

# **TUM PAINE MARU**

**L. NEIL SMITH**

**PHOENIX PICK**

*an imprint of*



Rockville, Maryland

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ISBN: 978-1-60450-260-2

**www.PhoenixPick.com**  
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Published by Phoenix Pick  
*an imprint of Arc Manor*  
P. O. Box 10339  
Rockville, MD 20849-0339  
[www.ArcManor.com](http://www.ArcManor.com)

Printed in the United States of America / United Kingdom

For Cathy, my Butterfly Princess



I would also like to thank those who made the 2005 e-edition possible, beginning with Ken Holder, its publisher, “cyberarcheologist” William Stone, whose intrepidity unearthed it from a tomb of obsolete software, Scott Bieser, more and more my good right arm in creative exercises, my wife Cathy and my daughter Rylla who suffered through my cranky absent mindedness, and Jeff Barzyk, who rescued me on the very last day of the rewrite.



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## ***A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR***

*TOM PAINE MARU* was intended to be my first “big” novel, with twists, subplots, otherwise admirable characters working to cross purposes, and all that there kinda literary stuff. It also contained my ideas about why so many people struggle to gain and keep power, and why others (or sometimes even the same people) bow down to it. I also tried to make sure that it had “enough sex and violence to satisfy even the most apolitical reader”, but the book was badly cut by its first publisher, and languished until it fell out of print.

For a short time, after a kind friend painfully extracted it from WordStar 3.0 for CP/M in which I’d written it, I tried to make it available to readers through my website as an e-book, but that never really quite worked out. To proclaim I’m delighted that it’s now being offered by Arc Manor would be an understatement.

So here’s *\_Tom Paine Maru\_*, fully restored to the novel I meant it to be, and readers may judge for themselves whether my theories encumber or enhance it. I only hope that they enjoy reading it as much as I enjoy seeing it in print again.

*L. Neil Smith*

FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

AUGUST, 2008





## **PROLOGUE: ASPERANCE DOWN**

A SOFT, FRAGRANT wind heralded the coming of darkness. It brought with it the distant murmur of thunder.

*“Asperance Re-entry Command to Lifeshell Four, come in?”*

Silence.

*“Asperance Re-entry Command to Lifeshell Five, come in?”*

The radio operator’s pleas were rewarded only with an empty static crackle. Eyes streaming, he backed away from the flames as the breeze shifted suddenly in my direction. What is it they say about smoke following beauty?

Beside him, standing over the smoky fire, the Lieutenant shivered, thrust his hands in the pockets of his uniform, demanding impatiently, “Any luck at all?”

Still coughing, the operator looked up from where he squatted, trying to coax a signal from the unit in his hand while heating a can of emergency rations at the same time. The expedition’s cook—along with most of our supplies—had been aboard the missing Lifeshell Four.

“Not a whisper, sir. They might be having problems with their own communicators.”

“Both units?” The thunder was a great deal louder this time, forcing the Lieutenant to repeat himself. “Both units?”

“Then again,” the operator held up his own radio, “it might be this one. I would not have any way of knowing—sir.”

That made a certain sense. The officer squatting by the fire was a botanist. Our regular communications expert was aboard the missing Lifeshell Five, the second of two re-entry vehicles we could not reach. Things would begin to get really interesting when it came time to erect the microwave array for sending a message home. That gear was aboard one of the four ablative-surfaced globes that had managed to—no, it was not quite time, yet, to say “survive”. We did not know whether the others had indeed perished, nor were we certain that we had succeeded at surviving.

The Lieutenant shook his head, silently mouthing unprintable words.

The blurry copy-processed expedition manual had ordained a landing at dawn, allowing one full period of daylight in which to establish ourselves on alien, possibly hostile territory. The planet's searing primary had decreed that we re-write those ineptly-collated pages. Even the few hours that we had spent in orbit, shielded behind nearly-opaqued photo-responsive plastic, had blackened the hardest of us, covering some in weeping blisters. Thus we had chosen a landing site in the high northern latitudes, prayed, then triggered the retro-igniters.

The landing had not been quite as bad as the scientist had said it might be. I had fractured a bone in my foot in two places. Four lifeshells had grounded violently within a few clicks of one another. We had not as yet located the other pair, although there was a fresh crater nearby. Where there had once stood eighteen intrepid Starmen, select of nation-state, pride of an entire planet, there now trembled a dozen frightened, homesick souls, variously shattered, unanimously bewildered.

Again, that low mutter of thunder toward the horizon.

I checked my makeshift splint before attending to the other wounded. The aluminum pistol cleaning rods kept slipping off my instep to a position either side of the arch, where they could not prevent the flexing of my twice-broken foot. It was growing dark rapidly. Thunder boomed with increasing regularity until it threatened to become a continuous, intimidating roll. I should already have broken out the expedition's arsenal. But so many wounded needed help—our medical officer, with his precious supplies, was lost in Lifeshell Five—that there had not been time so far to think about my regular duties.

Dazzled, shaken though we were, the surface of this planet seemed like heaven: rich with life, moist. Even here, on this twilight winter hemisphere the soil was warm, darkly aromatic. Four small moons blazed overhead, their reflected glory unbearable to look upon directly. It was a place to build a new beginning, to love a woman, to raise a family.

Not a square centimeter was uncovered by green growing things. Ordinary birds, extraordinary in their numbers, filled the trees with music. Pale, day-bleached grasses whispered with the hasty passage of tiny, furry, four-legged creatures, or sparkled with half-hidden multicolored scaly life. Insects swarmed in myriads. Even as we cursed them, we laughed with delighted astonishment while they pricked away at us.

Not a hundred meters from the landing site there was a brook with a small pond behind a barrier of mud-caked branches made by some broad-tailed swimming mammal. For a solid hour, earlier in the day, I had sat at its edge, dangling my ruined foot, more running water trickling between my bare toes than my family had used throughout my lifetime.

Now the thought gave me a feeling of guilty apprehension.

As a precaution, I crawled back into Lifeshell One, fumbling through the litter at the bottom. I began uncrating hand-weapons—eight millimeter Darrick automatic revolvers—getting them loaded, ready in their racks. Even

through the thick walls I could hear the thunder now. Our telescopic survey from orbit had betrayed sparse signs of primitive settlement. On the one-problem-at-a-time principle we had chosen to land as far away from those as possible. Still ... Finding a pair of oblong, foil-wrapped packages, I stripped off the wrapping, exposing a pair of reloaders, tipped one of them into the port of a weapon, then thumbed the triangular plastic cartridges into its grip-magazine. Repeating the procedure, I then fastened two issue holsters to my equipment belt. Now, if something unexpected happened, there would be at least one pistol ready for each of the mission commanders.

Carrying another half-dozen Darricks, still in their corrosion-proof containers, I crawled out of the lifeshell toward the rack I had erected earlier beside the fire. Already the least injured men were trying, under the Lieutenant's direction, to inflate our microwave dish, spreading the limp plastic it was made of in a circle safely distant from the sparks being whisked into the air by the twilight breeze. Like one of those sparks, our home star would drift across the sky sometime tonight. Our signals would take two years to get there from here.

No time like the present to start.

Thunder boomed!

This time it did not die. Suddenly ... *they were upon us*, half-lit figures out of a horror story, come to do their bloody business under the broad light of the moons, night-raiders riding us down from the sweat-foamed backs of tall, long-legged beasts whose disminded screams mingled with those of the helpless victims they helped to slaughter.

At the edge of the encampment, I watched as an officer was was lifted, impaled on a lance-point, tossed away like refuse, smashed against the hard ground. The frail plastic of the microwave dish, our only link with home, was shredded beneath the monsters' hooves. Beside the fire, the botanist/radio-man went down before a single, crushing sword-slash.

The sun had not been down an hour.

The Lieutenant ran at me, his mouth agape with terror. I struggled with a holster-flap, freed the gun, stretched it toward him. He never touched it. A rider, firelight reflecting blood-red off half-tarnished armor, overrode him, cutting him down with a vicious swipe of his sword.

The Lieutenant stumbled, grunting with surprise as much as pain, then collapsed. The rider swept past him, aiming his broadsword at me. Before I realized what was happening, the Darrick's sights were on the grill-slotted front of his helmet. I pulled the trigger. Bloody flesh exploded through the helmet's seams. The beast went on without its rider.

In a stride, unconscious of my wounded foot, I was standing over the Lieutenant. Above the bellowing clamor of armor, hooves, men possessed by the exultation of killing or the terror of dying, the Darrick's blast had seized the attention of our attackers. Someone galloped toward me, a huge plume

bobbing atop his helmet. He stopped his mount half a dozen meters from me, dipped his lance, kicked the animal's sides.

Aiming for a helmet again, I fired, then cocked the Darrick. The empty triangular plastic casing fell at my feet to join the first one I'd fired.

A second nearly-headless rider toppled, spilling his life over his animal's neck. I heard a war-cry close beside me. For the first time I was aware that I had the other pistol out of its holster. My front sight found its own way to the mark. Another skull exploded within its steel jacket.

My right-hand Darrick spoke again. Another alien fell, dashing his bullet-churned insides on the ground. A red haze formed before my eyes as the universe became the sound of my guns, the shadow of both front sights against firelit body-steel, the clash of bloody-edged metal, the flashes of my pistol muzzles in the dark. Men fell, shouting with surprised anger, screaming with agony, gibbering with fear.

What seemed to take hours must actually have been over with in seconds. Ten star-traversing "heroes" now lay mangled, everything that they had ever been, everything that they had ever done, gone to feed the warm, rich soil. Almost unopposed, the enemy had hacked us to pieces.

I glanced down at the litter of white plastic cartridges between my feet. The Lieutenant's arm was all but severed from his body. I found myself standing over him, with a pair of slowly-cooling empty-handled pistols.

With a merciless *swoosh!*, the battle-nicked flat of an ancient, carbonless iron swordblade slammed into my head from behind. It did not take my consciousness away altogether, only a certain amount of interest in what was going on. Sullen, pock-marked, bearded faces seemed to swim around me under dented helmets, gabbling words I almost understood.

Rolling my body aside, they stopped the Lieutenant's bleeding arm with a rough clot of manure, binding it with twists of something resembling burlap. Quarrelsome, they divided our pitiable few belongings, stripping what was left of the lifeshells, no doubt, to chink the leaks in peasant hovels or decorate the walls of a crudely-hewn fortress. They hauled us away on a wood-wheeled cart drawn by animals different, stockier than those the metal-suited warriors had ridden.

My last sight of the encampment was a tower of greasy, roiling smoke.

I would never return to Vespucci, my home planet.

I would never see my fair Eleva again.

*PART ONE*  
***THE STARTMEN***



## ***DUNGEON, FIRE, AND SWORD***

THREE WHOLE WEEKS for my eyes to adjust.

A person would have thought that I could see better by now, even in what little torchlight managed to squeeze through the tiny window, with its three stupid bars, in the rusty iron door of the cell we shared.

Just as well: that made it lots easier, eating from a crock of half-frozen slush they pushed in at us whenever they remembered. You could ignore the fuzzy stuff growing on its surface, hold your nose, pretend some of the lumps did not squirm as they began to thaw in your mouth.

Darkness got to be a kindly friend.

From where I sat, I did not need any floodlight to smell the Lieutenant's arm rotting off. Why he was not dead already ... Maybe I should have thanked our pre-flight immunizations, but the shots they gave us simply let his nightmare—mine too—stretch out that much further.

Eleva would have called that defeatism.

But then, Eleva was not here.

Of course it could have been that my perspective was all screwed up. In the last month it had shrunk, by abrupt increments, from the sun-filled universe—perhaps too much room out there, too many hard chips of starlight pressing in on us—to this underground kennel, hip-high, only two meters square, lit by the leavings from a jailer's passageway.

The Lieutenant—my lieutenant—Lieutenant Third-Rate Enson Serman-der, sprawled unconscious in one corner, gradually surrendering to gangrene, provided hypothermia did not claim the both of us first. He had never been much to look at, even in the best of times: tall enough that his scalp had crested through his hairline; a least a year's eating ahead of his calorie-quota. The man's face was a brown plastic sack full of stale pastries. He inevitably dressed like an unmade Army cot. Incarceration with infection was not improving him any.

Another corner was mine.

A third corner I had crawled to a couple of times every day in the beginning, back when I had still cared. It smelled worse than either one of us. At least that helped attract most of the scavengers away.

I wondered what Eleva would have said to that.

I kept thinking that the fourth corner would have been perfect for a table-model ColorCom. But reception was probably terrible down here, even if they had invented CC—or electric lighting, for that matter—on this putrescent alien mudball the natives for some reason called Sca.

At that, I would have gratefully settled for my button mandolar, with which to play myself to death, but it had no doubt burned, along with everything else from the *Asperance*. The idiots who believe that olden times were wonderful ought to try living in the real thing for a while.

A place for everything—with everyone in his place.

Each midday, somehow, when the nastiness seeping frozenly out of the rough stone walls began to drip, marking high noon, I would summon up the energy to belly over to the Lieutenant to check him out. Aside from shivering all the time, it was the only exercise I got. I was not strong enough to stand any more, but the Scavians had taken care of that: there was no room in which to do it. If the torch outside was fresh, I would try picking some of the blind, white, writhing things out of the Lieutenant's decay-blackened arm to squash on an already-slimy floor. He would struggle feebly at the attention, out of his head.

I was especially careful not to drop any of my own load of vermin into the wound. It took real character to move away from him afterward. His rotting infection was the only source of warmth in the place.

He would lie there, breathing raggedly, occasionally moaning, but for the most part leaving me alone with my thoughts, my dreams of home, such as it was, of fair Eleva, which were a subtle torture in themselves.

As thoughts go, they did not amount to much, a stagnant, circular trickle of regret. Three horror-attenuated weeks still had not been enough to accommodate me to my probable fate. A day from now, a week—or never, if they really had forgotten about us down here in the dark—His Excellency the Bishop, His Grace the local Baron, would finally settle between themselves who got to dispose of us and by what means.

Lieutenant Sermander was lucky. He most likely would not last that long.

Me, they would drag to a secular gibbet in the "town"—a thatchy pile of animal-droppings rucked up against the soiled skirts of this castle—or to a more highly sanctified burning-stake in the greater filth-heap that passed for a metropolis, seventy-odd klicks north of here.

Either way it ended here, back home on dear old Vespucci, they would never find out what had happened to their eighteen intrepid Starmen, the flower of the Naval Reserve. With encouragement—not to mention sufficient distraction—the citizenry would eventually forget.

Everyone but Eleva.



Bureaucrats would breathe a discreet (but hardly unanticipated) sigh of relief. It would have been nice, they would tell themselves, to have found a paradise world, ripe for exploitation. Even so, they would remind each other, now there would be seventeen fewer obsolete heroes to worry about. Never mind that it had been the most expensive liquidation, per capita, in the history of Vespucci, simply raise the tax on protein, or on birth or death or water. The warriors who had recently helped batter our beloved planet into political submission—pardon, make that “solidarity”—presently figured in the official mind as nothing more than the likeliest source of counter-revolution: once-convenient nuisances to find a place for, of honorable exile, of dryrot.

The eighteenth?

No hero, certainly, obsolete or otherwise. Just a humble Navy corporal who was good with certain kinds of necessary machinery. I guess you could say I was the single real volunteer aboard, the sole enlisted man, the only one with dirt under his fingernails, therefore, in the view of my superiors, a sort of machine, himself. My reasons are none of your business, but—well, Eleva wanted to marry an officer.

They had promised me ...

The only other individuals neither forgetful nor relieved would be the scientists. But they would be *quiet*. It was their expertise that had landed us here. Unless they managed somehow to contain their angry curiosity, they would make perfect scapegoats for our failure. Modern Vespuccian methods are more technically certain (for which read: considerably more painful) than any medieval hanging-tree or pyre.

Eleva, dearly beloved, where are you tonight? Are you thinking of me?

Or will you find an officer to marry, after all?



**THE LIEUTENANT GROANED**, stirring fitfully.

With what amounted to a supreme moral effort, I managed to lift my good foot, to bring it down on the rat nibbling at his fire-streaked fingers.

I missed, of course.

The jar of my boot on the muck-coated floor sent a shock through my sick, cold-stiffened body. The shaggy, naked-tailed creature scrambled back to its hole between two ill-fitted stones, to chitter away displaced frustration among less-venturesome but equally greedy companions.

They could afford to be patient.

Rats were only one surprising familiarity awaiting the Vespuccian expedition to Sca. Since the founding of our (then) Republic, two centuries before, natural philosophers had been accumulating evidence that humankind had originated elsewhere. There was never enough air to breathe, except at the lowest altitudes. There was never enough water to drink. There was never enough food to eat. There was never enough light.

Animal species on the planet were divided sharply: those like us, oxygen-invigorated, bilaterally symmetrical; or those constructed on a radial, seven-lobed architecture that lived by extracting chlorine from the lowland salt-sinks. The latter species predominated, perhaps because they did not lose three or four out of five newborn at every generation.

Each was thoroughly poisonous to the other, a phenomenon that made the ceaseless competition for environmental niches very interestingly deadly.

Recent republican emphasis on reasonable individual liberty, a resulting prosperity, a stable peace wholly unprecedented in the fifteen hundred years of written planetary history, had allowed the philosophers leisure time, among other resources, to dig up—quite literally—astonishing confirmation of a thousand ancient, bitter tales.

We did not belong.

How else could we have realized, from our remotest prehistoric beginnings, that Vespucci was nothing more than a frigid, barren, dried-out husk of a world, circling a dull amber clinker of a primary, never much of a home to anyone, totally without a future? That is what folk-wisdom had always maintained. That is what modern day science had corroborated. If Vespucci had been our natural place in the universe, we would have fit in, like the seven-legged crawlies of the chlorine marshes.

Vespucci would have fit us.

As the planet's shifting sands were probed, it began to appear that we—some of us, anyway—might try our luck elsewhere. Maybe that bright blue-white star, companion to our own, "merely" two light years away. For the dessicated books, the incredibly well-preserved artifacts the scientists found revealed that there was an abandoned starship orbiting Vespucci somewhere overhead, fashioned by the hands of human beings, our ancestors, who had known more than us, but who had nevertheless marooned their helpless unhappy posterity in this wasteland.

Yet we scarcely expected to find human beings here on Sca, nor ordinary rats. Nor powerful Barons ruling a degenerate barbarism, nor the Bishops of the Holy Order of the Teeth of God, who, in an uneasy alliance with the feudal aristocracy, held their sun-bleached world in a double grasp, one fist of terrifying faith, the other of naked brutality.

Something slithered out from between the mortarless stones behind my neck. I had been hearing the creature off and on, with its bristly sound of stiff body hairs or countless legs, for the past several days, halfway hoping that it was large enough to eat—the rats were too fast for me—or poisonous enough to bring this insanity to an end.

Perhaps I would have time to use it on the Lieutenant, as well.

I moved. It gave a dampish bubbling squeal, then vanished, leaving silence.



**FOLKS BACK HOME** had seen us off grandly. Eleva had 'commed me at the skyport quarantine. Military bands blared loudly over every channel as our clumsy shuttles one by one grumbled aloft toward the new, half-completed vespucciostationary satellite, assembled around the remains of an older technology. Fully finished nearby lay the *Asperance*, product of our two most important sciences: physics; archaeology.

The World State (no longer a republic) had decided to call her a “starclipper”.

Eighteen Starmen (that being what the World State decided to call us) bound themselves into position alongside the flimsy framing, where they would work, eat, sleep—while exercising grimly in place for months. Fireworks followed the speeches; personal interviews were ColorCommed to a grudgingly united world below. Ranks of heavily armed peace-forcers were not shown on camera in the crowd scenes. We floated free of the station, powered the inertia field-generator, spread our sails.

Mankind was free of Vespucci for the first time in their recorded history.

Technically sophisticated as they may once have been, practicing sciences long lost to their grandchildren—our ancestors—we had learned nevertheless that they had arrived a Vespucci by desperate accident.

Their lifeless, dust-filled ship lay in orbit, lifeslip stations gaping, empty. Within, in addition to their records, the scientists had discovered the “Thorens Broach”, the means by which they had ducked *around* the laws of physics, hemstitching through an unreal continuum where every point in distance-duration is geometrically common with every other—but one’s destination was uncontrollably random. They had definitely had a destination in mind but had not reached it. Their electronic log held horrific stories of a dozen panic-stricken random leaps until, at last, a marginally-habitable planet had been stumbled upon.

It was still only marginally habitable, which was why we were leaving.

I wondered at the time we read the papers, saw the unfolding story on the ColorCom: what had these people fled to take such a chance? What horrors had they willingly traded for the parched nubbin they named Vespucci? I sincerely did not want to know. Neither did anybody else. It was new worlds we looked for, a future for ourselves, for our children.

Generations of desperate hard figuring, plus a leg-up from what had been rediscovered amidst buried shards, orbital trash, propelled *Asperance* starward on a newer principle, one that made us feel we had won a certain measure of superiority over our unlucky forebears. Her quarter-meter-diameter hollow core was a paragravitic “antenna” spinning out a field rendering everything within her billowing plastic folds inertialess, no longer subject to the normal laws of accelerated mass. *Asperance* would not try to evade the speed limit, as

folk-tales held that those before us had been “punished” for doing; she would remain in normal space, to ignore the theoretical speed limit altogether.

Half of that capability had been achieved by the time I was born. We Vespuccians—in this case meaning the citizens of the single most advanced nation-state that had ultimately forced their country’s name upon an reluctant entire planet—were old hands at navigating the local system, pushed by photon sails kilometers in width, but merely a single molecule thick. We had explored a dozen lifeless, hopeless balls of baked or frozen rock, often taking months or years to travel a few astronomical units, discovering nothing for their effort in the end.

A sun-system, a planet, a nation-state, all known as Vespucci. It betrayed, I thought even as a little child, a certain narrowness of perspective. It was not the sort of insight I could talk about, even with Eleva. By the time of Consolidation, there were even those who wanted to rename our capital city, Volta Mellis, Vespucci. It was easy to understand: our options were as limited as the imaginations of our geographers.

Not particularly coincidentally.

*Asperance* might make all the difference. We had learned our ancestors’ physics from the textbooks they had unwittingly left us. The sails of our ship were meant to billow before the interstellar tachyon winds, faster than light itself. She could traverse local distances in seconds. Two light years to the nearest star—a little over ten trillion kilometers—would require something under nine weeks.



## GRIMLY, WE HUNG ON.

Daily, we forced down our inedible rations. Dully, we exerted our bodies against elastic cradles to prevent the void from devouring our bones. Under those merciless, cold pin-points of light, we slept only fitfully. Scarcely ever crawling from the racks to which we had been assigned, each of us tried to forget—or at least not to remind one another—that we would have to find some haven in which to survive the two years it would take for our puny signals to carry home the news of whatever we had found. Eventually we might even be followed by other vessels like *Asperance*, even possibly get back home someday ourselves.

Home.

Eleva.

If.

So, the officers played CC games, watched our meager stock of entertainment tapes until the brown oxide wore off the plastic. I chorded the button-fretted mandolar, wondering what was to become of us, seeing pale blue eyes, coppery hair, the delicate red bow of a mouth, where they had no right to be, against the ebon canopy of space.

Sixty-two days after our departure, we orbited a promisingly cloud-swirled marble hanging before its overwhelming primary. It was green down there, vastly greener than Vespucci, even to the naked eye, heartbreakingly blessed with water, so inviting it stirred primordial caution deep within a company accustomed to less charitable handling by nature. Yet, with a little finagling, perhaps, this paradise was—ours.

We were prepared to pay.

*Asperance* shut down her inertialess field generator, to shed her filmy wings in free-fall. We eighteen Starmen huddled together in half a dozen tough, spherical lifeshells of carbon filamentized polyresin that she had carried at her stern. During the all-but-endless journey to this place, they had been our only refuge from the pale, frozen stars.

Or from one another.

Now, under the blinding blue-white brilliance of a foreign star, Sca's thick mantle of atmosphere began to abrade their skins, filling their bottoms with human sweat. Each armored lander became shrouded, isolated from the other five within its own tortured curtain of ionization. We cowered inside, isolated equally, despite the inhuman crowding, each man alone with his thoughts, his fears. Our homeworld, niggardly as it may have been, was out of touch, lost to us perhaps forever.



**THE BARON**, AS heavily-scarred by some nameless infection as the merest of his vassals, enjoyed a complete ignorance of the geography of his own planet. He refused to believe the “superstitious nonsense” I managed to communicate to him: that we were from that bright light in the sky, right there, where I am pointing. We were all invaders, he decided, foreign vandals, common brigands, breakers of his benevolent peace.

He wanted to hang us.

The Bishop, through a live-in delegation at the Baron's castle, was all too ready to believe, naming us sorcerers, non-human demons, unnatural purveyors of some weird (but, it appeared, not very potent) magic.

He wanted to burn us.

The Bailiff, a squat, evil-eyed old ruffian with a short axe in his belt, did not much appreciate being caught between two absolute powers. I recognized his type immediately: a retired head-trooper, the kind of battered career non-com who has seen it all, done most of it himself, a little of it twice, but still does not believe a word of it.

He was very enthusiastic about my daily interrogation, however. That did not call for divided loyalties, no sir, not at all. He soon discovered my shattered instep, along with the fact that I screamed quite satisfactorily when he ordered it twisted, grinding the broken bone-ends together. Given such “incentives”, I found learning a new language ridiculously easy. Scavian seemed

to follow familiar rules, varied from my own Vespuccian more in pronunciation than vocabulary. I began to wonder whether Sca might be the hell-hole my ancestors had fled. Yet how could these savages have constructed even the absurdly unreliable star-drives we had discovered abandoned in orbit above Vespucci?

I became a lot more fluent—also less curious—when they began displaying tongs, pincers, obscenely-shaped irons thrust into buckets of glowing coals. For the most part, however, the Bailiff preferred simply having my foot exercised. It was much less expensive than good charcoal.

I told them everything I knew, plus plenty I did not know I knew. I remember at one point offering pathetically to go back home to find out more. None of this seems very real, somehow, although many of the scars, inside or out, I will carry to the end of my days. I passed out frequently during those sessions. With no memory of the intervening period of relief, I would often wake the next day to find some poxy minion wrenching my ruined foot again. Eleva's eyes, her smile, began elude me, abandoning me when I needed their recollection to sustain me.

Naturally, most of what I had to tell the Scavians did not make sense. Even sane, physically whole, how do you explain air-power or overlapping fields of machinegun fire to some primitive in knitted iron underwear whose notion of leading-edge martial arts is to poke at his enemies with a metal-shod stick? At last they gave up, dragging me away until some agreement could be arrived at about what to do with us. The Bailiff personally saw me bolted into a hole in the dungeon wall.

The Lieutenant had remained completely unconscious during the eternity—perhaps a week—that I had been put to question. That had not stopped them torturing him. The forms must be followed, after all.

They had not invented locks on Sca. The door, a crudely-hammered meter square of iron sheet, was fastened at its hinge-like hasps with soft metal rivets a centimeter in diameter, quite beyond reach of the palm-sized grating in its center, or the slopping-slot below. These were the castle's lower-class accommodations, at the literal bottom of the heap. Down here, the walls dripped constantly, when they were not frozen solid, with seepage from the luxury dungeons high above us. We were fed occasionally. Someone came to replace the torches in the passageway.

I estimated three weeks' passage by making small tears in the edge of my flight jacket every time I awoke to the drip, drip, drip of the polluted stone around me. Very rapidly I became too weak to keep such a calendar, except that my uniform jacket obliged by getting easier to tear.

Twenty-two rips in the rotted fabric later, the Hooded People came.

## **FAREWELL TO ELEVA**

**THE HEAVY WOVEN** synthetic restrainers cut painfully where they rode across my midsection. It was hardly noticable after the grandly hollow send-off we had received, or the crushing four-gee eternity from the desiccated surface of our native Vespucci up to stationary orbit.

Nighttime reigned in this position. To the right, several kilometers away, the new space station lay, still under construction, a wild hodge-podge of beams, containers fastened to the hull of the ancient colonial ship which had brought our ancestors here. Between the interstices in the new construction, she could still be seen, a micrometeorite-pitted dull metal sphere, dozens of meters in diameter, dead, cold, empty for fifteen hundred years—until lately rediscovered by her creators' children.

Already copies of her fusion powerplant were being installed in Vespuccian cities all over the planet.

Reflexively, I smoothed the creases from the trousers of my special, fancy, useless uniform. Tailored just for this occasion, they were a violent shade of lavender to photograph well on CC, tricked out with silver braid, a deep maroon stripe running down the pants leg, a short, waist-length jacket which kept riding up, exposing the place where the shirt crept continuously out of the beltless waistband of the trousers. The knee-length silver boots were clumsy, would have to be jettisoned for weight's sake before the *Asperance* shipped out.

At least I sat unburdened, as were the rest, with the awkward matching pistol belt. As the sole enlisted man among the crew, I was not entitled to carry a sidearm, merely charged with keeping them all in good repair, making sure the officers did not shoot themselves in the foot before I could stow the ordnance aboard-ship. I carried my mandolar in its collapsible fabric case; it used up every gram of my personal freight-allowance—luckily I do not grow beard enough to need a razor desperately—but I counted on the mandolar to keep me sane during nine weeks' endless voyage.

I shifted the safety-straps once more, trying vainly for comfort, peered forward to the end of the long, cylindrical transfer-canister where they were showing the festivities on a large ColorCom screen. At least they were interrupting the blaring military bands, the posturing politicians, long enough to give us a clear view, for the first time, of the *Asperance* where she lay a few clicks off the new space station. She looked like nothing else in Vespuccian history, not like any kind of vehicle at all—certainly not like this stubby, heavy-winged orbiter which had flung itself down a long, long runway earlier this morning, into the purple sky from the port just outside the capital, Volta Mellis.

From some vantage-point, probably another shuttle, we could even see ourselves approaching the starclipper, the shuttle's bay doors opened already, exposing the tube which temporarily, uncomfortably, housed seventeen officers, along with their single, general-purpose flunky.

No, the *Asperance* resembled a huge antenna of some kind, A single long, extruded titanium mast no larger in diameter than a big man's thigh, crossed perpendicularly at intervals with complex, tightly-guyed spars. At her forward end were the shackles for her photon sails, kilometers-wide umbrellas she would unfurl to catch the solar winds which would sweep us to our destination. Aft, she bulged with a half dozen multipurpose spheres, heavily armored for the landing, stuffed full of consumable supplies for the voyage.

The entire fragile assemblage resembled a child's toy. Draped from end to end in tough, loose, transparent plastic tenting, at the end of every cross-spar, there clung either a skeletal one-man seating-rack, or cluster of instrumentation.

The *Asperance* gleamed dully in the reflected light of the sun, her titanium core housing the inertia-canceling field-coils, the re-entry spheres concealing the field-generator/power-plant. Thirty meters long, not counting her sails, she would prove far more uncomfortable than the shuttle we now occupied.

Four more exactly like her were under construction. We could see the torches flaring, the spacesuited figures swarming over them off to our left.

*Asperance* was the first completed. If something went wrong with her, something which came to light—perhaps fatally—during our “shakedown cruise”, it would be too late to make significant changes. The design—along with the four other ships—would have to be scrapped. Something else newer, undoubtedly more expensive, would have to be undertaken, all over again.

The freshly-conquered provinces, the ordinary citizens who had conquered them, would groan a little more under the increased weight of taxation. Perhaps another division or so of peacekeepers would have to be sent to quiet the groaning.

Or perhaps a flotilla of Navy aircraft might be dispatched on another “good will tour” to drive the point home unmistakably.

We would not care. We would be far away.

Or dead.





**“I JUST DO** not know, Corporal O’Thraight, three years is a long time...”

I watched Eleva Dethri through the smeared transparency, hating the quarantine procedures at the base, wishing I were on the other side of the plastic where her voice would not come to me through an electronic filter, yet, deep inside, a little grateful for the regulations which saved me from potential humiliation.

I never touched her; I never knew if she would want me to.

Behind her on the corrugated metal wall of the shed, garish posters proclaimed the glory of our coming leap to the stars, informed visitors of the many rules governing their brief, highly-supervised stays, exhorted them to tell their friends, their co-workers, their families, how their voluntary tax contributions were building a magnificent future for unborn generations of Vespuccians.

“Yes, I know, Eleva, darling, if you could only...besides, when I come back, I will be an officer.”

Dim red sunlight trickled through the windows on her side of the barrier. The shed stretched forty or fifty meters. At the door, a heavily-armed Army guardsman stood at parade-rest, watching each conversing couple closely. There were a dozen stations like this one where we Star-men could have a short, unsatisfactory glimpse of those we loved, of the lives we were leaving behind.

She was right, of course. Women generally are about these things. Three years is a long time, a lifetime, almost the same amount of time I had loved her, since an Officer’s Club dance where she arrived come on the arm of some slaving lieutenant. Since I had last played the mandolin in public. Even then it came as a temporary assignment, an unlooked-for break in my regular duties.

Changing my life.

“An officer?” Her pale blue eyes brightened a little, she licked her lips uncertainly. “Why, Corporal, how wonderful! An astronaut, one of the first eighteen...but three years?”

Eleva the beautiful: fair, lightly-freckled skin, tightly-curved copper-colored hair, taller than I by a centimeter or so, unless I stood up very straight. I stood up very straight. Combat boots helped, except when she wore high heels. I suppose, as the only offspring of a warrant officer—worse yet, descended from an upper-class family whose demotion, after a lost battle, had been the scandal of the previous century—she never fitted, either among the enlisted class of my beginnings, or the officer class she desperately aspired to rejoin.

I shifted uncomfortably on the tractor-seat bolted in place before the counter they had divided down the middle with a plastic partition. We eighteen would spend two weeks here, with our alternates, until we proved to carry no diseases which might compromise the mission. Air pressure measured slightly higher inside the buildings to insure our isolation. We communicated with the outside world by wire.

Eleva looked unhappy. “Corporal...” She glanced around to see whether anyone listened, a futile gesture, as, in addition to the guardsmen, our conver-

sation would be line-monitored by the psychiatric staff. "...Whitey, I—I do not know what to say. I, well, I had my plans, my life sort of laid out in front of me. Now you..."

Now I... I had thrown her an unpinned grenade by promising to become the officer she wanted. What else could I do? Did I want a commission for its own sake, for my own sake? I knew I wanted Eleva. Like most individuals of my class, I had learned not to want much of anything else.

"Say you will wait for me, Eleva," I answered, trying hard to cover the anger, the frustration I felt, "Or say you will not. Either way. You will not say you love me. We have never... But let me know, now."

"Please do not force the issue, I do not know what to say! Whitey, I do not know what I feel. Three years? Why, by then, I will be..."

"Three years older. Eleva, go marry a captain. I will learn not to care. Anyhow, it is too late, I am stuck here with this mission, all on account of—"

"Do not dare blame me!" she pouted. The door-guardsmen looked our way, raised eyebrows under his titanium helmet. "I never asked you to volunteer for the *Asperance*, did I? I did not ask you to do anything at all—except let me alone!"

This was turning out all wrong, not at all as planned, as dreamed about. Saying goodbye to the only girl—woman—I ever loved, I had expected something different from her, something warm to take with me to the cruel stars. Now I watched myself ruining it, heard myself say all the wrong things, helpless to stop myself saying them.

"Then what the Ham are you doing here, Eleva Dethri? Why did you come?"

"I do not know!" she cried, flinging herself off the stool. She ran out of the room while I could think of nothing to say but "Eleva! I love you! Please do not go like this!"

But of course she could not hear me. The press-to-talk switch popped up the moment she released it.



**THREE YEARS EARLIER**, I stood before the battered desk of my CO/conductor, Colonel Gencom, trying hard to understand what they were doing to me. The office walls were lined with photographs of the band over two generations, half a thousand men in uniforms of varying obsolescence, half a dozen wars of varying unbearability. On the window sill behind his desk lay a tarnished trumpon with a bullet-hole through its bell; the unit color-cords hanging from it were stained with something which matted the braids together. Something dark, nearly black.

"Whitey," the Colonel shuffled through the sheaf of paperwork as if he, too, could not comprehend the reasoning behind this order, "You are the best damned mandolar player in the band. I hate to see this happen; you know how it is: 'Ours not to reason why...'"

Never mind that, in an orchestra, nobody hears the mandolar except the other musicians who rely upon it for harmony, chord-progression, rhythm even the percussionist depends on.

Never mind that the papers on the Colonel's desk were reassigning me to training as a field-armorer, a sort of meatball gunsmith—something I knew nothing about, possessed no background for. There was a war on; there was always a war on; war imposes its own reasons, its own demented logic. There existed a greater need, in the eyes of the State, for field-armorers than for mandolar players no one except the other musicians could hear.

Never mind that I had been trained to play the mandolar, by edict of the same government, since the age of seven.

I doubled as company supply-clerk, meaning in the first place that I was in charge of spare reeds, mouthpiece-covers, mutes, assorted junk like triangles, ceram-blocks, train whistles, sand whistles, slide whistles. In the second, it meant I billeted with what I was in charge of, spending my days—except for rehearsals, performances—among endless shelves of odd-shaped semi-musical detritus, inventory forms, the storeroom dust of a hundred military years.

In the third place, I was de-facto repair officer: if a thumb-key broke off a picconet, if the bass saxonal got dented, if the xylotron threw burnt insulation all over the xylotronist, they brought it to me, for soldering, hammering, emergency rewiring—even a little first aid. I got to be pretty good—undoubtedly the reason I had been chosen for retraining.

“It is not all so bad,” the Colonel shattered me of my reverie, although I thought he spoke more to himself than to me. “While you are in training, you will be available should we need you. I suspect there will be no replacement, not in a hurry, anyway.”

I nodded. Nothing he said required—or justified—a reply.

“There may be other opportunities, even after you are rotated out into the field. I shall try to see there are, if it would please you, Whitey.”

“I would like it very much, sir.”

“Good. Also, you will always have your musical talent to fall back on, as a comfort to yourself, your comrades. It could be worse, could it not, Corporal?”

I saluted, snapped my heels. “Yes, sir, Colonel, sir, it could be worse, sir.”

He gave me a very unmilitary grin, shook his head ruefully. If one thing the Navy—or the Army, for that matter—could arrange, it was for things to be worse. He knew it. I knew it.

I turned smartly, started out of his office.

“Whitey?”

I turned again, curious. He removed his spectacles, rubbed his eyes, looked back up at me. “Since we will not be getting a replacement, take your mandolar with you. You will need to stay in practice, anyway.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Do not thank me, son, I am not authorized to give away Navy property. I do not know what happened to Corporal O’Thraight’s mandolar, just before he got reassigned. Thank the Navy, boy. I do it every day. You could never print the words I use to do it.”



**THE VOICE** in the corridor outside said, “Here it is: YD-038.”

Nobody knocked. The door opened. Miss Sixte, ninth-floor mother for the local Navy Reserve creche stepped inside.

I snapped to attention.

It was a gray room, three meters by three, with a gray door, six little gray bunks, YD-036 through YD-041 inclusive, smoothly tucked to regulation tautness. Miss Sixte kept pretty much to herself. Sometimes you could hear her sobbing in her own room after lights-out. None of the kids ever managed to discover why.

Everybody else had gone to calisthenics that morning; I had been told to wait. It made me nervous. I had never spent much time here in the daylight. Behind Miss Sixte, a tall, thin man carried an odd-shaped plastic box by the handle. “Whitey, this is Sergeant Tenner of the Twenty-third Aerofleet Band. He is going to be your teacher.”

I had teachers, plenty. Tenner looked okay, though, if kind of weird: cadaverouslike, with slicked-down hair, olive skin, a good smile. Good hands, with long, thin fingers. “Whitey?” He offered me one of the hands.

“Sergeant,” I answered, gravely adult as I could be, “What is that you are carrying, sir?”

“Not ‘sir’, ‘Sarge’. Take a look.” He handed me the case. I fumbled with the spring latches. Inside, in a tight-fitting bed of bright yellow plush, lay the most beautiful object I had ever seen.

About the length of my forearm, it had a long tapered neck on the flat face of which six inlaid columns of square brightly-colored buttons touched each other at the edges, like mosaic tiles, each about the size of a thumbnail. They marched down the neck in twenty-four rows, until it blended with the body: not much larger than the neck, very slightly ovoid. At its bottom was a cluster of tiny knobs. Six long plastic vanes stuck out from the face, centimeter-high, six centimeters long.

Tenner took the beautiful thing from my reluctant hands, arranged the fingers of his left on the neck-buttons, just-so, fluttered his right thumb down across the hinge-springed vanes.

A chord more wonderful than anything I had ever heard. E-minor-seventh.

“What do you think, Whitey?” Nobody had ever asked me that.

“What is it, Sarge?”

“A mandolar. From now on, it will be your life.”

## ***THE SKY DEMONS***

**SLOP, I REMEMBER** thinking, is a bit early today.

I had heard the barred doors slamming open along the length of the hallway. Now a shadow eclipsed the only light in my severely atrophied universe. To my immense astonishment, a heavy mallet rose, fell, rose again, fell—exactly as it had done when we were sealed into this purgatory, this time miraculously splitting the soft rivets in the hasp.

The rust-blistered door grated open noisily. Out in the hallway, forms moved erratically from side to side, throwing bizarre shadows into my world. I cringed backward, only partly in terror of renewed torture, mostly because my fear-filled eyes were painfully blinded by the raw, unfiltered glory of a smoky torch in the sconce across the passage.

“Ye’re of a certes as these be the ones ye’re wantin’?”

His harsh voice seared forever into my memory, the Bailiff stood before the door, visible from the waist down. I recognized his boots, the hem of his mailed shirt over its padded vest. A hammer with chisel dangled from one of his sword-callused hands. A hatchet hung from his belt.

Other figures, completely anonymous in their floor-length hooded robes, bent down nearly double to examine us, each in turn averting its hidden face as it did so, from the ghastly sight, from the vile stench of two once-human beings being slowly converted into piles of putrescence.

The rats skittered back into their niches.

The last of these hooded apparitions, in a dialect of Scavian that was almost unintelligible to me, spoke to both of us in a low sibilant crackle betraying not a hint of personality, or of gender, or even of humanity.

“You are the sky demons?”

Backlighting by the flickering torch outside, the vapor of its breath hung menacingly before my face within the frigid cell. I tried to look it straight in the face. Firelit shadows gave the impression of a brown-robed man, arms folded into opposing sleeves, faceless, terrifying.

“What is it you want from me now, torturer?” I managed to croak a question of my own in response. They were the first words I had spoken—besides Eleva’s name—in what seemed like centuries, “Yet another confession?”

“With the right truth, demon, yet may you live to see the moons rise.”

I had almost forgotten that this planet had two pairs of natural satellites. It had been very scenic, four moons, until the animal-riders slammed down on our half-built camp, shattering our dreams forever.

“I will see them—just before you light your bonfire! Now get out ...”

The comparative fresh sweetness of the air outside our cell seemed suddenly unbearable. For some reason I began coughing uncontrollably, huge tears streaming down my face. Fever, followed by chills, passed through my body in waves. I was suddenly ashamed of the filth that covered me, worse of being humiliated before my captors. What would Eleva—

“Silence! Silence!” the whisper demanded. “Your silence or the truth! Now listen carefully! Do you hold the reins of the star-flying machine?”

It was another minute before I could speak. At this rate, I would not last much longer. The figure bending before me, after its brief tirade, remained mute. When my voice came, it was a hoarse sobbing rasp.

“What are you asking me, priest?”

“Guide you the star-flying machines?”

Burning, I reasoned dully, is probably better than being hanged. Once the flame sears your nerve-endings, I am told, you can not feel a thing. It certainly beat outliving my inoculations, as I seemed to be doing now, eventually contracting leprosy or perhaps something equally attractive.

Or being eaten in my sleep by rats, for that matter.

“Sure,” I lied. “Naturally. Of course. Also, ‘of a certes’. I piloted one such star-flyer here myself.” I paused, adding, “But it will not now return to the sky. It was not ever intended to. It has been burned, the ashes scattered by warriors. I have explained this before.”

Queerly, the anonymous form squatted on its robe-draped haunches, frozen for a long moment as if in deep meditation. Then one of its identically-clad companions still out in the passageway approached the Bailiff.

Coins clinked within the silence of stone walls. The Bailiff appeared to look both ways, then withdrew. Almost as if a switch had been thrown, the hooded figure halfway into our cell came to life again.

“Demon,” it hissed, even lower, even more threatening than before, “If you wish to return to life, tell us how your thunder-weapons are fashioned.”

So that was it.

In the furious one-sided battle at the landing-site, I had somehow managed to kill or wound a handful of the animal-riders, their thin metal plating being worse than no protection against my fast-moving eight millimeter slugs. Staging single-handed gunfights with barbarian warriors had not been part of my job-description when I had signed onboard the *Asperance*. I was

supposed to prepare the arsenal for the officers. Had I done so, perhaps we Vespuccians might have fared better.

Instead, I had sat on a streambank, paddling my toes in a little brook. I had fiddled with my music, daydreamed about my girl, watched a couple of the moons rise, while, all the time, the enemy was coming to murder us. As an armorer, I had been much more useful playing the mandolar.

In any event, my guns had been emptied in due course, confiscated by the brawling killers while I lay unconscious, the remainder of our ammo surely destroyed. Back home, in the Final Vespuccian War, I had done what the field-manuals told me, employing a fancy kit of gauges, drift-punches, screwdrivers, confident in the certain knowledge that replacement parts were never further away than our field resupply depot.

I might be able to hand-make certain of the tools—screwdrivers are easy, even good ones—what I knew of manufacturing the Darrick 8mm Revolving Magazine Pistol could have been engraved upon the tip of the Bailiff’s back-up dagger with the chisel he had used to open the door.

Naturally, I said: “Of course I can tell you. Nothing to it. I know all of the proper incantations. Burn me, I cannot teach you a thing.”

The hooded speaker froze again, its companions likewise ceasing all movement in the hallway. Praying, maybe. Or thinking about a New Improved Holy Order of God’s Teeth, augmented with a little advanced military hardware. Old Vespuccian fairy tales told about such things: how, for example, Kalvan the Boss traveled back in time to teach the Olden People about modern machinery. That was before we learned that our Olden People had forgotten more about such things than we had ever known.

The Baron would not be happy, I thought. Then again—I started trembling at the idea—perhaps these “thunder-weapons” of mine were religiously illegal. Perhaps the Bishop only wanted to assure himself that, by disposing of us, he was eradicating dangerous or forbidden knowledge.

Well, either way, at least I would die warm. The cold down here, the vile dampness had seeped into my very bones. The insides of my lungs felt coated with the same fine mildew that garnished the cuisine. I would not last very much longer at this rate, whatever I chose to say. When they discovered the true extent of my technical education ...

The faceless figure came back to reality.

“This other demon—” Like an image of Death itself, the dark apparition gestured with a long, empty sleeve. “Knows it these things as well, the making of thunder-weapons, the guiding of sky-flying machines?”

I coughed again, this time to give me time for thought. Lieutenant Enson Sermander, in these late, great days of the Vespuccian State, had the finest military career his family could buy him—one of the old Command Families, with a real name. Do him credit, though: he had spent another fat half-dozen years purchasing even more status on his own.

In the War, he had flown (or so he said) a ram-fighter against the Shirker States. Certainly at the launching ceremony nine—no, twelve—weeks ago, his chest had been ablaze with ribbons. I was glad Eleva was not there to see him in his glory. Five confirmed kills, three probables. Feats of arms against clumsy blimps, fragile biplanes. He was only here in this dungeon only because he had not thought quite quickly enough to buy himself into favor with the current regime. Being too slow on that kind of uptake clearly defines one as a threat to national security. So, he had been volunteered for the *Asperance* expedition.

As for flying the starclipper to this place, even the Lieutenant had admitted with a chuckle that the computer was the best pilot aboard.

Nevertheless, he had not been too bad a fellow, for an officer. A cheerful cynic, the only one of seventeen crew members who had ever spoken directly to me outside the line of duty. I had come to like him, in a way. Those who actually knew what they were doing, he left strictly alone to do it. That is what constitutes a good officer these days.

The Lieutenant was a good officer.

“This sky-demon is the great-grandfather of all sky-demons!” I announced, with as much enthusiasm as my weakened body would let me muster, “I am only his humble apprentice—but he is sick. He needs help!”

“He does, indeed.” A nod from beneath the hood, then that eerie, hackle-raising whisper again. “This may be arranged. Able are you to stand?”

“Not in here.”

The hooded figure backed out, straightened.

Its companions reached in swiftly to drag me out by the armpits to my feet. Agony tore through my right leg as I set weight on my much-abused foot. I bit my lower lip, choking back nausea. Tears squeezed from between my tightly-closed eyelids as the priests half-carried me across the narrow corridor, propping me against a comparatively dry wall where sooty cobwebs powdered my excrement-soaked uniform. I clung, breathing heavily, to a torch-sconce, my heart hammering like a machinegun.

They slid the Lieutenant’s body out of the cell.

He moaned, even fought them weakly, trying to speak. Restraining him with a surprising gentleness, one of the hooded figures extracted a relatively clean swatch of the ubiquitous burlap material from its robe, dabbed at the Lieutenant’s enormous pustulent wound until fresh blood broke through the crust. A new rag was then wrapped around his arm.

“Nothing can be done for this one ...” the hooded figure whispered chillingly (was it the same one I had spoken with in the cell, or was this another one?) then, to my relief, added, “... here.”

Fighting dizziness, I croaked, “Then let us go where something can!”

They nodded; it almost amounted to a bow. The trip upward through seemingly endless underground corridors—there was no sign of the Bailiff nor of any other castle personnel—was a hazy purgatorial nightmare, reminiscent of



the period, eons ago in some sense, of my daily torture-sessions. My foot was now three times its normal size, swollen up to the knee. I was queasy, half-conscious, weak. Terribly weak.

It seemed to be a busy place, this dungeon. Screaming issued out of every cross-corridor, pitiable moaning, the rattle of chains in their wall-rings. The priests looked at one another whenever this happened, their faces hidden from me in the shadows of their cowls, then looked resolutely straight ahead. The endless upward march went on.

I did manage distantly to wonder if it were day or night outside. This was no trivial matter on Sca, where all life was active during the well-lit nighttime hours, only to scurry from the dawn as if from an enemy horde. Already, in the higher-rent dungeons, my eyes smarted from the more numerous, better-trimmed torches. Outside, a naked blue-white sun would burn the optics out of my head, then start for the brain.

Suddenly we passed through a pointed stone arch to an outdoor court I recognized from our arrival here. Around the yard were railed places for the riding-animals, great piles of dried vegetation in long tied bundles, ragged servants busy with shovels. Near the gate stood another of those wooden-wheeled carts, hitched to four big pulling beasts.

It was nighttime.

Under the gentle light of a single risen moon, armored soldiers loitered about the yard, a great many of them. The Bailiff was among their number. He approached us as we slowly crossed the flagging. He was an old man for his culture, I suddenly realized, perhaps forty, white-haired, his face the usual Scavian battlefield of smallpox scars, fleabites, the marks of hard-fought mortal duels. He coughed as he spoke to us, a nervous hand fingering the pommel of his two-edged hatchet.

“Now tell me where ye might be taking these here captives?” he demanded, very loudly, “They be property, duly held for My Lord the Baron!”

Something official was happening here: he wore a breastplate over his mail now, a crested helmet, bearing the local symbol of authority, a gibbet—rampant or gules or something—on what looked like a field of bloodsoaked mud. The hooded folk gently placed the Lieutenant on the courtyard flagging. The priest I had been leaning on stepped out from under me. I swayed a little bit but managed to stay afoot. Soldiers all around us lost a bit of their transparently artificial nonchalance.

“Here is our warrant and seal!”

My guide had answered in a stage-whisper, nearly as loud as the Bailiff’s bellowed challenge. It was equally intended to be overheard. I let my eyes roam the high walls of the courtyard, looking for a noble face observing the proceedings through a narrow slit, but saw nothing.

From the broad trailing sleeve of a hooded robe, there appeared a parchment. With arthritic fingers, the Bailiff laboriously untied the ribbon, unrolled the document, skipped over the writing—which he likely could not

read anyway—to the heavy wax seal affixed at the bottom. He eyed us, a swat-trickle escaping from under his dented iron cap.

Then he decided: “Why, may God blind me, this be but yon little Bishop’s seal! Where be that, and the written word, of My Lord the Baron?”

From all quarters, his men began sauntering oh-so-casually toward us.

“Here, thou treacherous canine, is word enough for the Baron!”

This was spoken by another of the hooded people—in that same low, threatening whisper—who had slipped up beside the Bailiff. Steel whispered from hidden leather. Something dark was thrust into the fellow’s undefended armpit, out of sight beneath the Bailiff’s arm as two of the priests picked the Lieutenant up. We marched past the bewildered guardsmen to the cart near the open gateway. The Bailiff waved his men away, beads of sweat decorating his unlovely cratered face.

“Th-the w-word of God be the Supreme Law...” he stammered loudly, “Thy Holiest of Orders rightfully acc-acc—b-bows to no temporal authority.”

“Why, you learn canon law quickly, villain,” the weapon-holder whispered, almost sounding amused. “Now you may help us with the oxcart!”

Abruptly one young guardsman stepped forward as if to block our progress, his fire-hardened wooden pike at the ready. With a casual swipe, the free hand of the priest lashed out. The guardsman took a stunned step backward with a ruined face, blood gushing onto the pavement. He collapsed, his pole falling to the flagstones with a clatter.

The tension in the courtyard turned to fury in a wave that swept around its walls. More guardsmen took a step, lowered fire-blackened spearpoints. Swords, daggers, battle axes were loosened in their scabbards.

“No!” cried the Bailiff, his shoulder rising several centimeters under the impetus of the upthrust steel in his armpit, “Stand ye all where ye be! Have that guardsman broken if he lives!” He pointed at the wounded and unconscious youth, but his face had turned to that of the priest. A murderous hatred now raged behind his small, bestial eyes.

Together the two pulled at the harnessing of the animals, turning them toward the gate. With some difficulty they managed to line up the crude planked wheels of the cart to fit between the raised beam-edges of the narrow drawbridge. I very nearly fainted on the spot, only the idea of how Eleva would despise such a display of weakness sustaining me. They half-carried me to the cart, handing me up where I could lie gratefully in clean straw. Remotely I felt them lift the Lieutenant up beside me. Two robed figures took hold of the straps on the animals’ faces, pulled them through the gate onto the suddenly fragile-seeming bridge.

It groaned under the strain.

The other priest now trudged behind us, close enough to touch, had I been able, keeping a hidden eye on the Bailiff who had somehow been persuaded to perch his broad rear-end on the lowered tailgate of the vehicle. As if at an afterthought, the priest jumped up beside the man.

“I yield to thee for now,” the Bailiff hissed between clenched teeth. It was easy, there were so many missing. Veins standing out on his scarred forehead, his voice began to rise as we passed beneath the rust-pitted portcullis. “But we shall all see anon who bows to what authority!”

The outer walls of the castle were now lined at their tops with soldiers, each with a sheet-bronze cap, a leather vest closely sewn with iron rings, a sharpened wooden pike. Each young, disease-marked face peeked out over the high collar of a thick batting of cotton under-armor.

“The Baron,” continued the Bailiff, “Shall hear of—!”

There was the briefest of motions under the man’s arm, no noise at all. The Bailiff stiffened momentarily, lost interest in what he had been about to say, then slumped, propped against the hooded figure beside him as we rumbled off the end of the bridge onto a rutted dirt roadway.

Gradually, miraculously, the Baron’s castle grew small in the distance.

I struggled to an upright position on the pile of straw in the swaying cart, looking at the priest whose weapon had been tucked away again.

“Just what is it that you are you planning to do with us?” I asked, almost surprised that I was beginning to care again—about anything.

We turned a corner, finally losing sight of that hateful pile of stones behind a line of tall trees. The priest was a long time answering.

“First you teach us,” the figure said at last in a loud crackling hiss. It gave the Bailiff a shove. His body tumbled off the side of the road into a ditch, vanished from sight. “Then you disappear, as well!”

## ***ESCAPE TO CAPTIVITY***

**SCAVIANS NEVER SEEMED** to have discovered that wheels should be round.

The man-tall weathered pair on the cart might possibly have begun that way. They were constructed of heavy parallel timbers, bolted together carefully with iron strapping. But apparently it had never occurred to the wheelwright to apply some of that iron strapping to the rims, as tires, so the end-grain had worn less quickly than the rest of the circumference. Ah well, perhaps in another thousand years ...

The straw-covered bed lifted, dropped, lifted, dropped, with every half-turn each of the wheels made, perfectly out of synch with one another.

The Lieutenant did not notice. He lay even more deeply unconscious than before, although he seemed to breathe more regularly. His uniform was as tattered as mine. In addition to his wounded arm he was covered with sores from our long confinement. I wondered what they had done to him, what kinds of torture his unconscious body had endured. Whatever it had been, it did not show—which made me shudder with grisly speculation.

Although nominally winter, only a few hundred kilometers from the planet's northern pole, it was much warmer here, aboveground. My toes, my fingers had started aching as they thawed. I itched furiously all over, the vermin I unwillingly carried with me stirring from their torpor.

Fellow escapees.

How long it would take the Baron to catch on that his Bailiff was never coming back from this excursion, I could not guess. The hooded people seemed altogether too relaxed about it to suit me. My “Pistols, (Darrick), 8mm, Magazine, Revolving, (one each)” were Vespuccian history's most sophisticated handweapons, fabricated directly from specimens discovered aboard the abandoned colony starship. But even they, I had found, could not hope to stand up to a sufficient number of mounted men, primevally equipped but unafraid to die. If the Baron sent his minions after us, I was half-prepared to wake up in my cell again.

Or dead.

Despite such grim considerations, well-shaken by the irregular rocking of the cart, I dropped off into an uneasy sleep at least a dozen times before we made our first stop. I would wake up, startled, remember where I was, assure myself the Lieutenant was okay, watch the hooded figures plodding silently behind us ... silently behind us ... Then awake again, repeating the whole heart-stopping process until it seemed that I had been doing this same idiotic thing for all of my life.

Two of the moons were high now, painfully bright. Sca's star, its sun, is an unbearable blue-white fusion torch, the temperature, the color, of metal being welded in front of your face. Animals, humans, plant-life, all seek refuge from the full deadly light of day, some in burrows or by bundling themselves in thick, reflective, toughened leaves.

Scavian nighttime calls forth life again, illuminated much more brilliantly by the planet's satellites alone than the high-noon summer surface of my own world ever is. Birds sing. Flowers bloom. Peasants stumble from their caves or their tightly-shuttered huts to till their masters' fields. The rare desperate individual forced to travel abroad by daylight does so closely-robed—as these mysterious strangers who carried us with them—even so, at the risk of nasty burns, no matter how many layers of primitively-woven clothing he simmers and sweats in.

A thought struck through the pain-filled fog swirling inside my head: mankind could not have originated here, either! Unless it was this sun they were escaping, just as we, in our own way, had tried escaping the ungenerous star of Vespucci. I could not picture human life evolving on this planet, the place was far too inimical to it. Then again, perhaps the star itself had changed, at some time in the past. Perhaps it burned hotter now than in the early days of Scavian life.

The cart lurched to a stop.

I very nearly slid off the slick yellow straw into the dirt-track of a road, but one of the trailing hooded people steadied me. The one up in front made clucking noises at the animals, wrestling them into a right-angle turn. We trundled into a narrow cavern between two great growths of shrubbery, several meters tall. As the pulling-creatures fed themselves from bags of grain tied to their faces, the hooded ones directed their attention first to the unconscious Lieutenant, then to me.

The Lieutenant they stripped naked, efficiently, dispassionately. They turned him, carefully examining infected cuts, sores, abrasions he had acquired in our short, eventful stay on Sca. They were gentle with his deeply-injured arm, working together in a monastic silence that was perhaps appropriate, somehow generating an atmosphere of calculated haste, cutting away the crude bandage with its sickening cargo.

I had rolled over to watch them work on the Lieutenant, when a sudden lance of pain shot through my broken foot. I stared down at myself with agony-gauzed eyes as a robed figure busied itself at my trouser leg, with what

was left of my stocking. The moment the mangled foot was exposed, I had to look away. It was as bad, I thought, as the Lieutenant's arm. Without question I was going to lose it, counting myself lucky if that was all that I lost. In any event, I would never again—

—abruptly, everything froze.

As one, the three hooded people turned away from the cart. Two of them crossed the narrow roadbed, crouching down behind a big clump of slowly-opening nightbrush to conceal themselves from the direction we had just come—the direction of the castle, of the Baron, of the Baron's murderous riders. The remaining figure hid itself on the near side.

They waited.

How they had detected our pursuers was a mystery. All I knew was that, eventually, there was a sound, a cascade of hollow noise quite unlike any other. It was terrifying, especially since I had heard it for the first time when our camp at the *Asperance* landing site was being overwhelmed. It was the sound of hard-shod animal-feet, pounding in their hundreds on the ground, audible through the very soil itself. Gradually there came, too, the metallic jangle of the mounted warriors the animals bore, their weapons, their equipment, rough shouting, the peculiar hair-stirring high-pitched screaming of the riding-beasts themselves.

As the mounted warriors thundered into sight, I had a plain view abreast from the tiny clearing. Casually, the hooded people stepped into the roadway with a smooth silent motion. The mounted column braked to a dusty, disorganized stop. Archers twisted their arms over their mailed backs for arrows. Axes were loosened in their belt thongs.

Swords were drawn with a ringing whisper.

This was followed by a brief unpleasant exchange of words, an even briefer silence. Then the officer heading the column happened to glance for moment to his right, straight at me. He began to shout a command.

All at once, a broad fan of white-hot energy leaped from the burlap sleeve-ends of the robed people, showering the column, flaring into a wall of flame where it struck the mounted men. In a single horrifying instant the entire troop was engulfed, consumed where they stood, animals, men, without so much as a final scream of terror or pain.

The heat of the thing baked itself onto my face.

When the flames died out a scant few seconds later, exactly as if someone had turned off a gas valve, all that remained in the road were a few blackened, irregular smoky lumps which might once have been saddles.

Even the bones had burned.

As quickly as it had begun, it was over. The three robed figures calmly returned to the cart without looking back. They gave me water, flat-tasting, mildly bitter, drugged. I was not particularly surprised to awaken, swaying, bumping once again, with Sca's four moons about to set.

Daylight was about to arrive.



**DAYTIME ON SCA** is just about twenty-five hours long, Vespuccian.

What's unusual is that so are the nighttimes.

I had been unconscious for quite some while, apparently, wrapped up in a heavy robe like those worn by these strange people who had either captured or rescued us, but with the hood thrown back on my shoulders. My right foot was bound to the knee in clean local coarse-weave concealing something else, some other dressing, comfortable, yet firm.

All right, then, what was missing? What bothered me?

Lying on that pitching wagon, I discovered with a little shock that I had forgotten completely, somewhere in the past few nightmarish weeks, what it was like not to be in constant pain, waking, sleeping, or floating dazedly suspended between the two states as I had been most of the time. It was a peculiar sensation, like being thrown out of a high window. Pain had come to be the hidden foundation of my existence.

The Lieutenant, too, wore a robe, but its long brown sleeve was slitted open to reveal the same rough burlap bandaging where the crude alien sword had nearly cut him through. He was snoring loudly. It was contagious.

What felt like only moments later, I awoke again, the moons apparently still setting. This time, something felt very wrong, deeply disorienting. Perhaps it was a remnant of the drug. I twisted around, glancing reflexively at the Lieutenant, but his color, if one could judge in this slantways light, was steadily returning to normal. He breathed easily, if a bit loudly. The hooded people marched onward, two behind us, stolidly, mutely, any faces they might have possessed hidden away deep within the shadows of their clothing. A third guided the pulling-beasts who could scarcely have been more stoically unresponsive.

Then I had it: the moons were actually rising! I had slept one entire hellish day-period through. To all appearances, our little traveling company had simply kept marching, when I had half expected we would take shelter somewhere, to wait for another night to travel. No wonder I was warm; it was residual daytime heat that I was feeling. This—

—then another thought struck me: what had fooled me was that the moons were on my left. If they were rising, then they should be on my right.

We were traveling south,

Not northward to the city of the Bishop—or the burning-stake.



**ANOTHER NIGHT PASSED.**

In one of my mother's ancient folk songs, there is a passage about some place "where the dawn comes up like thunder". On Sca, it comes up like a fission-bomb explosion. At the first excruciatingly brilliant bead on the clut-

tered horizon, the hooded ones halted the cart again. There had been a false dawn over there for some hours. It is never dark on Sca. Now the strangers stopped to drape heavy fabric over the animals, snuggling string-drawn coverings down over the beasts' placid eyes.

The very air had an expectant smell to it. Insects were suddenly silent, birds nowhere to be seen, nothing rustled in the day-bleached grass.

The Lieutenant's sleep-disheveled robe was bound closely about his body now by gentle, competent hands, his limbs carefully covered, the hood slipped up around his ears. They closed the front with a draw-cord, fumbling deep inside the face for some time until they appeared satisfied. I got basically the same treatment, every square centimeter of my exposed flesh cloaked, everything accomplished in total eerie silence. Once the hood came over my head, one of the robed figures reached in, pulled a dark interior netting across my eyes, reducing my point of view to a small, increasingly brilliant circle. Soon it was like peering out of the mouth from deep within a darkened tunnel.

Creaking into motion once again, we plodded onward under the near-lethal sun, meeting no one, seeing no one, not a single living thing except for trees, bushes, other foliage, their leaves clenched tightly into little knots to resist the deadly glory overhead. Time after time, half dazed, I would move to loosen the heavy stifling robe—my body was drenched in sweat that only made the itching worse—only to have my hands pulled gently away from the fastenings. Then I would remember what the sunlight on this planet could do to human flesh.

On Sca, in addition to the gibbet, in addition to the pyre—as if the rulers here really needed another form of brutality—exposure to daylight was a third form of execution, reserved for miscreant nobility.

Within an hour, everything around us appeared to be washed out, lit only in shades of glaring white, impenetrable black, like an old, over-exposed photograph. The Lieutenant mumbled, tossed, struggled fitfully with his smothering protection. They propped him up, gave him something to drink through a small plastic tube thrust into the face of his hood. Afterward, he rested quietly. Within my own sweltering discomfort, I began to yearn for a sip from the same potion, probably the drugged one they had given me the day before, but it was never offered.

We continued southward.

Slowly, I began to have an idea about what might really be going on here. Growing up, I had been warned never to jump to a conclusion prematurely in the absence of reliable data. This is very good advice. However the human mind—mine, at least—was designed to jump reflexively, on the basis of partial information, whether its owner wants it to or not. Mine was doing that right now. Since nobody else would talk to me, I thought I would give it a chance, at least to explain.

Say that these mysterious characters were from the Church. They dressed the part. They had the Bishop's seal. I do not believe that anybody but a monk,



accustomed to long years of suffering in silence, could have endured the journey thus far as these individuals had, without so much as a sneeze, a hiccup, or a lame joke. I knew less about religion than I had about the manufacturing of weapons, but I knew a little history. The Church of Vespucci, compulsory in the nation's schools, largely ignored by everyone in adulthood, was a transparent prop for the State. It had not always been so; in earlier times it had been active, powerful—divided into a half dozen schisms.

These hooded people might be renegades of a kind, representatives of some faction that wanted neither the Bishop nor the Baron to kill us. Perhaps they wanted our technology—not that they appeared to need it—perhaps they simply wanted to dispose of us themselves. This was not pleasant speculation, but it was the only conversation I had.

Whenever it got boring, I drifted off to sleep.

Exactly as I had done during church services in school.

Nighttime came at last, almost reluctantly, it seemed to me, as if the cruel blazing star overhead somehow enjoyed what it did to the land that lay beneath its hammer-blows. They pulled the cart off of the road again. The animals were fed, then watered lavishly from some nearby source. The Lieutenant was unbound, his vile wounds carefully tended to. His eyes actually opened for a moment. He looked at me with what might have been recognition, perhaps the same mild astonishment that I felt at still being alive, then the man lapsed once more into oblivion.

Gratefully, I unfastened the face-netting before they got to me, undid the hood, spread the robe wide open down the front. It was still breathtakingly hot. It would be several hours yet before the outside temperature dropped appreciably. Sca is lucky that its atmosphere is not thicker. Getting rid of all that insulation helped a good deal anyway.

I almost laughed at the memory of nearly freezing to death in a dungeon only day before yesterday. Now, sweat soaked my hair, ran into my eyes, dripped from the end of my nose. My body vibrated with the heat.

Somewhere over the past several hours, probably in my sleep, I had somehow regained a trace of self-respect, as well. Hooray for me, then. Feeling painfully distended below the beltline, I arose stiffly from the bed of straw, beginning to slip off the end of the cart with the idea of trying to limp over to one of the more inviting-looking shrubberies.

Firm hands restrained me.

“Look, friends,” I told them, “I have to go to the little boys’ bush!”

The two stepped back, giving me room.

I slid the rest of the way, putting weight on my bad foot. It held without much pain, but I was weak, as if my body were made of warm gelatin. Dizzy, I hobbled over to do what a man has to do, trying to ignore three pairs of unseen eyes fastened on my every move. I could not help, however, noticing how careful they were to stand upwind of me. I could not very well blame them

for that, all things considered. If I could have avoided standing downwind of myself, I surely would have.

This time, the animal cart had been brought to rest close beside a shallow, sandy-bottomed stream. Attempting to reorganize the remnants of my clothing underneath the burlap robe, I began to have another idea—maybe not a very sensible one, but only the second idea I had enjoyed in a long time. I decided to savor it. However crazy it might be, it was certainly better being burned at the stake by second-string inquisitioners.

Several yards away, two of the hooded figures were at the cart, fussing with the animals. The third seemed to have been delegated to watch me, staying within a few arms' lengths. I addressed this nearest one.

"Say, are we going to be here for a while?"

There was the very slightest of nods.

"Then how about letting me wash some of the prison out of my clothes?"

No response.

"Look here, Your Reverence, I saw what you people did to a hundred armored troopers. Believe me, I am as harmless as a man can get. I am not going any place you do not want me to go. But I have been steeping in my own filth for a solid month. More, if you count ship-time. Just consider it a last request: maybe it will help your box-office at my witch-burning!"

The swaddled form turned toward its companions at the far end of the clearing. The biggest of them nodded, although it was plainly much too far away for my voice to have carried. On the other hand, they had heard the late unlamented cavalry long before I had. Maybe they were just aliens with good ears. In any case, the nod got passed along to me.

"Thanks, I will do the same for you sometime—in the next life."

I glanced around without being obvious about it, making certain of my surroundings in a manner I had been taught, laboriously drilled in, since earliest childhood. Especially, I made sure of the Lieutenant's location. I had been pleased to see my personal hooded chaperone touch reflexively at its waist at the mention of the troopers it had helped massacred.

Nice of it to show me where the real power was.

I turned, stumping with only half-feigned weariness over to the stream-bank, making an exaggerated production of my crippled weakness. Dropping my borrowed robe onto the grassy bank, I removed my poor old rip-fringed jacket, peeled off what scraps remained of my uniform shirt, unfastened my pants. Underneath, my shorts were in worse shape than the shirt. Both garments were scarcely distinguishable from the filth, the unsloughed flesh, that seemed to be all that was holding them together. They began coming apart in the blood-warm stream the instant I attempted to rinse them. I let the rotting fragments slip away in the current, started scrubbing at my body with clean yellow sand.

And thinking.

Nakedness is an odd thing. Different people certainly react to it differently. I had been acquainted with another lieutenant once, back home on Vespucci when the Navy Reserve had been “temporarily” handling routine urban police work under martial law in one of the first of the Holdout Kingdoms we had overrun. We had been idling on the stone steps of a police station, waiting out our change-of-shift, talking about burglars.

“Corporal,” he had told me, if you ever hear a noise in the night, always take time to grab your pants before you grab your candlestick or crowbar or whatever to confront the thief. Otherwise, you will be at a severe psychological disadvantage. Nakedness equals helplessness. You will know it. The burglar will know it. You will lose. He will win.”

Or something like that.

Later on, my CPO observed wryly that an attack by a stark-naked crowbar-wielding householder might just be a perfect burglar medicine. At the least, it would startle the dickens out of the intruder, maybe even run him off, or at the least, buy you a little extra time for maneuvering.

Personally, I had agreed with the Chief. I had always thought that that lieutenant—exactly like all lieutenants everywhere—was just a little on the prissy side. *College boys!*, as the CPO often snorted with contempt. I was willing to bet, on this oppressively-religious planet, that these hooded people (if someone had thought to ask them) would be likelier to agree with that lieutenant than with my old Chief.

That would be their mistake.

I rinsed out my pants, rinsed out my jacket, enjoying the air on my clean, freshly-abraded skin. Like the Lieutenant, I was covered head to toe with ugly lesions, but they seemed to be healing already. I thought about things some more, like what to do about him. I looked around as unobtrusively as I possibly could, considering the tactical situation.

My guard appeared to be paying more attention to its comrades than to me. Its back was turned. Peripheral vision, I knew from experience, was completely blocked by those hooded robes. I stepped carefully toward the bank, avoiding any telltale splashes or ripples, keeping an eye on the other figures at the cart, as well as the one nearest me. If I could just get hold of whatever weapon had blasted that armored column ...

I put off trying to figure out where the Holy Order of the Teeth of God might have gotten such a thing. Or plastic sipping tubes. Maybe there had been a higher civilization here once, maybe the one that had exiled my poor ancestors to Vespucci. Or, for that matter, there might even have been a previous landing from some other—no, no, stupid, concentrate!

Even in the miserable condition I was in, surely I could overpower one small monk who seemed more interested in meditating on the Great Whatever than in me. I had an advantage—I was desperate. Surely, if I stayed close, they would hesitate to incinerate one of their own, if only for the second or two I needed to puzzle out how their weapon worked.

I had to keep the Lieutenant out of the line of fire.

My foot found the stream-edge where the grassy turf hung over. I glanced down. The sodden burlap on my leg had slipped. Beneath it lay something rubbery, something almost alive in appearance, silvery-gray, like the reflective underside of Scavian leaves in the harsh four-moon light.

I lifted my bad foot carefully up onto the grass, my good foot on a large rock just above the waterline. I balanced, my weight over my good leg which felt like a spring coiled beneath me. Crouching, I breathed in slowly, silently, deeply, trusting to the lifelong martial arts training I had suffered through from gradeschool to bootcamp. I had been good at it, my only “sport”, the only one they give no letter for..

I sprang! Charging across the freshly-opened grass, I threw myself into the air for a flying—then *slammed!* to the ground in shock, the breath blasting out of my lungs. I shook my battered head, looked up at my hooded guard, crouched low in a tense combat stance, hands extended, ready for more trouble any time I was foolish enough to start.

No longer hooded.

I was looking straight into the eyes—afame with fury at the moment—of the most beautiful pale-haired blond female I had ever seen.

## WINDOW ON INFINITY

“HAD ENOUGH, ASSHOLE?”

The weirdly lovely creature circled warily, stepping sideways, one small fist extended, one drawn back like a coiled spring, ready at her waist. Her hair tossed wildly as she moved, lashing at her shoulders like pale fire, enveloping her face, golden highlights, glints of copper, struggling for dominance in the moon-reflected glare of Sca’s primary.

I sat on the grass in the dent I had made, keeping my mouth shut.

“Don’t be too hard on him, Cilly,” another of the priests shouted suddenly, throwing back his hood. “He must have thought we were going to—”

“Stow it, Coup!” she spat, not once taking her eyes off me. They were green, with undertones of that deep bluish glow you find in the heart of a nuclear reactor. “Anybody who sneaks up behind Lucille Olson-Bear better be prepared for what he gets! *And don’t call me Cilly!*”

Then to me: “How about it, jerk, ready to behave?”

I blinked, trying to absorb everything that was happening around me. To my surprise, I was feeling halfway healthy. Without thinking, I braced myself to rise—when a light sweep from a small foot kicked my hand out from under me. I was down again, liking it less every minute.

The man this Lucille Olson-Bear had called “Coup” interrupted once more, coming toward us suddenly in long unmonklike strides, abandoning the bantering tone he’d started out with, for one of warning, of command.

“Quit playing with him, Lucille, that’s an order.” He pointed a big finger at me. “We’re supposed to be on his side. He’s a customer, remember?”

This “Coup” may have been the largest man I have ever seen, with a close-cropped, nearly shaven head that could have been chiseled from a mountainside, a big ugly nose, ears that would have looked like cargo hatches on anyone else. One of his hands was the size of both of mine together.

“Yeah,” I added from flat on the back of my lap, some confidence beginning to return at the prospect of having such an ally to protect me from the little blond, “The customer is always right. Can I get up now?”

I had deserved that second knockdown, a white-belted boot knows better—

“Give us your parole, first!” Lucille had not relaxed from her combative stance, not by a fraction of a millimeter. She still stood over me, tense-muscle, breathing hard with meanness, rather than exertion.

I could match it if I had to: “What the hell good would that do? You do not know me. Maybe I lie a lot.” I was starting to get mad, all right—about a month’s worth of mad, or maybe a lifetime’s. “You tell me what is going on, Goldilocks, then maybe I will give you my parole.”

Perhaps. If she was lucky.

A gentle breeze stirred the trees around the clearing, lifting Lucille’s hair softly. Her cheeks were flushed, tiny dampish curls stuck to the smooth curve of her forehead. The girl was absolutely beautiful.

Terrifying, but beautiful.

“Goldilocks, is it? Well, buddy-boy, what’s going on is a long, complicated—”

“You are not from Sca!” I interrupted suddenly. Here accent was different, more like mine. There was not a mark or a blemish on her gorgeous face. “Nor from Vespucci, which means that there must be a third—”

“Slow down, son.” Coup loomed tall as an airport con-tower over Lucille. “Let’s start with polite introductions—preferably vertical ones!” He leaned down, took my hand, lifted me to my feet like a child.

“Whitey O’Thraight,” I answered the big man reflexively, giving it the official pronunciation, “Armorer-Corporal, Vespuccian Naval Reserve.”

All at once I realized I was standing at attention without benefit of any command to do so. “Coup” affected people that way. Also without benefit of my uniform or any other clothing at all. Oh well, the rank designations tattooed on my arms should be enough uniform for any real Vespuccian.

“There’s a formula we’ve heard before,” Lucille observed to our companion, “Name, function, rank. Buddy-boy, the only thing you left out was your serial number. Haven’t been reinvented where you come from?”

She added, “—And are you ever going to get dressed?”

Lucille appealed to me. Embarrassingly enough, I was beginning to show it. Two long months in space, another month—or an eternity in prison—if that is any excuse. Hastening to the river-bank where I had left my remaining clothes, I called back over my bare shoulder, “Do you people never ask one question at a time? That *was* my serial number.”

“What?” Lucille and Coup said it together.

“Whitey O’Thraight; YD-038. Five digits. Almost a real name.”

It *was* something to be proud of, after all.

Lucille whitened, muttered in a grim, low voice, “Sweet Lysander Spooner’s baby buggy bumpers, what kind of a sick, twisted, rotten culture—”

“Not in front of company, Cilly.”

“*Don’t call me Cilly!*”

The big man laughed hugely, patted Lucille on the head, tousling her hair. “Corporal O’Thraight, I’m Geoff Couper, and this impolitic and violent young female has already introduced herself, I believe. I take no responsibility—nor does anybody else, including herse—*Whoops!*”

As good as Lucille was, Couper was blindingly better, casually blocking her intended sidekick to the belly with an iron forearm, then seizing her extended foot. He held it for a moment as if contemplating twisting it off, then released her with a little push so suddenly that she had to hop for balance. Tension, half a second’s pause, then they laughed. It was like watching a pair of giant mountain predators at play.

Self-consciously, I gathered up the tatters of my uniform, along with what little of my dignity was left. I put the pants on, then the jacket, both wet. While Couper continued sparring with Lucille on a verbal level, I hesitated with the robe they had given me, folding it over my arm. Then, changing my mind, I sought privacy behind a bush, for some reason of irrational modesty. I removed the sodden clothing again.

This was my first real chance to examine the hooded garment. The outer shell was about right for what one might laughingly call the technology of Sca, but it was a deception. I should have noticed it at once. That rough-woven fabric next to my much-abused skin would have hurt. But the robe was lined with the same odd material that was still wrapped around my game leg. Except the silvery-gray stuff was buffed up into a velvety nap, the surface noticeably warmer than the night air.

The front edge of the robe slipped between my exploring fingers. I felt a cylindrical lump sewn into the hem. Examining it, I squeezed an end. Instantly the lining cooled to the touch. Dew began to condense, running off in tiny diamond droplets. Frost started to form. It took several tries, twisting, pinching, before the lining began to dry again.

Who were these people, anyway?



“**WHO ARE YOU** people, anyway?” I demanded as I emerged from the semi-privacy of my dressing shrub, uniform draped over my robe-covered arm.

“There you are, Corporal,” Couper was massaging the leg of one of the draft animals, “For a moment there, I thought you’d decided to go AWOL on us. I guess we didn’t finish the introductions after all, did we?”

Lucille was not in sight.

Couper turned to the last of his traveling companions, a portly, gnomish individual, robe open and hood thrown back. He had a broad face, featuring black bushy sideburns that merged at the bottom of his chin.

Couper put his big hands on our shoulders, “Corporal, say hello to Owen Rogers, our weapons tech. Rog, this is Armorer-Corporal Whitey O’Thraight.”

Rogers raised a skeptical eyebrow at my title, as if he had just been introduced to a genuine flint-knapping savage. He nodded civilly enough, then went back to tinkering with one of the group's incredibly small, impressively potent handweapons. This had wiped out a hundred cavalry? I opened my mouth to speak, but Couper went right on without me.

"I suppose that I ought to add that Owen is also our expedition praxeologist," he observed, "A very busy citizen indeed, our Mr. Rogers."

"Don't call me a citizen, Coup," Rogers replied in a voice higher, more nasal, than I had expected, "I'm too tired to undertake a duel tonight."

Rogers took a stiff paper packet from his robe, extracting what appeared to be thin brown twig. With his thumb, he flicked a small mechanical fire-starter, placed the twig in his mouth, lit the end, drew smoke, puffing it out again. He peered critically at a part he had removed from the weapon, polished it on his robe, peered at it again.

I asked for lack of a better topic, "What is a 'praxeologist'?" Lucille was still among the missing. "More importantly, who in Hamilton's Holy Name are you people? What kind of 'expedition' is this?"

Both men stiffened slightly, as if at something I had said.

"We might ask the same of you, buddy-boy—omitting the damned obscenity."

I whirled. Lucille was right behind me, having come from another section of the little brook. Her wet hair was plastered down, bunched together into a knot at the back of her neck. Even that way she looked good.

"There ain't no such thing as a free lunch," she said, "Tell us something we want to, we'll tell you something you want to know—maybe."

I was just about to ask what obscenity, when the Lieutenant began stirring on the cart. He groaned, babbled a few words, tried to sit up against his good arm. Couper hurried over to him, gently pushed him down again, while continuing to address me as he examined my ailing officer.

"Corporal, where we come from, there was once a primitive people who had time and distance somewhat confused in their cosmology." He glanced over at Rogers. The praxeologist/gunsmith nodded professional confirmation. "You see, they figured that, if you came from far away, then you also came from the distant past. A decidedly odd point of view—"

"Which has its merits," Rogers interrupted, looking up from his work.

"In this instance, perhaps," acknowledged Couper.

He peeled the burlap from the Lieutenant's arm. Underneath was the same rubbery gray dressing I wore. Set into the resilient substance was a small rigid panel of the same color, two centimeters by five, decorated with tiny lights, miniature switches. One by one, as Couper labored over my friend, the little lamps blinked from red to yellow to green.

He returned his attention to me: "Where you come from, Corporal, there will be legends. Stories of a beginning, or an arrival." It was a statement, not a question. He gave me an evaluative squint that seemed to broadcast, even



at its friendliest, that he was not a man to lie to. “There always are. Have you ever heard of a place called ‘Earth’?”

“‘Earth’?” I rolled the unlikely syllable around in my mouth. “Why would anybody name their world ‘dirt’? Is that where you people are from?”

Couper went back to the electronic panel on the Lieutenant’s dressing. Rogers smiled, but it did not disguise a worried look that had accompanied his transformation from artisan to professional—what?

Praxeologist.

“In a manner of speaking, Whitey. Tell me, now, is this Vespucci of yours a city-state, a nation-state, a planet, a planetary system, or —”

“All four by now, most likely. What do you mean by, ‘in a manner of speaking’? I would think that you are either from a planet, or you are—”

“Is that so, Corporal?” Lucille sat on the—what do you call it?—the part of the wagon that is connected with the pulling animals, helping Rogers now to tend the weapons with a sort of absent-minded contentedness that I have seen other women reserve for knitting. I looked down at the ground, suddenly self-conscious, for a variety of reasons.

“What if,” she began, then stopped. “Okay, say a child had been born aboard your ship while you were in transit to this mindforsaken place?”

“He would be a Vespuccian, er ... citizen.” I glanced at Rogers briefly, wondering if the word still offended him. She answered for him.

“I see. Rog, hand me that orifice gauge, will you?” This thing sprayed a little light against the cavalry out there, after I stopped it down for the torture-master. Must be some play in the control ring.”

She might have returned to her work without further comment, but I spoke again. “I meant to ask about that. You did not have my reasons for hating the Bailiff. I realize he was about to shout for help, but why—”

“Constitution! I’d planned to fry the scum whether he made a peep or not!” Lucille answered cheerfully, tightening some adjustment at her weapon’s muzzle-end, “That’s standard policy with us—for his kind.”

I must have goggled.

Rogers stepped in: “Lucille’s standard policy, she means. Still, there’s something to be said for that, too. It’s a reliable method of measuring how civilized an individual—or an entire planet—really is. Savage cultures encourage torturers. Merely barbaric ones tolerate them, sometimes torture them back in revenge. While a truly advanced culture—”

“Attempts to rehabilitate them?” I asked, beginning to feel that possibly I understood this fellow. The Vespuccian educational system warns everybody against the few like him at home, overrationalizing, sentimental—

“Just another word for torture,” Rogers replied evenly, jerking my assessment of him out from under me, “Or a subtle variation on it. No, we kill them, as Lucille says, like any other vermin, swiftly and humanely. And it’s also lots cheaper than rehabilitation or any other alternative.”

“A plasma-gun under the armpit,” Lucille added before I could readjust, “simply does wonders for the local rate of cultural advancement.”

Rogers chuckled, “Not to mention underarm odor!”

Suppressing a grin of his own, Couper grunted, wrapped the burlap back around the sleeping Lieutenant’s real bandage, fiddling with the temperature-adjusting lump at the edge of the unconscious officer’s robe.

“Corporal, if I let this conversation go any further without ...” He stopped, started up again: “Son, bloodthirsty comments to one side, we’re basically a scientific exploration team, assigned to study this garbage-dump of a planet. Other questions—and answers, do I make myself clear, Lucille?—had better wait until we get where we’re going.”

Lucille stuck her tongue out but remained silent.

“Which is where, scientifically speaking?” As I watched, the girl reholstered her weapon somewhere underneath her robe. Rogers began putting his gunsmithing tools away in a fabric roll, took the feed-bags from the animals’ faces, tossed them into the cart beside the Lieutenant.

“That, Corporal, is a pretty good example of a question that’ll have to wait,” Couper replied, “Anyway, doing something is better than just being told about it. Saddle up, scientists, we’ve got miles to make!”



**THUS IT WAS** back to the same plodding journey as before.

Only this time, there were certain differences.

I sat up on the end of the wagon, having had the little control panel on my own dressing examined, the burlap cover drawn back over it. All of my lights had been green. Except for the negligible weight of the thing—the burlap on the outside weighed more—plus an occasional surprising deep healing twinge, my broken foot felt good as new. The—Earthians?—did nothing to discourage me from walking on it.

Of course they did nothing to discourage me from doing anything else, either, including lying down beneath the wheels of the moving cart, or blowing my brains out. (Although they did not offer to lend me a pistol.) The subject of parole had not arisen again. They did not seem to care, now, whether I escaped or not. They simply assumed that I would come along with them meekly. They were right about that, too: wherever they were headed had to be a lot better than where I had been.

But now, at least, they talked to me, Also to one another, joking, arguing, even answering more questions that I sneaked in from time to time, almost as if trying to catch up for their earlier stoic silence, the purpose of which remained unexplained. We ate emergency ration bars not terribly different from those I had “enjoyed” on the way from Vespucci.

Theirs actually tasted like something.

Chalk, I think.