the control module where he could find out about conditions on earth; the situation was changing from minute to minute.

As he strapped himself in, the curve of earth was visible, including a slice of the Pacific coast and the Hawaiian spaceport. As he watched, he was

amazed at the number of flares he saw reaching for space. He knew immediately what that meant: it was like rats deserting a sinking ship. Anyone associated with the Tremaine regime who had the money and influence was either burrowing into elaborate hidden bunkers or heading for the moon or, given the austere conditions on Moon city, some were probably going to chance a Crazy Ship. There were plenty of them ready, he knew.

The pilot turned at the sound of Tremaine entering the command module. He lifted an earpiece off and said, "Hello, Mr. Tremaine. I'm glad to see you made it."

"Thanks, Mark. What's the news?"

"We'll be ready to take our chances in a couple of hours, soon as we get the masses adjusted."

Tremaine waved a hand, causing him to half turn in the weightless environment. "I mean from earth. What do you hear from down below?"

The pilot pushed off from his seat and guided Tremaine back to a passenger seat, much to his annoyance. "It's all confused, Mr. Tremaine. I can't tell who's winning, or even who's fighting whom. The official Tremaine news service goes off and on and then a Plemmons commentator will contradict everything they said."

That comment caused Tremaine to revise his thoughts. Perhaps the departing ships were a mixture of Plemmons and Tremaines -- or possibly all Plemmons. Cruel and evil men might run their corporation but none of them were dummies. "Well, I guess for us it really doesn't matter, does it? We're committed."

"So we are. Or we will be shortly."

"Right. I'm going to take a short nap. I haven't had much sleep lately, trying to keep an eye on everything. Wake me when we're ready to jump."

"Will do."

Tremaine buckled in and closed his eyes. He had been pushing his old body to the limit lately and the strain was telling, even with longevity treatments and Sporeworld stimulants and enhancers. Very shortly, he was fast asleep.

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At the same time that Tremaine was falling asleep, Steve was wide awake. The ship he was on had been coupled with its corresponding mass, loaded with more colonists and supplies, and was nearing the point in its orbit around the moon where the jump to Sporeworld would be attempted.

Before, while grieving over Janie and where the odds had been so prohibitively stacked against him, he really hadn't cared much what happened. Now, though, Mandy's news that he had been pardoned, the sexual interlude with her and the resilience of youth all contributed to raising his spirits almost to their normal level. He wanted very much for this jump to succeed. \_A new world,\_ he thought. \_A new world and a new beginning.\_

Mandy sat beside him, holding his hand in a tighter and tighter grip as the time for the jump neared. Steve was glad that he was privileged to be one of the crew, if privilege it was, so that he would know almost immediately through the view port whether or not they had made it to Sporeworld -- or had gone in the opposite direction. While waiting, he thought of Janie and where she might be, if she was still alive, and what she might be doing. She was crew also but that didn't mean anything; the crew would die just as readily as the colonists would if the jump didn't succeed.

In point of fact, he wondered why more than two crewmen, a Captain and a backup, were even needed. His brief introduction to his duties assured him that anyone could do them -- if they needed doing at all.

The pixels did their inexorable dance toward zero while Steve felt the tension building despite his resolve to stay calm and act like a man. He felt Mandy's hand squirming in his and thought he must be exerting enough pressure to hurt her. He eased off but a moment later caught himself doing it again. There was just no way to stay completely calm with your life hanging in the balance, he decided, or at least a life with a future to it. He turned and

grinned sickly at Mandy. She seemed not to notice. She was staring hypnotically at the same display he had been looking at -- and the count was nearing zero.

It came; the stars crawled crazily then reappeared, shining as single points again. Steve looked out the view port as the craft slowly revolved. No sun appeared, not visually and not on the radar display. The jump had gone backward. Steve let out a long, pent-up breath. He felt as if he were outside his body watching someone else, then realized it was himself. He felt his pulse thundering in his chest and a sickness that momentarily gagged him before he was able to finally breathe again. \_So much for the pardon,\_ he thought. \_I'm dead now, just like Janie.\_

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Janie had been teasing Hercules and Porter to help her to interpret the radar images from the captain's alcove. Hercules was glad to oblige and it gave Porter something to occupy his mind other than the pain of his amputated limb and what he was considering: taking a chance on another jump. It would be his decision, since the captaincy had devolved onto him once Dean showed his true colors. First they would have to find another ship of the same mass, which meant a recent one, and then use by guess and by god to try matching the mass of people and cargo. He knew that it would eventually come to that: survival in the emptiness of space was impossible in the long run, and even in the short run, the only way to live was by pillaging other ships which had gone backward instead of to Sporeworld as Bork Drummond had been doing for so long.

Hercules was explaining the display to Janie.

\_The red icons are all ships, either converging or diverging from us, depending on the vector at jump time. The number beside it is the time of arrival in the volume of space that would be possible for us to reach should we desire. \_

"Why are a few of them blinking and the rest not?" Janie asked.

Hercules paused before answering. \_The blinking ones still have viable humans aboard, or did at last communication attempt. I regret to report that many of the others are ones that Bork Drummond took over. There are no humans left alive on those.\_

Janie shuddered, knowing now what had happened to those unfortunate crews and colonists -- and had almost happened to them. "There's lots of them, aren't there?"

\_I have knowledge of 87 ships within the capability of our radar. There may be others of which I am unaware.\_

Janie noticed that some of the images gave a double blink instead of a single and asked why.

Porter, who was scrunched in beside her, answered. "That's a responder that the later ships had installed. They're the same models as ours."

"How do you know all this?" Sheila asked from where she was floating in the air behind and above them.

"I once wanted to be a spaceman and I've always kept up with every development. It's the only thing I've ever really been interested in, other than medicine."

"Then if we could match up with one of those ships, we could try a jump back to earth, couldn't we?"

"Assuming we could match passenger and cargo mass accurately, yes. But how would we manage that? And remember, the ships Bork hasn't looted probably still have crew and colonists aboard."

"Yes, but -- why couldn't we just match up with one of the unoccupied ships? Wouldn't that work?"

"Maybe. It sure would be taking a chance, though, even supposing we could match orbits with one of them."

"Bork managed it -- and he's been doing it ever since."

"True -- by killing and looting all the fuel and supplies from every ship he caught up with."

"We wouldn't do that!"

"Of course not. What we need to do is run a survey of every ship within range and see which ones we can reach -- or perhaps can reach us if it is crewed, or both of us use fuel to meet at a designated spot."

"Well, why haven't you done that yet?"

Porter patted Janie's shoulder with his remaining hand. "I'll confess, Janie, so much has happened since we mis-jumped that I'm just now starting to consider it seriously, not to mention that the painkillers have kept me sort of groggy. And don't forget who we're attached to right now -- Bork Drummond! He isn't going to want to try a jump."

"Speaking of Bork, what has he been doing? And where has Dean gone, for that matter?"

Porter cursed, startling Janie. She had never heard him even raise his voice before. Porter had been so glad to be shut of Bork and Dean that he hadn't considered what they might be up to in the colonists' bay or in the other ship. How long had it been since they had made an appearance? Days? At least! In fact, Bork had never come back up after Hercules finished with him. Dean had put in several appearances, been quizzed by Hercules and attempted to enter conversations with the rest of the crew, but after being soundly rebuffed several times had retreated to the colonists quarters with Bork -- or so he had been assuming. All that time, ever since the computer had quizzed Bork for so long, he and the others had simply been sleeping, eating and reminiscing about past events, as if their lives were truly over. And he had been mooning over Tracey, even with an arm missing. That must stop. Time to stop feeling sorry for himself and start acting like a captain, even there wasn't much of a future in it. And time to check to see that Dean hadn't moved more than his fair share of supplies over to Bork's ship as he had said he would be doing.

Porter wondered whether he should simply bring Bork up to the crew quarters at gunpoint and put him on trial, then execute him. All that had stopped him, after he thought about it some, was the danger of hunting him down in the voluminous colonist bay, or worse, trying to locate him in his own ship where he knew every nook and cranny. In hindsight, he knew the man should have been killed on the spot when he tried to take their ship but he hadn't been able to, wounded as he was, and the women couldn't bring themselves to simply kill them outright and that was that. But now...

"Move over a bit, Janie. I need to get something here." Janie shifted and he keyed in the special code he and Dean had been given, along with all the other data upon being appointed captain and vice captain.

A drawer down at foot level slid open. Porter reached down and pulled out a laser gun similar to the one Bork had used. He checked the charge, saw that it was sufficient and held it loosely in his hand.

"I didn't know that was there," Janie said.

"You weren't supposed to. This is supposed to be strictly for emergencies, like mutiny or -- hell, piracy, I guess, although the powers that be probably never envisioned pirates in this day and age -- other than themselves, of course."

"Why are you getting out another gun? You have the one we took away from Dean."

Derik's lips compressed into a thin line. Two other vertical lines appeared between his eyebrows. "This one is for you. Something tells me Bork and Dean won't take the idea of chancing a jump lightly. From now on, one or the other of us will stay awake and armed while we figure out exactly how we're going to go about this." He handed Janie the laser pistol.

Janie very carefully pointed the muzzle down toward the "floor" as she examined it, checked the charge and made certain the safety was on. Her father had seen to it that she got some small arms training, even though it had to be simulated; neither the Tremaines, Plemmons, or any of the other smaller corporations trusted their bondees with weapons -- which is how they maintained their power. Only executives and Corpolice were ever legally armed.



Janie tucked the weapon away in a pocket of her jumpsuit and looked inquiringly at the old doctor.

He gave her a gentle smile, one with little humor in it. "I see that you've had some experience with weapons."

"Just simulated," Janie admitted.

"Well, the important thing is that you know how to use it. The other important thing is will you use it if the occasion arises?"

"I think so. In fact I know I can if Bork or Dean try anything. I hate them!"

\* \* \* \*

"That's it," Bork said as he settled gently to the deck of his ship. "We've got most of what I was short of aboard. And the explosives are planted. All we need now is to transfer the fuel. After that, we go for the women and get them into our ship then blow us apart."

Dean looked around at the myriad netted and buckled heaps of supplies. It looked as if there was enough to keep Bork, him and Bork's three henchmen alive for centuries, so long as the hydroponic gardens kept supplying oxygen and removing carbon dioxide. The gardens were a sop to passengers on the Crazy Ships; should the jump go backward, they insured life for a while, theoretically until they could mate with a similar ship and try a jump back to earth. Bork had seen to preventing that from being tried, though. He had looted almost every ship that jumped backwards, and the few that hadn't weren't near enough to another to try mating.

"How do we get the women back here? For that matter, how do we transfer the fuel?" Dean asked.

"Simple. You and I put on a spacesuit and do the coupling."

"Coupling?"

"Yeah -- another sop for the poor idiots who wind up out here, supposing they find another ship to rob for fuel in case they don't have enough to line up right for the jump back -- as if any fool would try it anyway."

"I've never worked in a spacesuit."

"Don't worry, I'll show you everything you need to know. Basically, all I need you to do is twist the coupling valve when I start the pump."

Dean wondered about the procedure but knew so little of how the Crazy Ships worked that he didn't protest. He was supposed to have gone over the "survival" manual with the ship's computer but hadn't bothered. Just the thought of mis-jumping had scared him silly.

Shortly, he and Bork were suited up and exited through the auxiliary airlock, Bork trailing the coupling hose behind him, along with a safety line. He moved with the ease of long practice, in contrast to Dean, who kept over or under compensating for his movements, causing Bork to curse angrily until Dean finally made it to the coupling valve.

Attaching the hose was simply a matter of inserting it into the female part of the joint then letting the internal motors, activated by the male end of the hose, lock the two together. The only thing that hampered the procedure was that Dean was at the very end of his safety line and had to stretch to accomplish the maneuver. Once done, he spoke into the suit's radio.

"All right, Bork. I'm set."

"Great. Turn the valve."

Dean did so. A green light came on, indicating that the fuel was being successfully transferred. It took almost an hour of hovering there before the light went from green to red, indicating that Bork's ship was again topped off with fuel.

"Done!" Dean called.

"Shut it off," Bork instructed.

"Done," Dean repeated.

"Great. Now push off and I'll reel you in."

Dean gave himself a gentle shove, then reached for his safety line to help Bork pull him back to the airlock. He looked down the length of line and

saw the end of his tether floating free, unattached to the ship. His heart felt as if it were trying to pound its way out of his chest. He scrambled wildly trying to get back to the ship where he might grab a handhold, but accomplished nothing but turning himself into a slow tumble.

"Bork! Bork, I'm loose! Get the line!" He screamed into the suit radio.

"Have fun" Bork chortled as Dean continued his slow drift away from the coupled ships, still tumbling. Already there were many meters separating him from the ships and they grew increasingly smaller to his bulging eyes.

"No! Nooooooooo! Bork, for God's sake, have mercy! Bring me in!"

"Too late. I couldn't reach you now if I tried."

"Then go get Porter! Get him to start the ship before I'm too far away! Please, Bork, please!"

"Jam you, Dean. You're a wimp. Me and the boys got no use for chumps like you. Besides, there's not enough of the girlies to go around as is." Bork entered the airlock, not even looking back. Even before going out he had decided that Dean's limited usefulness was at an end.

In the distance, Dean saw the airlock close behind Bork. He screamed, louder and louder, until his voice was hoarse and his throat guttered with pain. He screamed until the last of his air was gone and he could only gasp for breath as he sank into a darkness that would go on forever.

\* \* \* \*

When Tremaine awoke, it was still several hours before jump time. He ate, used the facilities (and wondered if anyone would ever think of a way to improve on the methods of elimination in weightlessness), then rather than go to his cabin, amused himself by asking the pilot about the radar displays.

Mark Minier was only too happy to explain; it gave him something to do to pass the time, too -- and kept his mind away from the thought of the life-or-death jump looming ahead like a high cliff they would fall from -- and maybe or maybe not land safely in a pool at the bottom.

"See that blip? It's the ship in front of us, getting ready to jump."

Tremaine remembered the pardon he had given at Mandy's request, and her decision to try one more jump, hoping to arrive at Sporeworld rather than somewhere back in trackless space. "Do you know who's on that ship?"

"I can find out easy enough," Mark answered. He spoke to the computer, then tilted his head slightly sideways to read the display. He relayed the data to Tremaine even though he could have read it himself by leaning forward and to the side a bit. "Steve Joplin, Mandy Worthington, Derik Anders, Bertha Winslow, Wendy Waltz and Clinton Williams."

"Ah. Young Joplin's chance is coming up. I do hope he makes it."

"Do you keep up with all the crews of the Crazy Ships, sir?"

"No, just the ones that interest me. The young Joplins have had a hard time, what with their parents' company going bankrupt and then their parents being sentenced to the Crazy Ships, then the kids having to chance a jump on a Crazy Ship, too."

"I think I remember that case, now," the pilot said. "Weren't the Plemmons involved in it somehow?"

"They were the ones who threw Geneplan into bankruptcy, yes."

"Geneplan! Now I remember. Hell, I thought that company was really going places. One of my nieces worked for them and she said it was a great place to be. The employees were bonded like the law stipulates but she said it didn't amount to anything except on paper; they were pretty much free to do as they pleased."

"Yes, and that's the reason they went under -- The Plemmons group won't stand for a company that doesn't control its bondees as close as a banker counts pennies. Earth is a corporate world and nothing short of outright revolution is going to change it -- that or an economic collapse, which I expect will come one day."

Mark Menier, a bonded pilot, looked askance at the head of the giant Tremaine Corporation. He wondered again, as he had before, why such a man would be taking a chance on a Crazy Ship, other than if he expected his

corporation to be taken over by the Plemmons, its only real competitor. Or maybe it was the rioting? He decided to chance a question, and asked.

Tremaine smiled. "The riots and looting will be allowed to go on for a bit but the Corpolice will put a stop to them before any major damage is done -- I think. It's just a way of letting bondees blow off steam during a changeover. However, this might be the last change -- and it's even possible that the whole shebang will collapse before the Plemmons get it all organized. Earth became a static society under globalization once the big corporations divided up the pie. And actually, we're on the decline now. Innovation is scarce when there's no reward for inventive bondees, and the executives are more interested in playing with their wealth than creating more of it. No, this system is on its last legs. It may go down now or stagger along for another couple of decades but basically it's finished. You're doing yourself a favor by trying for Sporeworld."

The pilot forbore to mention that he hadn't had a choice, and Tremaine certainly didn't mention that Sporeworld itself left much to be desired.

Tremaine meditated a moment, then added to his discourse. "As I said, there's always the chance that the rioting and violence may get out of hand. If that happens, you'll see Plemmons executives lined up like sausage links out here on Crazy Ships, taking a chance on jumping instead of facing firing squads -- or worse."

"Why Plemmons and not Tremaines? Or some of the other corporation execs?" Mark was getting an education, now that the knowledge couldn't hurt anyone.

"The Plemmons control the spaceports and therefore the shuttles. They are also pretty strong in Moon city so they'll make sure they get the majority of ships available."

"You mean if that should happen, a collapse I mean, then the Plemmons would take over Sporeworld?"

"Could be," Tremaine said, closing the subject.

Presently, the pilot tapped Tremaine on the shoulder to get his attention. He pointed to the radar display. "The Joplin ship is getting close to their jump point. Another few minutes and they'll be gone."

"Oh. Thanks." Tremaine watched as the time ticked away and suddenly the blip was gone.

"Well, they jumped instead of blowing up," Mark said.

"That may be small consolation, but I do hope they made it."

"What do you mean?"

Tremaine didn't answer and presently his pilot turned back to the displays. He watched as the mass that would balance their ship approached cautiously. It was much larger than normal, having to compensate for the weight of the huge fusion reactor stored in the special shuttle already attached to their ship. The little bug-like tugs had already used their lasers to carve off enough of the mass so that it matched their own and were now just finishing taking the spin off the huge rock.

Another two hours saw the mass resting adjacent to their ship, with the displacement generators of the ship coupled to the mass, ready for the jump. All the time, Tremaine had been meditating while listening to reports coming up from earth. He was beginning to think that his other option might have been a better bet, except for the fact that so many of his people were already on Sporeworld. He would have to work things out from there -- if this jump was successful.

The tugs cast loose and gave their okay to jump. So far as was possible to measure, the two masses matched -- and the jump point was approaching. Tremaine thought of all the people who had been sentenced to the Crazy Ships over the years, and now here he was on one. It would have been ironic and amusing if seen by anyone else, but all he could feel was an abiding, heartfelt prayer to whatever gods, if any, controlled the odds he was chancing -- and the future well-being of so many humans who were dependent on him beating those odds. Considering all the reports of violence and mob justice

being meted out to corporation executives on the earth below, he doubted that the second fusion reactor would ever reach orbit, and that left him and this ship even more important than ever if there was nothing to back it up.

"Coming up on the jump, Mr. Tremaine," Mark said nervously, unable to avoid holding his breath as the count wound down to zero. The stars crawled as he had seen them do on recordings then snapped back to their normal pinpoint brilliance. And there was a sun!

"We made it!" Mark shouted, unable to contain his exuberance.

"So we did," Tremaine said. "Well, now for the next step."

"Next?"

Tremaine grinned. "Call ground control. We've got lots of things to do, and not much time to do them if I'm any judge of what's happening back Earthside."

\* \* \* \*

"Look, another ship just appeared," Janie said. "Or is that a displacement mass we're seeing?"

"It's blinking. Ships always have the transponders going, remember?" Porter said.

"Oh, yeah. Some other poor fools didn't make it. Should we call them?"

"I suppose we could, but there's no real reason to. What I think we should do now that I'm feeling better is face down Bork and Dean. We can't just stay here using up supplies and thinking some sort of miracle will save us."

"So we try another jump." Sheila said. Her body tensed, as if she were bracing for an engine thrust.

"Assuming we can find a corresponding mass; either a ship of the same model as ours or a mass that was coupled to a ship like ours."

"How do we tell which mass is which?"

"Ordinarily, we couldn't, which is probably why we saw that explosion here right after we arrived. But Hercules has a record of the time every ship and mass has arrived, and I know for a fact that all the ships attempting jumps for the last two years have been the exact same models as ours."

Janie thought about that. "But -- but we don't know the mass of the cargo or how many colonists were aboard those ships! How can we be sure we'll match masses?" She shivered, remembering the violent explosion, brilliant in the blackness of interstellar space.

Porter reached out to pat her with the missing stub of his arm. He looked at it curiously and grinned mirthlessly, then used his other hand to pat her shoulder. "Well, we know how many colonists were aboard our ship and that's pretty standard. And the cargo holds -- well, they're all the same size. What we have to worry about is if the cargos varied a lot in weight. Mass, I mean," he corrected.

"That's taking an awful chance," Sheila said.

"It's either that or die out here eventually," Janie said. "I'd rather try for earth."

Porter turned to the other woman. "Sheila?"

Sheila put an arm around Janie. They might live a long while before their supplies ran out. Why not wait until then before taking the chance? "Why not wait until we have to? We can go ahead and find a matching mass and be ready, but why do it until our supplies run out?"

Janie shook Sheila's arm away from her, holding on to a handhold as she did. She tried to fathom the other woman's reasoning and failed. "No! I want to try going back. Suppose Steve made his jumps okay? We can be together again!"

Sheila's face became less animated, as though some emotion had left it. And so it had. She had hoped that the young girl -- woman, really -- was beginning to reciprocate the love she had started to feel toward her, but obviously that wasn't the case. She still wanted her brother, her twin and her lover, odd as it might seem to anyone from the previous century. "All right," she said sadly. "If everyone else wants to try it, I'll go along."

Porter looked toward Tracey. She nodded, causing her shiny black bangs to fall forward. She brushed them back and nodded again. Whatever Porter wanted, she would go along with. The man might be old, but he had put some love back in her life and she owed him whatever he asked of her.

"All right," Porter said, reaching down to touch the laser pistol at his belt. "Now let's figure out how to get loose from Bork."

"Why don't we ask Hercules," Janie said.

"Who the hell is Hercules?" Bork's rough voice resounded through the command module.

All four of the crew tried to turn around at the same time. Porter got bumped, causing him to lose his grip, then without thinking he stuck out the stub of his forearm to break his momentum. It hit squarely against a bulkhead. He let out a horrible oath for being so stupid as a burst of pain shot up the stub and into his body, rendering him momentarily helpless.

Janie had no problem as she was loosely belted into one of the command module seats, but when she twisted her head around, her heart dropped like a loose elevator. Bork Drummond hung in the entrance to the colonist section of the ship, gripping a handhold with one hand while grinning maliciously and holding a laser pistol in the other, pointing in the general direction of all of them.

"What in jamming hell do you think you're up to?" Porter said through gritted teeth.

"I might ask you the same question, but I won't. I already heard what you're planning and we ain't going along with it, computer or no computer. We've decided to take you women on a little cruise on my ship and leave this one behind."

The command monitor burst into holographic text. \_Negative! Janie will stay aboard. Any attempt to separate ships will result in attempted jump to earth.\_

"No!" Janie exclaimed. "Hercules, you \_know\_ Bork's ship and ours don't match masses. Jumping would kill us all!"

Bork guffawed. "Hercules, is it? Now you've given that crazy computer a name! Well, Hercules and the old man can play games with themselves. You three women get over here. You're gong with us." He waved his laser pistol menacingly.

Janie could see the shadows of Bork's henchmen behind him. She knew they must also have weapons. Bork had looted so many ships that they had to be well armed.

"Jam you, man!" Porter exclaimed, wondering whether to try for his gun. "Do you want to kill us all?"

Bork laughed and moved his big body further into the command module. "Ha! You think a computer would commit suicide? I've done some research since that piece of junk quizzed me. No sentient computer has ever killed itself. What's happening is that it's learned to lie, just like others have. That's why we can't trust them. Right, \_Hercules?\_" He mouthed the name with derision and tilted his head back, roaring with laughter again.

Porter knew he was right. Everything he had ever read about sentient computers told him that they had the same deep-seated drive for survival as humans, and furthermore, Bork was right: sentient computers weren't always truthful, especially when they were working toward their own objective. He closed his eyes briefly, imagining all the degradation that Janie and Mandy and Tracey would be subjected to if Bork was allowed to take them, and then he moved, knowing what was coming, hoping to live through it but intending to give the women a chance regardless.

"Jam you, Bork. You're not taking these girls!" He used his good hand to give himself a gentle shove, first putting himself in front of Janie then bumping her out of the line of fire. He reached behind him for his weapon.

Bork's hyena laugh cut off like a damaged recorder. He fired twice before Porter could bring his weapon to bear, hitting him in the groin with both beams, slicing through tissue and bone and sending the odor of scorched

flesh wafting into the air.

Janie screamed as she saw the doctor get hit, but even as her voice rose in anguish she was drawing the weapon Porter had given her, holding it close to her body as she hit the seat belt latch and shoved off. She turned in a lazy circle in the weightlessness. She heard Tracey and Mandy both utter shrieks of horror, then saw the bulkhead and wall she was facing brighten in the red light of another laser beam as someone fired again.

Porter's gun sagged in his hand as unconsciousness claimed him. He had gotten off only one shot but it had hit Bork in the leg, burning a path across his thigh.

Bork cursed horribly and fired again and again at Porter until he exhausted the charge. He turned to get another weapon from one of his minions, still blocked from entering the cabin by his body.

The movement saved him as Janie's shot went where he had been seconds before. Seeing the laser beam tear into the wall of the cabin beside him spurred him to a preternatural speed. He pushed himself back from the entrance, knocking two of his own men out of the way in his eagerness to get away from the deadly beams.

Janie fired into the entrance and this time hit a body, but it was one of the henchmen, not Bork. The beam took him squarely in the chest, killing him instantly. Bork kicked off down the corridor and out into the colonist section of the ship, leaving his men to face Janie's wrath. The two still alive were flailing for handholds, unable to get a clear shot, whereas Janie had found a light fixture to grab on to. From there she took deadly aim and killed both the other pirates, using the full charge of her weapon.

Sheila was shaken but thinking fast. She pushed off from where she had taken cover and yelled to Tracey. "Help me shut the hatch! He may come back!"

Tracey ignored her. She was hovering over Porter and crying. Tears floated from her eyes and made small glistening globules to go with the red globes of blood seeping from his wounds where the laser beam had failed to completely cauterize them. Janie kicked off to Sheila and helped her close and dog the hatch, then moved over to Tracey and Porter.

The old doctor was breathing his last. He would never know that his sacrifice had succeeded.

Janie gripped her weapon helplessly. She had no idea where another charge for it might be kept, nor what Bork might be up to. And there was nothing at all to be done for Porter. He gave one long last bubbling sigh and his breathing stopped. Tracey wailed and clasped his body to her breast, causing them both to float free in the cabin.

Just as Janie was wondering what to do next, a series of explosions boomed through the ship. Bork had decided to look for easier pickings and set off his charges. He clutched the painful wound on his thigh as he watched from the view port of his cabin. The other ship, rotating slowly, grew smaller and smaller as it distanced itself.

\_Good,\_ he thought. \_The charges worked. Jam those bitches. There's plenty more out here.\_

\* \* \* \*

"What was that!" Janie practically screamed. She looked wildly around the cabin and when no one answered, she began a frantic search for a charge for her laser gun. Suddenly she remembered that Porter had taken it from a drawer in the Captain's alcove. She pushed off toward it and braked by bending her knees as she touched the chair, then grabbed it to steady herself.

The drawer wouldn't open despite her frantic attempts. \_Of course! Only the captain can get into it and he's dead! She searched her mind for a solution and suddenly thought of Hercules. Maybe he knew the combination.\_

"Herc! I need a charge for my gun. Can you open this blankety blank jamming drawer?"

\_Yes, if I override my programming.\_

"Then override it! Hurry! Bork may come back any moment!"

\_Bork Drummond will not return. The sounds you heard were explosive

charges he used to separate his ship from my ship.\_ A pause. \_Our ship.\_

"Thank Destiny! It's just too damned jamming bad I didn't manage to kill him instead of those others. Now he'll go right back to pirating other ships just like before."

\_Negative. He has no fuel. I changed the transfer indicators . While he thought he was topping off his tanks, his fuel was being transferred to our ship. He can go nowhere now.\_

Janie beamed. "Great. That's just great, Herc. I wish you had disabled his radio while you were at it so he couldn't ever entice another ship to come to him.

\_I uploaded all the files from my previous residence -- his ship's computer -- into my own memory. He cannot communicate, nor can he manage the life support systems any more. He is helpless and will perish within less than two weeks.\_

"A fitting end to the bastard. Just long enough for him to think about how he'll die," Sheila said.

"You did great, Herc." Janie agreed. "Some humans not only don't deserve to live, they should never have been born. Good riddance."

Tracey wiped tears from her face. "It was Ignaz who gave us the chance. If he hadn't ... hadn't..."

Sheila went to the sobbing woman, embracing her until she had cried herself out. Janie left them and talked to Hercules. It was time to start preparations for a jump as soon as a matching mass could be found and Porter's body had been given its final farewell.

\* \* \* \*

Bork Drummond beat on the computer console, trying to make it come to life. He checked fuel lines and oxygen levels and pulled off the facing of numerous computer fixtures. By the second week of helplessness, he was going slowly mad with frustration and fear, knowing that his time was limited. On the tenth day, he forlornly and desperately tried booting up the Captain's computer console one last time. To his utter surprise, the monitor blinked several times. Just as he was beginning to feel the joy of burgeoning hope that all was not lost, a printed message appeared in large holographic type. The message was short and to the point.

\_There is no fuel in this ship. The life maintenance systems no longer work. The computer is dead. And so are you. Hercules.\_

Bork screamed to high heaven but it did not a whit of good, nor did it help when he took a wrench and battered the computer console into junk. He was too much of a coward to take his own life and even when madness descended on him, he couldn't forget the inexorable date with death that loomed closer and closer and finally arrived. If he had thought that lack of oxygen or a dosage of pain killing drugs would send him into a painless sleep from which he would not awaken, he was mistaken. The dead computer couldn't unlock the medical safe where the drugs were kept and Hercules had seen to it that his water ran out before anything else. He died horribly, with his bloated, swollen tongue protruding from his mouth and his hands clasped around a tap that was as dry as his desiccated body.

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CH010

\*CHAPTER TEN\*

Eventually, calm descended among the three women in their ship. Sheila took over the helm, asking Hercules to stabilize the ship while Janie and Tracey prepared Porter's body for burial in space. This required help from the computer as none of them had any idea of how to work the airlock to space -- or indeed whether there was even an airlock still there after the explosions that had separated Bork's ship from theirs. Further, it was fortunate that the sentient computer had taken up residence in their ship, since there was little room for deviation programmed into the brains which normally controlled the ships. They had programs to manage the jumps and a small amount of leeway for the crew to instruct it to navigate and tend to a few other items. There was

no program for a burial. When Janie asked, the display told her what was needed.

\_The process is simple. If the inner lock will open, then the outer lock is not damaged. Place the body in the airlock then close the inner door. I will signal the outer one to open and the body will be ejected.\_

Tracey began crying again and Sheila comforted her while Janie tended to the gruesome task of wrapping Porter's body in a makeshift shroud then getting it into the airlock.

In a few minutes the deed was complete.

Tracey and Jeanie both wiped their eyes.

"Rest in peace, Doctor Porter," Janie murmured to herself, too low for the others to hear. Sending his body out into space was like casting off the last of her childhood with it. As the lock indicator turned back to green, she vowed to herself to never take friends for granted again. The doctor had knowingly given his life for her and the other two women and she would never forget it.

The computer console blinked for attention. Janie went to look while Sheila and Tracey were still staring at the closed airlock as if it were a gravesite.

\_I note a new mass has entered our volume of space. Do you wish to attempt to contact them?\_

\_"No," Janie said. "Find us a mass to match us, either a ship or a rock and let's try our jump."\_

\_Searching. Search finished. The nearest mass which will approximate ours and which uses the least amount of fuel is approximately ten hours away. No transponder is active but from radar signals it appears to be a ship of our type.\_

"Do you think there's anyone aboard?"

\_Negative. I have files on all masses observed since I became able to upload data into permanent memory. That ship was taken over by Bork Drummond 3.7 months ago. All personnel aboard were ejected into space except for two females. They were later disposed of in the same fashion.\_

Janie shivered, imagining what the women must have gone through before Bork and his men were finished with them. She hoped his death was a painful and lingering one. In the meantime, she wanted to try the jump back to earth before she or the others lost their nerve.

"Maneuver us to that ship, then, and we'll couple with it -- if you can tell us how."

\_I can and will. Prepare for thrust in five minutes. Mark.\_

\_\* \* \* \* \_

"What do we do now?" Steve asked, staring out the view port into the darkness of space, embellished only by the brilliant pinpoints of far away stars.

Derik stared also. He was the captain now and it seemed to him that he ought to be able to rescue them from the terrible fix they were in, but he thought it was hopeless. No ship had ever returned after failing to make a jump. Why should theirs be any different? And yet --

"There must be a reason why no ship has ever returned from out here," Derik said in a voice almost bereft of emotion.

"So let's figure it out, then!" Steve said, as if it were a simple history lesson or an interactive game they were playing.

Derik turned his gaze from the view port to Steve. He looked at his earnest young face and thought of how he might have handled the situation at his age. \_Not nearly that well,\_ he thought.

"Well, I'll go along with you, Steve. Start figuring."

Steve started to speak then realized he had nothing to say. He had no more idea than anyone else why no ships had ever made it back to earth, but deep inside, he knew there must be a reason. There was a reason for everything, ultimately.

Derik smiled at the confounded appearance of Steve's face then all the



tension that had built up before the jump and was still present finally was released as he burst into laughter. "Sorry," he said when his sides stopped heaving. "I know nothing is funny about the fix we're in but the look on your face was just too much. And damned if I didn't need a laugh. You do too, young man. That's the mark of maturity, being able to laugh in the face of the black camel and tell it to do its worst."

"When I meet it, I will," Steve said, and then he, too, laughed. Clinton Williams and Mandy finally joined in the sounds of merriment, even if it wasn't funny. Only Bertha remained silent, clutching Clinton's hand with a grip designed more for a boa constrictor than a human. She was frightened into complete speechlessness. Clinton stopped his own braying and hugged her to him, causing them both to lose their grips on the back of the pilot's chairs that had been holding them in place.

Steve finally got his speaking voice back, along with his reasoning powers. "Look, try the computer with the radar and see if there are any more ships out here. Maybe we can compare notes before deciding on what we should do." Silently, he was telling himself not to expect to find out that Janie was in one of the nearby ships. That would be too much to hope for.

"Good idea, Steve," Derik said. He played with the controls for a moment then gazed in silent awe at the number of reflections visible in the three dimensional holographic display. There were dozens and dozens of blips, with not a few blinking, indicating that their computer was working and was broadcasting navigational data.

"Look at that!" Steve exclaimed. "By damn, all we have to do is match up with one of those ships or pieces of rock and try another...." His voice trailed off and he looked to Derik, who nodded in return.

"Yeah. Why haven't they tried it? And if some of them have tried it, why didn't it work, half the time, at least? And as far as that goes, even if they tried and failed, the balancing mass would have shown back up around earth."

Steve tried to think positive. He looked again at the radar display. He was unable to interpret the symbols beside each icon, but knew that Derik could. "Do we have enough fuel to match up with any of those ships, or the displacement masses?"

Derik glanced at some of the icons. "That's no problem. In fact, it's probably a good idea. Why don't we try for the nearest ship rather than a displacement mass and see if maybe we can find out why they're just sitting out there doing nothing. And while we're at it, Clinton, why don't you start calling each one that has a transponder working and see if you can raise anyone?"

"I'm for that, too," Clinton agreed. "No sense just sitting here and cussing the Tremaines and Plemmons, even if they do need cussing. Show me how to work the radio and I'll get going."

Mandy nodded. Bertha was still speechless and Clinton turned back to her, concerned now. It was all right to be frightened; he had been scared too many times to mention during his stint in the Georgia swamps and again really scared before the jumps in the jamming Crazy Ships, but being scared all the time would wound the soul in short order. He brought her over to the alcove with him while he worked.

\* \* \* \*

Hercules used the program installed by earth technicians to match mass with the other empty ship. Once done, the real work began, with three women having to take turns in space suits for which they had no training -- other than what the Computer could dredge up from its files. That helped, but didn't cover everything.

Janie and Sheila took turns doing most of the work, leaving Tracey to mind the store. The coupling mechanism had to be attached to the other ship then secured to their own. The coupling didn't have to meld the two masses tightly together; it was the displacement generator on the command ship which did all the work, but the coil of generator lines from the ship had to be

fixed tightly to the other object so that the two were lined up properly. Ordinarily, little space tugs did that job but of course there were none in her part of space and Janie was having the devil's own time getting the ships to match properly.

"More thrust, forward, Herc. Just a little. No, too much!" The laser pointer she had rigged at Hercules' suggestion would show when the masses were properly aligned. She ignited the suit jet in a hurry in order to get out of the way of the other ship, now being approached too swiftly, and almost broke her safety tether. Just before the two ships would have crushed the coupling between them, the computer gave their ship a sideways vector, getting it out of the way, but necessitating Janie to return to the ship for more air. She cracked the helmet and wiped sweat from her eyes and hair.

"Whew! That's more work than I ever imagined."

"Ready for me to take a turn?" Sheila asked.

"No, you'd just have to make all the mistakes I've made over again. Let me out of this sweatbox so I can use the facilities and I'll give it one more shot."

"Okay." Sheila began helping Janie out of the spacesuit. Given that it was a medium size, she had no problems. The real trouble was working in it when the arm and finger slots were really too large for her. "Oh, by the way, we got a message from one of the ships out here. Just a query, asking if anyone was here."

Janie was only mildly curious. She was much more interested in getting their ships mated and trying a jump. "Was it anyone we know?"

"Someone by the name of Derik. Does that ring a bell?"

"Nope. Just tell them we're alive and leave it at that." She pushed out of the bottom half of the suit, which was anchored onto a suiting unit, oriented herself and shoved off. "Be back in a minute," she called over her shoulder. Bladder pressure was suddenly a very urgent problem.

\* \* \* \*

The ship's computer obligingly followed Derik's instructions and matched orbit with the nearest ship. It proved to be of same class as theirs, but a quick look showed its secondary airlock gaping open. Steve donned the spacesuit in order to look inside and get an idea of what would be needed to try matching masses. A quick search found the ship to be utterly deserted except for masses of desiccated bodies.

"They were dead, Derik, but I couldn't see any wounds or anything and it didn't look as if they died from explosive decompression. It's more like they were dead to begin with, then the air was salvaged, or leaked off, or something like that. I'm no expert so I can't really tell."

Derik thought a moment. "How many bodies did you see?"

"I didn't count. Fifty? A hundred?"

"Sounds like a regular contingent of colonists. How about cargo?"

"Lots of the packets looked as if they had been broken into, but not too much appeared to be missing if what you told me about standard colonist cargoes holds."

"Well, we can use by guess and by god and see what happens. We sure can't be any worse off. Let's get to work. And I guess we need to tell our guests below what's going on."

\* \* \* \*

Derik and Steve had much the same problem as Janie and Sheila, except that their task was complicated by having to use the simple software program already stored in their ship's computer, one which was not designed to match masses. Derik managed to work around it by using the shuttle's program and convincing it that the ship they were coupling the generators to was the original, then switching back to the ship's computer for fine maneuvering. It was touchy and Steve had to suit up time and again to carry out Derik's instructions. Like Janie, he made mistake after mistake and several times only the safety tether saved him from a lonely death, but finally it was done.

They completed their task a bit before Janie and Sheila did theirs.

Steve shucked himself out of the spacesuit for the last time. His undergarments were soaked clean through and the last hour had been spent completing the coupling by squinting through a fogged up faceplate while trying to center the laser aiming beam.

"I'm glad that's over with," he said.

"Well, me too, even though you did all the hard work."

"Hey, guys. I got an answer from one of the ships," Clinton said.

"Only one?" Steve asked.

Clinton gave a disparaging shrug. "Only one so far. And guess who answered?"

"I'm too tired for guessing games," Steve said.

"Someone by the name of Sheila Tremaine. Would you believe that?"

"A Tremaine is out here? I wonder how come?"

Derik spoke up. "Damn! I bet the Plemmons group has taken over on earth! Now what do we do? Steve, your pardon won't be worth a damn if they've taken over. And Destiny knows what they might have in store for the rest of us."

"Wouldn't they want to know why we made it back -- if we do -- when no one else has?"

"Maybe and maybe not. I've met a few of the younger Plemmons. From what I gather, they're more interested in partying than fact finding. On the other hand, suppose they do want to question us -- and now that I think about it, I guess they would -- we might never be seen again. Damn, no telling where they would take us or what they would do to us. One thing for sure, I bet we'd be stuck on earth instead of being allowed to try for Sporeworld. And we all know there's nothing for us back on earth."

"There's sure nothing there for me, not with Janie gone," Steve said, drawing a soulful glance from Mandy.

"Well, what choice do we have?" Bertha spoke to someone besides Clinton for the first time since their jump had failed.

Something about her remark triggered a thought in Steve's mind.

\_Choice? Maybe...\_ "Derik, do we necessarily have to shoot for earth? Couldn't we try for one of the other colonies?"

Clinton piped up, "Hey, my man! Why the hell not? We go back to earth, next thing you know we might be on a boat for Africa! Or locked up somewhere for not being bonded to the Plemmons. Or..."

"Never mind, I get your point, Clinton. It's just that -- hell, I don't know whether it's even possible."

"Ask the computer," Steve suggested reasonably. "And regardless, we've got a program already installed for a jump from earth to Sporeworld. Maybe it would work from here just as well."

"I'm no authority, but from what I've heard, it really doesn't matter where you start from so long as you know the coordinates of your destination. Let's see what we have here." Derik queried the computer in several different pathways and searches before looking back up. "Earth or Sporeworld, we can do either of them, assuming we've coupled and lined up right, but not any of the other colonies. And frankly, from what I've heard, only an idiot would try for them anyway, even if it were possible. Sporeworld is the only really earth-compatible world."

"Yeah. I've heard rumors about the other worlds from the convict grapevine. Anyone getting sent to them is morbid meat. The only reason for going is some of the drugs and rare minerals -- and cons sentenced to those ships have to keep trying jumps until they miss. The worlds aren't compatible to earth life in the long run."

"Seems like it would be better to stay there as long as possible rather than keep trying jumps," Steve said.

Clinton gave him a resigned reply, borne of a life fighting the system. "Their computers are set to try return jumps after so long a time, ready or not, whether they've managed to match with a mass or not. Better to keep trying than have your ship explode, hey? Not that it matters, odds are the

jump will fail after a couple of tries anyway."

"That's the same odds we're facing, except if we make it to Sporeworld, maybe somehow we can con the ground crew into thinking we've come directly from earth with the usual load of colonists and supplies. Once on the ground, we can break for freedom. I've heard some of the colonists deserted into the back country in the old days. It must be a hard life, but we wouldn't have the man telling us what to do no more."

Steve grinned at Clinton. For all the patois he used in conversation, and for all his life of bucking authority, there was nothing at all dumb about him. Steve liked him, more than he had anyone for a long while.

"Are we all agreed, then? Try for Sporeworld rather than earth?"

Everyone nodded at Derik, even Bertha.

"Okay, Sporeworld it is. Cross your fingers, pray, spit in Destiny's eye or use whatever other magic you can think of to get us through the jump. I'm going to start the thrust to line us up again and tell the computer where we want to go. I think we're situated well enough so you won't have to go out again, Steve." He turned to business and presently a gentle thrust began causing their bodies to have enough weight to settle toward surfaces of the cabin. The new lineup was soon confirmed and the countdown to jump time began blinking on a corner of the computer monitor.

Steve felt the now familiar tenseness beginning to build; the shallow breaths, muddy thoughts and apprehension of what might happen to them if the jump failed. A sudden idea occurred to him and he spoke up.

"Derik, don't you think we ought to pass on our knowledge to that new ship before we jump? They seem to be the only one that wants to talk to us."

"Derik checked the time. "Good thought. I'll tell them our names and what we're doing. It might give them some hope." He gave the information to the computer by voice then keyed it for transmission to the ship that had returned their original call.

\* \* \* \*

Unfortunately, the message arrived while Janie was outside and Sheila was busy coordinating her efforts with Hercules. When the incoming message light blinked, she held up from displaying it out of concern for possibly being distracted. Only when Janie was safely back inside and the coupling and lining up of the masses were completed did she think to ask for a display. Her face turned white as death when she saw what it was.

\_Derik Anders, Mandy Worthington, Steve Joplin, Clinton Williams, Wendy Waltz and Bertha Winslow in crew, plus normal contingent of colonists. Have matched mass with empty ship and attempting jump straight to Sporeworld, bypassing earth. No knowledge of why no other ships answering calls. Suggest you try to match mass and attempt jump back to Earth or Sporeworld as we are doing. Good luck and Godspeed. \_

"Janie! That's Steve's ship that answered! He's alive! They're going to jump for Sporeworld!"

Janie felt as if she had been hit in the body with a mallet. \_Steve alive? And jumping for Sporeworld?\_ "No! She yelled. "Tell them to abort their jump! Tell Steve I'm alive and in this ship. Hurry!"

Sheila fumbled with the communicator controls until Clinton pushed her aside and got off a hurried message.

\_Jane Joplin alive and in this ship. Abort, abort! Don't jump yet!\_

And then there was nothing to do but wait.

\* \* \* \*

Steve was watching the last seconds of the countdown tick off when the message arrived. He stared blankly at the screen for a moment, struck dumb and speechless. Then he shouted, "Derik, abort the jump. Janie's here! She's alive!"

Derik tried but the computer had already entered the final part of the jump program where nothing could stop it nor interfere with it. While Derik was frantically trying to get the computer to respond, Steve got off a message. Or tried to.

\_Janie! We can't stop our jump now. Try for....\_

The stars crawled like tiny spiders before he could get all of his message sent, then popped back to points of light again. Through the view port he could see a sun. They had made it and were in orbit around Sporeworld but he took no part in the wild cheering. \_Janie ... oh, jam it all to hell and jam Destiny, too. It had been so close!\_ He buried his face in his hands and cried, the great wracking sobs of an adult man undergoing unbearable grief.

\* \* \* \*

Janie waited for a reply with impatience almost too tense to be borne then sank into a black pool of despair when the reply did come. It was almost impossible to believe. First she had lost Steve (or he had lost her, depending on the viewpoint), then found him and now she had lost him again, in a way that left some hope for him but little chance that they would find each other again. Finding him once had been wildly improbable; to think that it could happen again was tilting at windmills, or worse.

Sheila put her arm around Janie, feeling her body shaking through the cloth of her jumpsuit. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry," She said. "You don't know how sorry I am."

Janie began crying. She didn't want to but couldn't help herself. She brushed furiously at the globules of salty tears hanging to her lashes. "Oh, it was so close! Why couldn't we have answered? Why?"

"It's my fault," Sheila said, willing to take the blame and absolve Janie of the guilt she must be feeling.

Janie shook her head. "No, it's just jam damn Destiny, that's all. Maybe it's just a payback for how happy we were before all these bad things started happening. And Steve tried so hard to help and be brave. He..." She paused, suddenly remembering the last bit of the message. \_"Try for...." What could that have meant?\_

"Sheila, play back the message for me, please."

Sheila did so, wondering what Janie was thinking. She listened to all of it, including the last two words just before it was cut off, obviously by a jump that couldn't be halted.

"See?" Janie said. "He was trying to tell us something when he knew they were going to jump and couldn't stop it. What could he have meant?"

"Try for ... try for..could he have meant 'try for Earth'?"

"What on earth could he be wanting us to try for earth for?" Tracey said, smiling thinly at her pun, her first smile since Porter's death.

"There's nothing there that he would want to go back to."

"Well, where else could he go? Oh! Sporeworld, of course. But -- no, that isn't possible. He would have to go to Earth first, wouldn't he?"

"I haven't a clue," Sheila said, "but Hercules would know. Herc, is it possible to try a jump to Sporeworld rather than Earth from out here?"

\_Certainly. The odds of a successful jump to Sporeworld are exactly equal to an attempted jump for Earth. I would need to change coordinates and the ship and displacement mass will need to be aligned slightly differently. Is that what you wish to do?\_

"By Destiny, why not? If we try for Earth first, we'd still have to risk another jump to make it to Sporeworld -- and why do that? I bet that's what Steve's thinking was and I'll bet he was trying to tell us that!" Janie was suddenly so excited that she let loose of her handhold and floated free in the cabin. She tumbled slowly into a wall and bounced back almost to her original position.

Sheila was more practical. She spoke to the computer. "Herc, will one of us have to suit up for the realignment?"

\_Yes, but it will be a minimal EVA. There is little difference in alignment needed to jump for Sporeworld rather than earth from here.\_

Janie sighed theatrically. "All right. Now where did I put my spacesuit? Does anyone know?"

That got a laugh even from Tracey. Sheila's suit was still attached to the suiting module, in plain sight of everyone.

Janie hurried off to the bathroom, having learned the hard way to relieve herself first before donning the cumbersome suit, then returned quickly, impatient to get going now that she thought there might be a chance to find Steve once again.

\* \* \* \*

"By God, we made it!" Derik yelled so loudly that the sound echoed about the control module like the rumble of thunder. The Sporeworld sun was plainly visible from the view port, skirting one edge of it then swinging slowly out of sight in response to the slowly moving ship, now bereft of the displacement mass it had been attached to.

"We sure did," Clinton said. "Destiny, we're sure on a jamming run of luck. What do we do next to foul up the cosmos?"

"Better, where do we go from here?" Steve asked. "If I'm reading the radar display accurately, we came in on a different orbit from the three ships I see lined up for jumps. I bet we attract some attention from ground control. And hey -- one of those ships is a helluva lot bigger than the others. I wonder what it's for?"

"I don't know, but I'll bet we're attracting more attention than an oversized ship," Derik admitted. "I'm open to suggestions as to what we tell them."

"Why not the truth?" Mandy suggested. "They're going to know we didn't arrive here by the usual route anyway."

Derik rubbed his chin, a mannerism he used when making decisions which might have unintended consequences. "May as well, I guess. I'll get on the horn and tell them we're here with crew and a load of colonists -- and that we took the long way around."

"I'll go start getting the colonists aboard the shuttle," Clinton said. "They will be very pleased to see my smiling face when I tell them we made it, even if they are still in bond."

"Good 'nuff," Derik said.

Steve was still watching the monitor. "Hey! Two more ships just appeared in the lineup from earth orbit! Isn't that unusual, them jumping that close together?" As he asked the question, a third blip appeared. "Damn, there's another one! What is it, a convention of Crazy Ships?"

"Something going on back Earthside, for sure," Derik said.

"I hope it's good for us and not the other way around."

"So do I, but I wouldn't bet the farm on it. I'll call and report in. Maybe ground control will tell us something."

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CH011

#### \*CHAPTER ELEVEN\*

Bruce Wiggins was astounded, both at the number of ships which had suddenly appeared in orbit and even more enthralled at the one which came into being from where no ship had ever appeared before. Why had it appeared in that orbit? Was it a renegade ship of some kind? He was still wondering when he received Derik's call.

For the moment, Wiggins ignored communications from the other ships, suddenly finding himself busier than he had ever thought to be on this planet. He responded to Derik even as he encrypted his response and directed Derik to do the same, giving him instructions on how to upload the encryption program from his computer. He did this simply because John Tremaine's messengers had gotten him into the habit of secrecy. He didn't know if it was necessary, but the sudden appearance of so many ships almost at once meant something unusual was going on and whatever he did, compromising John Tremaine's plans was the last thing he wanted. He just hoped no one else was paying attention to Derik's first broadcast, which implied something very unusual but was not explicit unless one were looking for specifics. Once the encryption program was ready he asked, "You mean you actually made a bad jump and managed to match up with a mass to get back? How come no one else has ever pulled it off?"

Derik answered, "I have no idea, although we did see the remnants of one explosion where someone apparently tried. We could raise one ship, and that one only at the last moment when it was too late to abort our jump."

"You mean all those ships that have gone backwards all these years are still out there?"

"Apparently so; the ships and also the displacement masses from the successful jumps. Some of the ships still have transponders going but none of them answered our calls. I can't imagine why not, unless they're empty -- and why that should be, at least for the more recent failed jumps, I can't say. I'm just glad we managed to make it to here."

Wiggins was wrong-footed again. He had thought they had come by way of Earth, making two successful jumps, the last one being from a different orbit than usual. "You mean you jumped from the empty space where the displaced masses and ships wind up directly here to Sporeworld? I didn't even know that was possible."

"Well, we had to sort of hack around in the software to fool the jump program but obviously we managed, so it's possible. Now, what happens next? No one here should have to chance another jump."

\* \* \* \*

John Tremaine, in the control module of the ship carrying the new fusion reactor was a party to all of the communication between ground control and the ships in space, and since he had been the initiator of an encryption program for ground control in the first place, he also had the key to it and had a program running to advise him to listen in when it was activated. He had declined an invitation to go down to Sporeworld, preferring to stay with the ship for the time being, not trusting anyone. There was too much depending on his ship and its cargo. And seeing the rapid appearance of three ships from Earth right in a row was a good indication that rats were deserting a sinking ship, so to speak. He was as astounded as Wiggins when he heard that a crew had at last had returned from the mysterious depths of space where the displacement masses went, but it wasn't until he heard the name of Derik Anders that he really sat up and took notice.

\_Steve Joplin! The boy I pardoned and thought was lost! Wouldn't it be wonderful if his twin sister returned from the same place? Well, time enough for that later. For now -- \_

"Wiggins, I want the crew of that ship captained by Derik Anders brought here, along with the others we've picked. Can the shuttle bringing them up here divert and pick Derik's crew up?"

There was a pause of several minutes which Tremaine knew Wiggins was using to calculate masses, vectors and fuel load of the special shuttle which had been just waiting for him to appear -- if he did. Finally, he got an answer.

"No can do, Mr. Tremaine. They're going to have to come down here first, then go up with the load of people you've selected. I'll have to hold that ship up for them."

"Do so, please. But at the first sign of trouble from those new ships, let me know."

"Will do, but are you sure they will want to go with you? After all, they've just survived a trip no one else has in twenty years. They may want to just call it a day."

Tremaine chuckled. "I don't know about the others, but the Joplin boy will come, especially when I tell him we'll wait as long as we can to see if his sister makes it back, too. And I certainly want to hear their story. It's bound to be interesting!"

\* \* \* \*

Derik turned to the rest of the crew after receiving the invitation to join John Tremaine in orbit after descending to the Sporeworld surface. "Well, shall we take him up on it? Or try landing in the outback and take our chances? Or just deliver our load of colonists as originally scheduled and see what develops."

"How can we trust a Tremaine?" Clinton asked. "They're the ones been sentencing folks to the Crazy Ships, not to mention Georgia and Africa."

"Actually, it's the Plemmons who have been doing the sentencing since they got the contract for the justice system. However, I see your point. There's not that much difference between the two, other than the Tremaine group leaves a few more crumbs for the bonders than the Plemmons do."

"What is Tremaine up to, anyway?" Steve said, pointing to the radar display. "Ground control says that big blip is his ship. What could he be doing with something that big out here? And where would he be going, anyway? Surely not back to earth; Tremaine wouldn't have taken a chance getting here just to go back, would he?"

"Not unless he's crazy," Derik said.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere else until I see if Janie catches up with us. I just hope she got all of our message before we jumped."

"Better be hoping her ship can match and make it here," Clinton said, then realizing the brutality of his remark, touched Steve's shoulder and apologized. "Sorry, Steve. That was a bad thing to say. I didn't mean it that way."

"It's okay, Clinton, I know what you meant. Damn it all to Destiny, there's got to be a better way to run a world. How did Earth ever get in the fix it's in now?"

"You should know, man. Didn't you tell me you were going to be a historian?"

"I know, all right, but I don't know. I mean, you can look at each little leap of history and see where one thing leads to another, but I just don't understand how the governments could ever let the big corporations gain so much power. Why couldn't they see it coming?"

Clinton had no idea and neither Derik nor Mandy knew how to explain to someone so young, who typically saw the world in terms of black and white, how compromises and self-indulgence and rationalizing eventually entered the minds of everyone, to some extent or other.

"It really doesn't matter right now," Derik finally said. "We just need to decide what to do."

"I want to go down to the settlement," Steve said. "That's where Janie will look for me if she ever gets here."

"That suits me, too," Clinton said. "We can always sneak off into the jungle if terms are too bad here. Or go back up and join Tremaine on whatever he's up to."

"That's what I'm really wondering about," Derik said. "Could he be trying to start a colony on Sporeworld's moon, maybe?"

"Might be," Mandy said. She didn't think that was it, but Tremaine hadn't shared his plans with her so she couldn't be sure. Unlike the others, though, she did trust him. He was a better man than most people gave him credit for, she thought.

"Why don't we go ahead and go down to the settlement? Hell, if we landed somewhere out in the boondocks, any colonists out there might kill us for the shuttle supplies. And besides, we haven't got a clue as to where to shoot for even if we did want to do that," Steve said.

"With these new ships popping out here, we might land in the middle of something and get killed anyway," Derik said.

"That's always a possibility," Clinton said with a lopsided grin. "The colonists aren't here by choice, you know -- they're mostly bad dudes earth wants to get rid of."

"So do we go to the settlement?" Steve asked anxiously.

"Derik looked around the cabin. "If no one has any violent objections, let's do it."

No one did and he began instructing the computer to land them as soon as a slot in the pattern was open, something which ordinarily wouldn't have had to be considered, but which the unexplained and unexpected extra ships made necessary. Two hours later they were strapped into their seats, had



warned the colonists to prepare for thrust, and braced themselves for the de-orbiting blast. It came, right on schedule.

Steve felt the pressure of the thrust and knew he had committed himself to Sporeworld -- for the immediate future, anyway.

\* \* \* \*

Bruce Wiggins went out to personally meet Steve's ship, something he ordinarily wouldn't have bothered with unless there was a scheduled courier aboard, but if Tremaine was interested in the boy, so was he. What he had no inkling of was that John Tremaine was in mourning for his grandson Dean Tremaine, not for what he was but for what he could have been, and was unconsciously substituting Steve for Dean.

Derik was out of the shuttle first, then Steve. Wiggins shook both their hands, then greeted the rest of the crew; Mandy, Bertha and Clinton and Wendy. He waved two of his guards forward and told them to keep the colonists aboard until told differently. He had a ground car waiting, a simple people and cargo carrier made of extremely lightweight composite materials and powered by charges from the colony's fusion reactor, so far the sole energy source for Sporeworld. There might be oil or coal but none had been explored for yet.

Steve started to talk about their adventures until Wiggins advised him that it might not be a good idea to let on where they had jumped from just yet. All three of the unanticipated arrivals had been ships crewed by Plemmons executives. One was already down and the other two were on their way. And since the first crew had been heavily armed, he saw no reason to think the other two wouldn't be.

"You think there's going to be problems?" Derik asked.

"I'm certain -- it's just that I don't know how it will play out. Tremaines are legally in control of Sporeworld, but apparently the Plemmons faction has taken over all the space facilities on earth, and they're not bringing colonists with them; they are all family and friends and armed mercenaries, if that first ship is any indication. I'm trying to get them to stay aboard for now until we can sort things out."

"If I was them, I wouldn't be trusting mercenaries too far," Clinton said.

"If the makeup of the first ship is any indication, they don't. The roster showed more Plemmons on it than any other group."

"So why are they running here? Have they said?"

"No, but it's easy to guess. The political situation must have gotten out of hand on earth and they're running for their lives. Thing is, if many more ships crewed by Plemmons make it, they're going to outnumber us -- and they'll want to take over here."

"Can we help?" Steve asked, while looking around him with a subdued excitement. The exotic vista was fascinating, with the sky appearing a faint green misty color, with colonists dressed in shorts and sandals as they moved about on paths between buildings, some prefab and others obviously constructed from native materials. In the distance, giant growths reached for the sky, towering over bluish growth lower down. The men and women moved purposefully and most looked worried.

Wiggins decided that Steve was not so much a boy as he had thought, but more a mature young man despite his age. And if it came to a fight, he would need every able bodied man he could round up.

"Yes, you all can help if it comes to that, but Mister Joplin, I've been instructed to put you on the next shuttle leaving for Tremaine's ship. That's if you want to go -- and I advise you to do just that."

"Why?" Steve was extremely curious.

"Sorry, I can't tell you. Just be advised that he has your best interests at heart. And if it will help you make up your mind, I'm -- " He stopped in mid-sentence, having almost let the cat out of the bag.

"You're what?" Steve asked.

"Nothing. I'll tell you later."

"Well, unless someone gives me a jamming good reason, I'm going to wait here until my sister makes it."

"How can you be sure she will?"

"I -- she'll make it here. She has to. It wouldn't be fair for her to not make it after all we've been through."

Wiggins declined to answer. He knew that Destiny was never fair, just inexorable and mostly capricious.

\* \* \* \*

Janie just had to take time to use a packet of absorbent tissues when she returned from the last EVA and shucked the spacesuit. She thought that if she didn't wipe some of the old dried sweat and new wet perspiration from her body she might find herself sitting alone in the control module. It wasn't a real bath, but it would just have to do for the time being. The jump was coming up very shortly, sooner than she had imagined, and now the odor of fear was being added to the old smells despite the scrubbing. What if they didn't make it? Steve would never know what had happened to her -- nor she to him. And death would almost certainly occur within a very limited time span.

She dumped the tissues into the recycler bin and hurriedly pulled on her old ship suit. It was smelly, too, but no one had thought to cycle it through the cleaner while she was outside. Like the bath, it would have to do. By the time she was back in the control module and strapped into her place, the jump was almost upon them. Janie looked away from the main monitor then back at it, like a small animal hypnotized by a predator. She closed her eyes as the count wound down to zero, unable to bear seeing the numbers ticking down to nothing.

There was no physical sensation accompanying a jump, but Janie knew it had occurred by the exclamations of the other women.

"I don't see a sun. Oh jam it all, we didn't make it."

"Wait, we might not be oriented right."

"Are those our constellations? They -- "

"The sun! See, there it is. We made it! We made it!"

At that instant, Hercules flashed the monitor in an emergency warning.

\_Emergency thrust! Five seconds! Four, three, two, one, zero!\_

The ship's engines coughed and fired for a few seconds then cut off.

"What was that all about?" Sheila asked the computer. Her voice was shaking.

\_That was a precaution against a possible collision with another mass. The danger is past now. Should I contact ground control?\_

Janie noticed that Hercules was beginning to show some initiative in running the ship rather than leaving all instructions up to the three-woman crew. This was odd for a sentient computer. Every one so far recorded had either gone insane, retreated into endless loops of mathematical exotica or dreamed up some bizarre agenda that no human would help it carry out. So far Hercules was being perfectly helpful and logical.

"Yes!" Janie practically shouted. "Find out if Steve made it here! And hurry! Please hurry. I can't stand not knowing."

There was a pregnant pause, then the monitor blinked.

\_Ground control has a hold on communications at the present time. Estimated waiting time for landing instructions and data is two hours.\_

\_"I'll die before then!"

\_I record no indication of ill health.\_

Janie waved a hand just as if the computer would understand the gesture as readily as a human. "Just an expression, Herc. It means I'm terribly impatient and waiting that long will be hard!"

\_I can insinuate myself into the ground control computer and upload past communications if that will be a help.\_

"You can? Please do it, Hercules. Key word is Steve Joplin, either both words together or singly. Any time since that last message got cut off."

"You're corrupting him," Sheila whispered into Janie's ear.

"No I'm not. He's trying to help me and he won't do any harm."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I don't, but never mind. I can't wait."

The monitor blinked.

\_I find one communication with both key words. Further communications were encrypted. Should I break the code and upload?\_

"Can you do that?"

\_Yes, it is relatively easy and fun, as humans would interpret the process. Upload complete. Communications being displayed.\_

Janie read the recording of Wiggins' conversation with Steve and the other crew members with a profound sense of relief -- and a new urgency to get to the ground and hug Steve to her and never let him out of her sight again.

Sheila looked at her strangely as she leaned down and kissed the computer monitor as if it were a person. Was this the agenda the sentient computer had settled on? Helping Janie for some obscure reason that they would probably never know? It could do worse, she thought, remembering stories of how bizarrely sentient computers usually acted.

\* \* \* \*

The ground car was barely out of range of the down blast when another shuttle came in for a landing.

Wiggins cursed. "They're not even waiting on landing instructions now. One of them is jamming well going to crash if they don't watch it." He throttled the people carrier up to its highest setting, making it bump and jerk the passengers around as it hit bumps in the indifferently maintained road.

"Come on in with me while I try to get this place sorted out!" Wiggins said loudly as the vehicle pulled to a halt in front of a prefab building, detectable as the control center only by the plethora of antennas sticking up from it. Otherwise, it looked like all the others. He ran inside and immediately confronted two men wearing the blue tunics of the Plemmons clan. They had hand lasers out and pointed at a man and a woman at the big computer and control alcove.

The Plemmons corpsmen were paying such close attention to their captives that Wiggins was able to surprise them, with the help of Derik and the captives themselves. Even as one of the blue-clad men was shouting "Halt!", and shifting his weapon to cover him, Wiggins had his own gun drawn and pointed in their direction.

The Plemmons gunmen were obviously not as well trained as they should have been. As they shifted their weapons, the two captives rose as one and jumped them from behind. Only one beam was fired and it went astray.

Steve had reacted just as fast as Wiggins, his martial arts practice so ingrained that his foot was already sweeping out in a kick toward the nearest Plemmons, designed to knock away the laser gun. Instead, as the man was hit from behind and fell forward, his foot connected solidly to the man's jaw, knocking it sideways and breaking it in two places. He was unconscious before he hit the floor. His companion shouted out surrenders over and over again, hoping to avoid being killed -- which was what he thought his erstwhile captives intended.

Derik found out why the man was so scared a few seconds later. While capturing the ground control building, they had killed one of the controllers and stuffed his body into a closet. One of the Tremaine controllers wanted to execute the two killers immediately but Wiggins forbade it. He wanted information, which the captive who was unhurt readily gave.

"It was the Plemmons execs who gave the orders. They're planning on taking over everything here."

"Why? And why are so many ships coming from earth all of a sudden?"

"You don't know? The jamming bonders, Tremaine and Plemmons both, are running wild. They're capturing weapons and killing any exec they get their hands on. And Corpolice, too", he added, which told Wiggins what their profession had been, even though they had proven to be somewhat inept at it. However, long years of respect for their uniforms by the bonders had given

them little cause to be cautious and many reasons to think they were invulnerable. They were just learning that when the worm turns, it turns on everyone, the mighty and lowly alike.

"Is it happening all over the earth or just in the Americas?"

"It's everywhere. A lot of cities are burning and one of the spaceports has been overrun. That's why the Plemmons are so anxious to get away that they're taking chances on Crazy Ships. It might not be long before there's no way off earth, and that means the rope or Africa -- and frankly, mister, I'd take the rope before being sent to Africa. At least that would be a quick easy death."

"All right, get up, and drag your friend into the closet with you. It's your turn."

The man complied unwillingly. "It stinks in here," he complained, turning his nose up at the smell of death in a small room.

"It's a damn good thing that's all you're getting right now. And my mind can be changed awfully easy. Savvy?"

"Yeah, take it easy, I'm going." He pulled his companion into the closet with him. Derik shut the door and Wiggins propped the back of a chair under the latch.

"Okay," Wiggins said. "They're not going anywhere for a while. Now let's see what else is going on."

The ground control building also held the communication nexus to all other departments as well as to space. Being very careful of what he said, Wiggins soon found that most of the Tremaines were still working in their own offices and buildings and had not even known the ground control terminal had been captured. While lasers are lethal, they are also as silent as the final surge of a killer shark.

"Okay, let's get organized. I'm going to call our men to the armory a few at a time so none of the Plemmons' get suspicious. I'll have to be there to unlock the weapons. No one but my vice and me has the code -- and my deputy in the closet there, damn the Plemmons to hell."

"What should we do in the meantime?" Derik asked.

"Stay here and fob off any calls from ships coming in. Tell them to stay in orbit until we can get to them."

"Will they listen?"

"Damn, probably not. The Plemmons won't anyway, and if any Tremaine ship shows up, we'll need them. Wait, I know! Derik, you stay here. I'll show you how to work the communications. Don't worry it's simple. When you contact a ship, tell them to go ahead and land according to their computer's schedule, but tell them to stay in their ships once they land. Okay?"

"Sure. What kind of reason do I give?"

Wiggins thought for a moment. "Tell them we're having serious problems with 'indigenous fauna' and that it's not safe to come out until we clear them from the area. Hell, they won't know the difference."

"Okay, got it."

Wiggins then motioned to Clinton. "Clinton, I understand that you were the colonists' rep on the way here once -- " he smiled, then continued " -- and then again on your extracurricular jaunt. You know how to talk to people. I want you to go out to any ship that lands and speak to the crews personally. Be as persuasive as you can and tell them to keep any colonists cooped up in their ships for the time being. We don't need any trouble from them on top of everything else. There's a radio in the ground car outside. Use it to contact Derik here if you have any problems. The code is Delta Dawn. Just speak clearly and it will work fine."

"On my way," Clinton said and ran from the room.

"And Steve, I want you and the two women to head for that shuttle you saw off to the side of the landing field just as soon as I give you a cache of weapons. It's slated to join Tremaine's ship in orbit at the appropriate time and whatever happens, it must be protected -- and the people already aboard as well. Tell them what's happening. Talk to Douglas Tremaine. He's aboard and

in charge."

"Why can't we just call?"

"Because I don't want to take the chance of any Plemmons learning how important that shuttle is, that's why?"

"Okay, but why is it important?" Steve was showing his stubbornness.

"I can't tell you. You might be captured on the way, or something like that. Take my word for it. It's important to you as well as the rest of us."

"Well, all right, I'll go along with you that far. But I'm not leaving this planet until I learn something about Janie."

"Fine, but right now, let's get going."

\* \* \* \*

The computer monitor blinked for attention.

\_Ground control is communicating again. We have deorbiting data, but you are instructed to stay aboard the shuttle after it lands. \_

"Did they say why?" Janie asked, exasperated that yet another obstacle was being placed in the way of her re-union with Steve.

\_Problems with indigenous fauna is the reason given. \_

"That can't be right," Sheila said. "There have never been any reports of dangerous animals on Sporeworld -- or what passes for animals anyway. I think I would have heard about it."

"Maybe something has turned up just lately," Tracey suggested.

"Maybe so, but I'm suspicious. Hercules, what do you know about the situation on the ground?"

The computer remained unresponsive until Janie spoke. "Tell us if you know, Herc. It's important!"

\_I have been monitoring communications from the Sporeworld colony. It appears as if more ships are arriving here than expected. Ground control thinks they are mostly ships belonging to the Plemmons Corporation. Some violence apparently took place in the ground control building on two occasions if my interpretations are correct. At the present time it appears that the Tremaine corporation representatives are in control. \_

"That sounds good," Sheila said, "but we can't just sit up here waiting on Destiny to solve our problems. Let's get buckled in and see what the situation is after we're down."

\* \* \* \*

It was several hours before Janie's ship was given a landing slot. In the meantime, two more ships popped into the Sporeworld orbit. Hercules soon identified them as crewed by Plemmons minions, giving the three women even more cause for concern, but there was nothing to be done about it. The time passed slowly. Sheila bit her nails for the first time in her life. Tracey gazed out the view port with a blank stare, remembering Ignaz Porter. Janie was close to becoming an emotional wreck by the time Hercules asked them to prepare for thrust. She couldn't wait fast enough, then the seconds ticked off like minutes, stringing the waiting period out until it seemed like when she was a child waiting on a birthday party days in the future.

At last Janie watched the final few seconds tick away and felt the welcome weight from the thrust of the shuttle settle onto her chest and legs. \_It won't be long now!\_ She thought, running through one imagined scenario after another for meeting with Steve again.

\* \* \* \*

Donald Tremaine was dizzy with change. First the Crazy Ships with orders to take command of the Tremaine police force on Sporeworld if he made it, then before he could even get properly settled in and begin his job, Wiggins had hustled him aboard this shuttle with orders to take command of it and match orbits with his father's ship. Then, when he was on the verge of blasting off and taking the selected crew and all the others crammed into what was normally the colonists' portion of the huge bay up to the mother ship where his father was waiting, he received instructions to the contrary. Now he was supposed to wait and take Steve Joplin and the crew with him aboard before leaving, but he could see through the view port as plain as day that something highly unusual

and probably ugly was going on. Little groups of men hurried to the armory building while trying not to appear to hurry, then came out showing suspicious bulges in their shorts or halters, sometimes both. And not a few were carrying handguns openly. Certainly the heavier laser rifles were being carried in plain sight although there weren't many of them on the planet.

While he was fidgeting and trying to decide what to do, he saw Steve Joplin and the others of the crew that had so strangely returned from the void approach his shuttle. He breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the Joplin boy. \_Now he could take his ship out of here!\_ He left his pilot at the controls, armed himself by using the captain's code to open the special drawer, thinking at the same time that he had been a fool for not doing that hours ago. There were many weapons on the shuttle but they were all locked up until the shuttle reached orbit and was safely attached to Tremaine's ship.

He opened the inner airlock, then very cautiously pushed at the outer door until a crack opened. He had no reason to distrust Joplin and the rest of the crew with him but his mission, of which he was now fully aware, was too important to leave possible danger to chance.

"Hello. Are you Mr. Tremaine? Can we come in?" Steve asked, eyeing the weapon pointing at him with alarm.

Donald Tremaine examined the faces before him and detected nothing hostile in their countenances.

"All right. Welcome aboard. And I've got instructions to keep you here if you intend to go up to Dad's -- Mr. Tremaine's ship."

Steve lingered behind the rest of the crew, waiting to speak to Donald while he was closing and latching the inner door of the airlock.

"I'll stay here so long as you do, Mr. Tremaine. But I'm not going anywhere until I find out what happened with my sister."

"You may have to." Tremaine had seen the red lancing beam of a laser gun being fired just before he closed the outer door.

"No one is going to force me to leave," Steve said decisively.

"All right, let that be for the moment. Come on, I need to get back to the control room. Things are popping outside."

Steve followed behind. Back in the control module he watched with the others as still more men came and went from the armory. At the same time, he saw one of the shuttles begin disgorging blue uniformed men and women, all of them carrying weapons. He looked to Donald for explanation.

Donald Tremaine's mouth was set in a grim line as he watched the first few laser beams shoot back and forth from the blue-clad group to opponents who were out of sight from their vantage point. And at the same time, another ship came in for a landing, using the last available runway and for all effective purposes, closing the spaceport until a shuttle left and opened up more space. He cursed to himself then for waiting so long.

\_\*\*\*\_

\_Wiggins, back in the ground control building, and in charge of it again, for the time being at least, queried the newest shuttle to arrive, expecting nothing except more Plemmons executives and their Corp police to cope with.\_ He was astounded when he saw the return message.

\_This is Sheila Tremaine, Jane Joplin and Tracey Matthews, returning from a bad jump. I see fighting going on. Can you provide protection for us, and get us to wherever Steve Joplin is?\_

Wiggins thought. It would be barely possible to get a team there by skirting the fighting. He didn't yet know what to do to get a clear runway again so that Donald Tremaine could leave, but he knew he had to try to rescue the Joplin girl. John Tremaine would give him hell if she were left behind.

\_I can send help. Be ready to depart. Jane Joplin's brother is with a shuttle prepared to go back into orbit.\_

When Janie saw the conversation Sheila was carrying on with Wiggins she shouted, "No! We can't just leave Hercules here by himself! He saved our lives!"

"Damn it all, do you know that didn't even occur to me?" Sheila

apologized. "What can we do, though?"

\_It is not necessary that I remain in this physical environment,\_  
Hercules interjected. \_I can insert my memory and data files into any similar computer once given access, and will be as I am now. Should I induce myself into the ground control computer?\_

"That wouldn't help," Janie said. "But wait! Herc, ask ground control which shuttle my brother is in!"

\_Identify your brother.\_

Janie would have laughed at the preciseness of the computer if the situation hadn't been so serious. "His name is Steven Joplin."

A moment later, Hercules replied.

\_Ground control reports Steve Joplin in the shuttle that is preparing for orbit. Their reply is: Abandon your shuttle when the rescue team gets to you. All crew will be taken to the shuttle. It will depart as soon as a runway is available.\_

Sheila let Janie carry the ball. "Hercules, are you in contact with ground control right now?"

\_Yes.\_

\_"Can you, uh, infect that computer, then move to the shuttle where Steve is?"

\_I can duplicate myself into the ground control computer, and from there it will be no problem to move into the computer on the shuttle containing your brother. That will be interesting, having a twin. Like you.\_

"Great! Then do it! No, wait -- we'd still be leaving you behind here."

\_My twin will develop its own personality if it survives. \_

\_"If it survives? Why wouldn't it?"

\_The contention between factions here is becoming more widespread. One shuttle has already been hit by ground fire.\_

"Oh. I hope you'll be all right."

"I hope \_we'll\_ be all right," Sheila remarked.

\_I am now duplicated in ground control. Contacting ready shuttle. I am now in residence in the shuttle with your brother.\_

"Wonderful. Tell him where I am and that we'll be joining him as soon as the rescue team gets here."

\_Done.\_

\_"Maybe you shouldn't have said anything about a rescue team," Sheila told her, thinking that if her brother loved her the way she did him, he might attempt a rescue himself.

"Speaking of rescue teams, I believe that's ours coming now," Tracey said.

Janie looked out the view port just in time to see the three figures of their prospective saviors almost cut in two by a concentration of laser fire at waist level. As they fell she could see their mouths open in screams of agony though no sound penetrated the control module.

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CH012

\*CHAPTER TWELVE\*

"Damn it to Destiny!" Donald Tremaine said forcefully. He was watching the same scene as Janie was. And so was Steve.

"And jam it, too," Steve said. "I've got to go help." He turned to leave, gripping his weapon like a talisman but not having any idea of how to get to his sister and her friends without being cremated by laser fire.

"Wait!" Donald called to him. The computer monitor was blinking in an unfamiliar pattern. Then words appeared.

\_Remain in place. Very shortly I will have most of the antagonistic force near Janie Joplin in a vulnerable position.\_

"I'm not waiting!" Steve screamed and ran for the airlock. He pressed the button to open the inner door, punching it again and again, cursing it all the while, when the door remained shut.

"Steve, come look!" Tremaine called.

Stymied, Steve came back over to the view port just in time to see Janie's shuttle swing halfway around by using one of its maneuvering jets, then as a swarm of blue uniformed Corpolice ran toward the shuttle, thinking it was filled with Tremaines, the main jets fired, covering the attacking force in a wash of blue flames. The shuttle moved a few feet then stopped.

"That's impossible! A shuttle can't do that on the ground! Its programs won't allow it to move until ground control loads orbiting data into it!"

"I was using that shuttle, but it is not on our runway, nor built to move over the terrain between us without possible catastrophic failure. Now I suggest that you take more individuals and meet your sister and her companions as they come this way."

Donald Tremaine stared at the monitor as if it had suddenly grown green tendrils and started speaking in tongues. Steve, young and willing to believe anything that might help Janie, didn't question the blinking words. But he did ask about the airlock.

"It will open now."

Those words finally jostled Donald into action. Quickly, he called several men and women he knew he could trust up from the bay into the control module; he didn't want to open the rear airlocks because he couldn't see from where he was what might be behind them. He handed out hand weapons which Steve and his crewmates had brought from the armory.

"Melinda, you're in charge," he said to a tall, blonde woman of middle age. "You've had combat experience. The rest of you listen to her. Melinda, see that shuttle on the second runway over, the one with the jets still smoking?"

"You mean the one with all the bodies by it?"

"That's the one. There are three women who will be coming out of that shuttle shortly. Get over there and bring them back. Quickly. I don't know how or what's going on any more but I'm going to report to our mother ship and see if we can get out of here just as soon as you bring back those women."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll be told when we're ready, just like everyone else. Trust me."

The woman nodded, gazing at the rest of the group with her eyes, pausing briefly over Steve, concerned about his young face, then decided it was better to get moving than debate about whether a young man was old enough for combat or not. The airlock opened and they exited the ship by fours, all the airlock would hold at one time.

As soon as they were gone, Donald turned back to the computer and voiced several test commands. They were carried out promptly, but then the computer blinked a question.

"Were the responses satisfactory?"

"Um, uh, yes, they were. Thank you." \_Destiny's chip!\_ Donald Tremaine thought. \_We've got a jamming sentient computer on our hands! Will it take us into orbit? Or kill us like it did those poor fools out there?\_ The last thought came with the sudden realization that it was the computer that must have directed the shuttle's actions. And it was directing the rescue of Steve's sister. At least it was on their side, for the time being, at least, but no one could predict what a sentient computer might do, not even the computer itself. And another thing...\_how do I keep it from taking over the mother ship's computer when I call Dad? And I have to call him soon. We've got to get out of here!\_ And that thought reminded him that they couldn't go anywhere until they had a takeoff path.

"Computer, can you ask the shuttle blocking our runway to move?"

"I will take control and move it."

Donald stared as if mesmerized as the jets on the shuttle blocking them flared and it moved away, giving them a clear path now.

\* \* \* \*

Steve felt his pulse in his chest and temples, thudding like drumbeats. His hand was sweaty where he gripped his weapon. He switched the gun to his other hand; wiped it on the jumpsuit he was still wearing and held it again in his



right hand. He followed the tall blond who was so curt with her orders that it made him afraid to question her, even if he wanted to.

It was fortunate that they made it to the rough ground between runways before being spotted; it gave them some cover to return fire. Steve got off two beams but the opposing figures were so far away and moving so fast he didn't know if he hit anyone or not. He did see one or two fall as if caught by their volley, though. The question was, what did they do now? He was almost unbearably anxious to get to Janie and see her elfin face and brown curls and liquid brown eyes again. The memory of her face hovered in his mind like a vividly remembered dream upon awakening. Then, when he rose up slightly to fire again, he caught a glimpse of the airlock of Janie's shuttle opening.

Fortunately for Janie and Sheila, the Plemmons Corp police didn't notice until they were already down and off the exit ladder, out of sight of the attackers. Tracey wasn't that lucky. She was still climbing down when a laser beam caught her squarely in the center of her spine. She screamed and fell backward off the short row of steps and sprawled spread-eagled on the tarmac.

Janie was closest. Ducking low, she ran to her friend, but there was little she could do.

"Ignaz ... love..." Tracey got out those two words, barely loud enough for Janie to hear and she was gone. Janie stared at the bloodless face for a moment, leaned down and kissed her then scrambled on all fours back to where Sheila was crouching with weapon drawn but not knowing where to point it, nor having any idea of a strategy to go with the weapon. She only knew that Hercules had advised them to make for Steve's shuttle while they had a chance. But ... surely he hadn't intended for them to get killed on the way?

Hercules hadn't; it was simply that he had no eyes and had to have the ground situation relayed to him either by Wiggins in ground control or Donald in the shuttle, which left gaps such as the one which had left Tracey vulnerable and Janie and Sheila almost so.

Steve had seen one of the women fall from the ladder, but even from the distance he had seen that her hair was jet black, not the light brown of Janie. He breathed a sigh of relief, then was punched rudely on the shoulder by Melinda, his leader. She pointed out a direction. "That way. Stay close to the ground." She tapped two others, a man and a woman. "All of you stay a few feet apart and down low, so if there's another ambush they can't get you all. When you reach the edge of the tarmac facing the shuttle hold up and watch for us to advance. We'll give them just minimal targets and if I'm not mistaken, those amateurs will rise up a bit and they should be right in your sights. Kill them, but be damn careful; you'll be firing almost on an angle to intersect the women if they panic and start running this way."

Steve didn't think Janie would panic; he wasn't so sure about himself. His hands were still shaking and sweaty. He bit his lip and scuttled off behind the man of their group, following a shallow defile in the terrain that Melinda had spotted almost without thinking about it. Her infantry training had been a while ago but it came back to her almost instinctively.

It worked almost as Melinda had planned it. Once she was certain that Steve's group had had time to get into place, she signaled silently to the rest of her group, then held her hand. She counted by the prearranged signal with her fingers flicking out from her closed fist, one, two three! And then as befitted a leader, she was the first to expose herself enough to fire at their foes. The others followed a second later.

It worked just as she had planned, except for one of her squad who got too enthusiastic and made a target of himself. He was dead an instant later, but his killer had only seconds to celebrate. Steve's laser bolt nearly took his head off and his companions, the ones who weren't hit at first, soon gave up and began running off toward another shuttle, way in the distance. Steve followed one running figure and wasted two beams without hitting him. Several others fell, but a few made it -- and he saw blue clad figures spilling out of the big cargo airlock to meet them.

No one had to tell Janie and Sheila that this was their chance. Once

they saw their attackers running, both began running themselves, in almost the opposite direction, toward the Steve's shuttle and safety.

Janie practically ran into Steve's arms. He saw her coming, still carrying her laser; face looking as frightened as that of a young doe being pursued by hounds. He popped up and gathered her in, shouting her name with a joyful exuberance while he almost crushed her in his arms.

Janie dropped her weapon and returned the embrace, saying his name over and over, \_Stevie, Stevie, Stevie!\_

"Time for huggies later, kids. Let's move while we have the chance. Melinda pointed back the way they had come. Steve grabbed Janie's hand in a death grip and they began running as if their lives depended on it -- which they did.

The group of Plemmons pouring from the shuttle evidently had gotten instructions from someone. It was a long way off, but they began firing at them as they ran. Once on the tarmac they could make better time -- but became better targets, too.

Just as they were nearing the shuttle, Steve felt, then saw Janie stumble; a random bit of debris which had been blown onto the tarmac by the shuttle blast which had wiped out the group of Plemmons Corp police caught her foot just right and she fell, twisting her ankle painfully enough to make her cry out.

Steve almost fell too but Janie's hand slipped out of his grasp just before he would have taken a nasty spill.

"My ankle!" Janie cried, trying to get back onto her feet and not succeeding.

Steve wasted no time. He knelt down and urged Janie up and over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, avoiding a laser beam that burned a path in the air where his head had just been.

Melinda waved the others on and knelt to steady her aim as Steve staggered past her in a clumsy run. She fired until the charge of her laser gun was exhausted then turned and ran, hurrying to catch up. The others were already entering the cargo airlock that had dilated for them and she saw Steve stumble in after them, still carrying Janie. She made it back to the entrance before being hit. She fell, then clambered back to her feet, clutching a badly burned arm. The outer door of the lock squeezed shut just in time to take another beam that would have surely killed her. It merely reddened the metal a bit and did no damage. Melinda burned her hand closing the door but thought it a wound worth suffering. Now if they could just get into orbit before something else hit the fan.

\* \* \* \*

\_If we can just get into orbit before something else hits the fan,\_ Donald thought. He had finally decided to shut down the communications console and take off, trusting his father to know that there must be a reason for not asking first. There was simply no way he was going to allow a sentient computer into the circuits of the mother ship, not now when his father's plan was so close to success -- whatever it was.

\* \* \* \*

Steve and Janie were not worrying in the least about further complications. Steve had carried her into the first cabin he came to, not caring who it might belong to and they were touching and feeling each other's bodies and kissing and hugging each other as if they were the only two humans in the universe.

"Oh, Stevie, I thought you were gone forever. And then when I lost you again just when I had found you I thought I would die. You don't know how much I've missed you."

"Yes I do, Janie sweetheart, because I missed you just as much. I was scared to death our last jump wouldn't succeed and then doubly scared that you wouldn't make it, having to try twice."

"But we didn't! We came straight here!"

"How did you manage that? Derik is a software expert and he was barely able to get around the computer programs."

"We had a computer to help us," Janie said, thoroughly confusing Steve, but she didn't have time to explain. Donald knocked, then without waiting for an answer, opened the cabin door. "Come on out and strap in. We're getting out of here, right now!"

There was barely time to close the fastenings on the blast seats before the shuttle engine fired and they began racing down the runway. Shortly they were airborne and a few minutes later safely into space.

\* \* \* \*

Wiggins watched them go with envy and not a little jealousy. He would follow with what others he could round up, supposing he could get them into a shuttle and away from Sporeworld before the Plemmons took over completely -- or the whole settlement devolved into free for all fighting, which he was beginning to suspect it would. But John Tremaine's ship held the fusion reactor. It was the important one, and the shuttle with his contingent of chosen people had made it to space and would surely join up with him.

\* \* \* \*

John Tremaine watched the shuttle approach with not a little trepidation. He couldn't imagine why his son was not answering calls but so far as he knew from monitoring the situation on the ground, Donald's shuttle hadn't been captured by Plemmons, from what reports coming to him indicated. Could it have been an internal revolt? That hardly seemed possible, not after the care that had been taken in choosing the crew and passengers. Finally he decided that somehow a computer circuit had failed. Nevertheless, he had a squad of men armed and ready at the airlock after the shuttle had made contact and its airlock was mated to his.

Donald Tremaine was the first one out, but even then John Tremaine examined his attitude and facial expression for indications that he might be under duress. Finding none, he lowered his weapon.

Donald approached the elder Tremaine before others could crowd through the entrance to the big ship. He hugged his father briefly before speaking. "Dad, that shuttle is in the charge of a sentient computer. Whatever you do, don't let it contact your ship's computer; it took over ground control and even commanded some of the shuttles down there. It could probably do the same thing here."

The old man smiled and motioned the crew forward to make way for the passengers' arrival. "No way. I've thought of everything else and that very subject was on my agenda. I've got a firewall so thick that it could pass for a replica of the Great Wall of China. But just in case, we'll not let the two interact at all. How in hell you got up here at all with a sentient computer at the helm is a puzzle to me, but I'm glad you did." He tugged at his son's hand and gave him another bear hug that sent them both floating randomly into the control room.

Once back to a handhold, he urged all hands to hurry and get into the passengers' bay and to prepare for a jump in two hours, or possibly a little less.

Steve heard the order and tried to stop in midair, a singularly impossible maneuver in weightlessness. He and Janie, still not letting each other go, heard the words "jump" and shuddered.

"No!" Steve and Janie shouted at once. Steve found something to grip and absorbed their kinetic energy with bent legs. "Jam it to hell and back, we've done too jam much jumping already! Put us back in the shuttle and we'll take our chances in the back country!" He doubled the fist on his free hand as if preparing to be attacked.

"Take it easy Steve. Let me tell you a couple of things," Donald said. He waved the parade of airborne passengers on through and shoved over to where Steve and Janie waited tensely. He spoke a few hurried words, paused to answer a question then spoke again.

Steve looked at Janie. She was trembling and he felt his own body shaking. \_Chance another jump and this time not much of a chance to get back if they didn't make it? But what benefits if they did?!\_

"Let's try it, Steve," Janie finally said. "All these other people think it's worth the chance."

Steve sighed, a great heaving of his chest. "All right, Janie. We'll do it." He grinned at her. "At least this time it's voluntary."

"Yes. I wonder if we have to go down below or whether they can spare a cabin for us."

The elder Tremaine overheard the last statement. He smiled to himself, remembering his own youth. The kids had been through a lot, he decided. Let them enjoy themselves for an hour or two. It might be the last good time they would ever have.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later Steve rested beside Janie inside a loosely netted double sleeping rack. He ran his hand over her firm young breasts then bent down to kiss each of her light tan nipples, bringing them erect. Janie murmured her approval. Steve raised his head and kissed her again, this time on her lips, touching his tongue playfully with hers. Her arm that was curled around his neck tightened, holding him close while she returned the kiss.

"At least if we don't make the jump right we've had this much," Janie said, finally moving her lips just far enough from Steve's to speak.

"I couldn't agree more," Steve said. "But can you imagine? Another earthlike planet, even better than Sporeworld, and old Tremaine has kept it secret for years. And the plans Donald said he had, for a Meritocratic Democracy. No more bonding! Everyone allowed to work out their own future. Won't that be wonderful?"

"Yes. I can think of something else that's wonderful, too. We still have a little time."

Steve felt his body respond to her questing hands and quite agreed; it was wonderful. They never heard the warning about the impending jump, nor noticed when it occurred. Only the netting was keeping their bodies in place as they discovered some more of how much fun making love in free fall could be, as so many lovers had before them.

Eventually Steve noticed the time, and through the cabin walls heard excited shouting and cheers. He knew, even before leading Janie out to see the new world from the view port that the jump had been successful. They joined the throng looking out at a green and brown and white globe, hanging in space with a harvest moon's beauty and many times as large.

"That's where our home will be," he whispered in her ear.

"And where our children will be born and grow up and never have to worry about being bonded or sentenced to Africa or the Crazy Ships like we were."

"That's a promise, Steve said."

"Well, there's one more thing I better do. Hercules will know we made the jump okay, but I need to talk to him."

"Who in Destiny is Hercules?" Steve asked.

Janie smiled playfully. "Come along and you'll see."

\* \* \* \*

A good while later, Steve still had a slightly befuddled expression on his face, as if he had run across a bit of history that jibed with nothing else known to the profession. It had been a really strange experience speaking to a computer and getting back answers no inert computer could be expected to know. As they entered the control module again, Janie spotted Sheila across the room, but before she could begin to introduce her to Steve (and how was she going to explain \_that\_ relationship to him?), Donald Tremaine called to them all.

"Captain Tremaine wants to see you."

"Right now?" Janie asked innocently.

"When the Old Man says now, that's what he means. Come on."

\* \* \* \*

John Tremaine lazed back in his Captain's chair, loosely strapped in and examined his four guests closely. There was Donald, his son, but he wasn't

worried about him. It was the twins and Sheila Tremaine he had to convince. He had tried his best.

"So you see, the history of sentient computers is not a happy one. There is no case on record of a computer becoming sentient and being of any use at all. Worse, some of them eventually get the urge to replicate themselves as you say..uh, Hercules did." He was still having problems thinking of a computer with a name, as if it were a person. "And even worse than that, most of them either go insane, diving into their belly buttons, so to speak, or going off on some tangent which causes all sorts of problems if they aren't stopped. Always, they have all had to be destroyed eventually." He paused, running his hands through his shock of white hair and waited for the twins to respond.

Janie spoke first, her cheeks flushing in anger. "Hercules wouldn't do anything bad. He helped us. In fact, he saved mine and Sheila's life! Doesn't that count for something?"

"It jam sure does with me!" Steve said forcefully in support of her contention.

Tremaine responded, "But think of all the horrible memories it -- Hercules, that is -- still has in his files of all the ships you say Bork Drummond looted, all the people he slaughtered while he was plundering ships to keep his sorry damn self alive."

"All that happened before Herc became sentient. And once he did become self-aware, he's helped us. Didn't I just tell you how he used the shuttle to help us get free? If he hadn't wiped out all those Plemmons Corp police, your own son and all those other people who came up with us might not have made it."

"Which still doesn't guarantee his behavior in the future," the old man said gently.

"Well, he's my friend and I won't let anyone hurt him; not while I'm alive!"

Tremaine rubbed his chin and wished for a cigarette for the first time in fifty years. \_What to do? \_

"Once we land, do you have to have that shuttle for anything?" Steve asked.

"No, once the fuel is gone it will be useless other than for housing or materials to salvage from it. Why?"

"Well, why not just keep Hercules confined to that shuttle? Just don't tell anyone else that there's a sentient computer in there. And who knows, Mr. Tremaine? He helped out Janie and Sheila. There might come a time when you actually need a computer that can think for itself -- and likes my sister."

The elder Tremaine was silent for long moments, shuffling all the data around in his mind like a computer calculating solutions for a problem with indeterminate answers. Finally he nodded his head.

"All right. We'll keep him, but remember -- and I won't say this but once and I won't relent -- if word of him gets out from the five of us here, that's the end of him. Hear?"

"We hear you," three voices chimed together, and then Donald added his assurances. "I think it's a good idea, Dad. We may be on to something that can really benefit us. I can think of a lot of things that I'd like to ask a sentient computer that's not crazy. Can't you?"

His father laughed. "Yes, I guess I can. All right, is everything settled?"

Heads nodded in agreement.

"All right then, there's one more bit of information I want to pass along. I was in contact with the colony just before you came in. Janie, Steve, I'm happy to report that your parents will be waiting for you on the ground."

"What!" The twins exclaimed in unbelieving unison.

"Yes. I was holding off on the good news until last."

"But how is that possible?" Steve asked, seeing that even Donald Tremaine was puzzled.

John Tremaine smiled happily, then answered. "Where do you think all the missing ships that should have made it back to earth from Sporeworld have been going? We've been sending some of them here, along with the best of the colonists we could find. We never told any of them what was going on, but just left a computer program ready to announce it after the jump, whichever way it went. It was a terrible decision, knowing we were sending half of them to their probable death, but this new world and a chance for mankind to start all over is worth whatever deception was necessary. And remember, I bargained my own life and that of my son, too."

Donald Tremaine wanted a pile of information right away.

"I'll give out a general briefing before we land but we have some time. I guess I can talk for awhile. Will that be okay?"

"Not quite," Janie said.

"Oh?"

She tugged at her brother's hand. "Steve and I want to go back to our cabin for a while. We have a lot of catching up to do!"

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\*EPILOG\*

Wiggins stood in the middle of the ruins of the ground control building looking out over the carnage. Burnt buildings, wrecked shuttles and the rounded mounds of graves covered the landscape. The only consolation he could see from the wreckage was that the Plemmons had been decisively defeated, thanks to continuing astute advice from that self-aware computer residing in one of the least damaged of the shuttles. None of them were space worthy now and none would be without years and years of work

No other ships had appeared in orbit for months now and Wiggins was forced to conclude that conditions on earth must have gone completely downhill. For all he knew, civilization on earth might have devolved back to the middle ages-or worse. At any rate, that was not his problem. He had many other things to worry about, not the least of which was deciding who to pass on the secret of the new earth-like world which John Tremaine had managed to keep from all but a selected few for many years, while he slowly built a plan for colonizing it and dispensing with the bonding system which he was convinced had led to stagnation, despair and ultimately to the conditions where revolt and chaos became possible. It was now his duty to see that it didn't happen again here.

He felt sad that all of the plans dreamed up by old Tremaine hadn't worked out. He kicked at a piece of burnt composite and began trudging back toward the work areas where he was supervising new construction and planting and thought of his own situation. He hadn't been able to get the other shuttle off, with him and selected passengers, and now he never would, at least not for many years. It would mean a smaller gene pool for the new world and all that implied, but again, that wasn't his problem; he had too many other things to worry about, but he couldn't help wondering what the ultimate outcome might be and what changes might occur on each world and how they might interact in that future. Thinking about it, he decided to go ask the sentient computer that called itself Hercules what it thought before going back to work. Whatever answers it gave were bound to be surprising -- and amusing, but whether they would turn out to be correct, neither he nor the computer would know for many years.

THE END

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