

THE VENUS BELT

L. NEIL SMITH

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To my parents, Les and Marie Smith, and to
treasured memories of the lives and works of
H. Beam Piper and Karl Bray.

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Let no one hail this occasion as binding together our myriad interests and separate wills. Those represented here, the, respectively, United States of America and Mexico, the former Dominions of Newfoundland and Canada, the Republics of Quebec, Alaska, California, Texas, and Cuba—all enjoy unique histories and traditions which must be neither lost nor rendered inconsequential.

Rather, let us say that the barriers between us have been cast down, so that those histories and traditions might live and mingle freely as they will, toward a new synthesis, greater than the parts combined to create this, our own new North American Confederacy.

President Benjamin R. Tucker
In Continental Congress
July 2nd, 117 A.L.

I: ESPIONAGE CONFEDERATE STYLE

Tuesday, February 23, 223 A.L.

Denver's overzealous District Attorney wouldn't be raiding any more mom-and-pop porno stands. Not after last night's covert photo session in his basement—that extra room nobody's supposed to know about.

I'd chosen a wintry evening when he was out addressing Concerned Prudes Against Literacy, or whatever they call it. Breaking in was a cinch—I've had plenty of practice. So were the pictures—my light-amplifier's bigger than the camera it attaches to, the size of a .38 slug.

And what a collection! Whips, chains, video cassettes. I haven't seen so many rubber suits since they took "Sea Hunt" off the air. Next morning I sent a swell assortment of eight-by-ten glossies to the *News-Post* and *Rocky Mountain Liberty*, following up with an anonymous call, but I didn't linger on the phone.

It wasn't that I feared a trace, or SecPol's voice-analysis procedures. In the first place, the call was routed over a line that isn't even supposed to exist, courtesy of the Colorado Propertarian Party. And anyway, I used a Confederate-model vocal synthesizer, the kind chimpanzees and gorillas use to communicate with other folks. Took me six months to learn how to work the bloody thing.

In the second place, I'm totally above suspicion, with the pluperfect alibi: I've been dead for twelve years.

Mainly, I was in a hurry. I had an appointment in a broom closet, and was late for a game of golf. You might *call* it golf. I do.

My death? A reasonable, but fortunately unwarranted conclusion on the part of my former employer, the City and County of Denver, circa 1987. Though another several billion people—including critters I didn't even know about then—had called it 211 A.L. That's *Anno Liberatis*, and if you've got enough fingers to count up to 1776, you can figure out why for yourself. Now they're calling it 223 A.L., and in the good old U.S.A., it's 1999.

I put the phone away. The *News-Post* wanted the story, all right, and I wasn't much worried about the city's second largest paper, because, at that moment, Jenny Noble, *Rocky Mountain Liberty's* editor in chief—and national Propertarian chairperson—was handing me a grilled cheese

sandwich. I moved my soggy topcoat so she'd have a place to sit—her desk, after all—and slung my shoulder holster over the back of my chair. The battle-worn Smith & Wesson .41 clunked a couple of times before it stopped swinging. The edition in Jenny's wastebasket was yesterday's, but I was two months out of touch with my native land, so it evened out. Jenny interrupted my perusal of the front page before it got started:

"You and your cute little camera have a busy night? I understand they're really going to run the pictures."

Slender and freckled, Jenny's a pleasure to be in the same room with, only partially because she's pretty. She communicates enthusiasm, and her horde of gentle revolutionaries seemed to get the work out just to please her. Somewhere in her early forties, I believe, but it wouldn't matter, even if she *weren't* getting arteriosclerosis in the Confederacy.

"You bet your sweet by-line they are," I answered through fried bread and melted plastic cheese. "Is it just me, or is there a new appreciation for the Bill of Rights over there? Lady on the city desk said they've been trying to get the goods on the D.A. for a long time."

She grinned, which I enjoyed, and shut her door against the clamor from the crowded office beyond. Printers clattered through the glass; people tossed jokes and good-natured insults across the room. An occasional paper SST dipped and soared among the light fixtures. "There wasn't always a *lady* on the city desk. Her predecessor got permanently blue-penciled by some lunatic from the Right to Life Action Squad—didn't change their editorial position on abortion, thank goodness, but it sparked a timely re-evaluation of the *News-Post's* stance on gun control!"

I laughed. She reached past me for a sheaf of print-outs from the in-basket, leafing through to check the status of a hundred subversive little exercises like mine last night. Somebody entered from the din-filled boiler room and dumped off another two-inch stack of hard copies. She looked up with a little frown. "You really have to go home right away, Win?"

I nodded. Win is me: Edward William Bear, late of Denver's finest—even later for my golf game—former homicide dick, now P.I. and part-time spy for the North American Confederacy. If that's too melodramatic, how about loving husband and soon-to-be-father, at the astonishing (at least to me) age of damned near sixty?

I swallowed another bite. "I could lie and add 'regretfully,' but I'm getting pretty old for these uncivilized Colorado winters." I glugged down half the mug of Campbell's soup she offered, watching snow fall heavily outside the second-story corner windows. My feet were icy, soaked clear through, but it wasn't just the weather; it was a dozen years of growing accustomed to clean air, instant hassle-free transport, and virtually nonexistent crime. I glanced at the day-old headline again and shuddered:

“Don’t be ridiculous. You look ten years younger just since you smuggled that load of coke and silver over last December.” She gazed out at the noisy, bustling office, remembering. “Now *that* was a merry Xmas!”

I couldn’t help agreeing, on both counts—though ten years might be stretching it. Rejuvenation’s a gradual thing, especially for a guy who lived his first fifty eating, drinking, and breathing all the wrong stuff. “Clarissa gets the credit—Win Bear’s Practical Health Tip *Numero Uno*: marry up with a Healer, a beautiful one, if possible.”

Another smug survey of the semifrozen brown slush in the street, and I finished my sandwich, set the mug firmly on Jenny’s desk—it would most likely be buried in computer-droppings before anybody got a chance to rinse it out—and “Time to abscond. Tell your fellow-conspirators so long for me. Any time you need my talents as a burglar again...”

“You can’t get off *that* easily, Officer!” She rose with me to deliver a crushing hug and a peck on the cheek. “Love to Clarissa, and I’d better hear the *instant* your daughter arrives, understand?”

“*Of!* You’ll be the first to know—in *this* universe, anyway.” I gathered up my coat and gun, folded the newspaper under my arm, and threaded through the maze of desks in the outer office. Against one wall on a yellow flag, a stylized rattler warned DON’T TREAD ON ME!, while a hand-lettered sign read THANK YOU FOR POT SMOKING.

Half a hundred defiantly colorful posters advertised the recently launched Fraser campaign. D. Nolan Fraser had created the Party back in 1971, unaware that the Confederacy existed. Two decades later, as Denver’s first Propertarian mayor, he’d pulled the city out of its share of a nationwide depression, and now, with a little imported help, the polls gave him an even shot at dragging the whole country, kicking and screaming, toward “civil liberties and economic freedom” via four years’ residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Hail to the Chief.

Hail, yes.

At the last desk, a girl had a dispenser of pop-ups printed to resemble federal neobucks; she blew her nose and threw the tissue in a wastebasket. The guy next to her repeated the gesture with genuine government-issue, and they both giggled at the green ink it left on the end of his proboscis. He grinned up at me and pointed to the placard taped to the wall above him: IN GOLD WE TRUST.

I shook my head and stepped into the reading-room, looking forward to some quiet. Halfway to the broom closet, I swiveled, surprised by the chattering of a printer even in this sanctuary. At a library table, typing furiously, sat—another Jenny.

“Last time I heard, you were doing business out on Ceres.” I hefted my snow-soaked topcoat to a more comfortable position over my arm. “Very hush-hush. Got a chip from Lucy and Ed about it. How’ve you been, Prez?”

President of the Confederacy, that is.

“Ex-prez, *por favor*.” She handed copy to an assistant, who hurried it off to god-knows-where. “I understand Olongo’s thinking about a third term, poor masochistic old ape. Say, what’s all this about his getting held up?”

That had been the day I left; I didn’t know enough about it yet to tell her, but spread the paper out to show its chilling headline. “Crime marches on—everywhere, it seems lately. Why do you suppose they’re only taking women?”

“Probably because they’re *men*. This makes over a hundred fifty thousand, doesn’t it?” She shook her head grimly.

“In the Americas and Western Europe, anyway. I haven’t really been keeping score.” I glanced down at another column. “Says here there’s another dozen IRS men missing, too.”

“Yes, and sales of canvas and quicklime are up in seven western states and rural New Jersey—old joke. But *nobody* supposes that’s got anything to do with the kidnapped woman—it’s just another *healthy* sign.” She patted the protruding handle of a hefty automatic tucked into a holster underneath her jacket. “Anyway, thank goodness it hasn’t spread to the Confederacy—and while I’m over here, it’s not going to happen to me, either!”

Jenny Smythe is just as decoratively energetic as Jenny Noble, and for an excellent reason; while the latter was being conceived in the United States, her charming “twin” began existence in the Confederacy at precisely the same instant. Yet physiologically she’s four years younger, due to some advanced paratronic skulduggery called stasis delay: her mama wanted her, right enough, but not just at the moment, thank you.

Complicated, isn’t it? In the history I grew up with, Alexander Hamilton decreed a tax on whiskey, almost touching off a second revolution. President Washington mobilized fifteen thousand federal troops to quiet it down, abetted by a professor-type named Albert Gallatin who didn’t want to see his fellow Pennsylvanians slaughtered.

End of Whiskey Rebellion.

In the Confederacy, Gallatin’s counterpart organized the irate booze-farmers, conned the bluecoats into taking his side, and marched on Philadelphia. Old George went to the wall; Hamilton beat it Prussiaward, inaugurating a minor quasi-fascist movement that caused trouble for a couple centuries afterward.

End of Federal Government, however.

While Jenny Noble’s riding herd over an unruly crowd of anarchists whom Gallatin might’ve kissed on all four cheeks in sheer Discordian delight, Jenny Smythe makes frequent visits stateside to lend a seditious hand. I’m not sure whether all this qualifies as “synchronicity”; it’s just one of a million semi-coincidences that need better explaining, at least to this retreaded old flatfoot.

“Well,” she said finally, “there’s good news, too. Fraser’s begun clicking with the media, almost a year before the Demagogues and Republicrats even nominate *their* mealy-mouthed barrel scrapings.” She indicated the books lying open on the table, works that Gallatin had never gotten around to writing in this here branch of probability.

“So you figured Fraser might crib a stirring speech or two from *Rule of Reason* or *Principles of Liberty*?” I sneaked a peek at my watch, an annihilation-powered goodie from the Confederacy’s fifty-year-old Lunar colonies.

“Hmmp! I’ve been known to give a stirring speech or two, myself.”

“Yeah. The last one *started* this whole expensive, complicated, and probably unethical undertaking. Well, write on, sister! Dinner’s a-cookin’, and probably so’s the little woman by now, late as I am.”

Jenny’s flunky stood waiting impatiently for the next batch of profundity. She let him fidget. “If Clarissa hears that ‘little woman’ crap, it’ll be *you* doing the cooking, right up to your prominent ears in the soup!”

“No thanks”—I curtsied—“just had some—tomato bisque, I believe. And now, dear former Chief Executive, *au ‘voir*. My closet awaits without.”

“Pass,” Jenny answered, turning down a terrific straight line, “I’ll be back in Laporte by the time your daughter’s due.” She made a show of looking me over. “Guess I’m sort of morbidly curious how she’ll turn out.”

I replied with a raspberry cheer, turning again to the closet, the only Propertarian institution that hasn’t changed in twelve years. Originally a tiny, insignificant splinter group valiantly determined to shove America back in the direction Tom Paine had pointed it, the Party had occupied a lonely disinfected cubicle here at Colfax and York amidst an otherwise pee-stained conglomeration of leftists, eco-freaks, and latter-day Luddites. Now Jenny’s yahoos owned the building, printing presses, hundreds of telephones, even a lively public bar downstairs. *And* numerous less well advertised facilities that SecPol—the Federal Security Police—even in its presently chastened condition, would doubtless frown upon severely.

One of those was this closet. I forced the creaking door aside and squeezed in. Peace at last. Here were the old familiar dingy sink with a little brown spider homesteading it as always, a couple of rusted buckets, a plastic garbage pail, and a damp, moldering smell that titillated my gag reflex. There was also a dry rotted two-by-four on the wall with nails sticking out from which depended a ratty battery of mops and brooms. Pulling at the frayed cord dangling in my face, I squinted in the fifteen-watt illumination, counting nails on the rack, and pushed up *hard* on the third, fifth, third again, and seventh from the left.

A hole in the universe—the P’wheet/Thorens Probability Broach—irised open before me. When the aperture was large enough, I stepped through gingerly, unwilling to test its matter-annihilating properties with

a coattail or the heel of my shoe. Behind me, the Broach dwindled like the little dot you used to get when you switched off a TV set, then vanished with a *pop!* and a tiny, star-bright flash of blue.

I'd made it safely once again, to the other side of reality.

2: VOICES FROM THE STARS

Eyes watering in the sudden glare of Laporte's Inter-world Terminal, I stepped through a glassed-in security booth onto the concourse. Commercial gunmen circulated, alert for the occasional unfriendly immigrant. The Confederacy welcomes strangers, but likes to look them over first. The only import we reject is hostile intentions.

Like many another "breakthrough," the Probability Broach got invented by mistake. A dolphin—*Tursiops truncatus*—name of Ooloorie Eckkicheck P'wheet had been aiming for the stars. Her human partner, Professor DeeJay Thorens—who might've looked more natural, *without* her labcoat, somewhere among the pages of *Penthouse*—had cobbled the prototype together, and I'd been their first unwitting sample, accidentally collected.

Laporte's a hop, skip, and a universe—call it sixty miles—from Denver. Each has its counterpart in the other's continuum, the former as a minuscule Fort Collins suburb, the latter as the sleepy village called Saint Charles-Auraria. Each was once a candidate for capital of Colorado, Denver for its railroad. But Confederate *stagecoaches* ran on steam, so Laporte, an Overland Trail depot, became a population center of two million.

Far across the stadium-size terminal, a giant holo applauded KING-SLEY'S PENNSYLVANIA WHISKEY—THE DRINK THAT MAKES YOU DRUNK! Truthful and to the point, especially for brand-new refugees from a hundred Prohibitions. After a couple days in my native land, always more narrow and depressed than I usually remembered, I could use a drink, myself. Even Kingsley's Pennsylvania Crude.

Along the shining concourse, other agents, spies and smugglers, emerged the same way I'd just done, the familiar flash and *pop!* announcing them. Even more departed, laden with equipment, trade-goods, bound for a million secluded phone booths, jungle clearings, and "deserted" warehouses. Elsewhere, automated Broaches fed radio signals and printed propaganda which would appear out of nowhere anywhere from Salt Lake City to Peking Square. Huge freight machines rumbled in another portion of the Terminal.

I'd had a lot of doubts, initially, about the infiltration of my country, and I'm still wrestling with the moral ones. Hell, no one's ever *certain*, but

unless all human aspirations are to bog down in a syrupy fog of second guessing, we have to push on. Whatever the consequences may be, the alternative's worse. What bothered me originally was logistics: thanks to Gallatin's successors, the Continental Congress is little more than a ritual, hasn't convened in over a decade, and likely never will again. No taxes, no regulation of any kind (all that got settled, with George Washington's hash, back in 1794), so how do you scrape up enough valuta and person-power to subvert the universe next door?

Well, Kingsley's Whiskey, for example, could use a few billion new customers—it's pretty much a one-time purchase—and so could Laporte Paratronics, Securitech, Ltd., Neova Hovercraft. It's a new twist on the concept of industrial espionage: Confederate entrepreneurship wants a free market established in America sometime yesterday afternoon if possible. Shucks, this latest caper of mine was for an old respected chain of family pornographers.

Forget "redeeming social value," dirty pictures are *fun*. When I die I want my ashes sprinkled over a nudist camp.

I waved back at a couple of operatives I knew as they vanished into a Broach. Their specialty was stopping counterfeiters—the kind that grind out bushel basketsful on government printing presses. Sure hoped they'd be careful with all those blasting caps.

The less-reasonable satrapies of my homeworld are getting even shorter shrift. I remember reading about World War II, when the Allies dropped millions of crude single-shot "Liberator" .45s to European partisans. Stamped out by General Motors for \$1.71 apiece, each pistol came with a bubblegum comic illustrating its operation and purpose: sneak up behind Herr Nazi, blow away his mind, trash the disposable zipgun, and appropriate the enemy's Mauser or P38. We're pursuing identical tactics via Broach, with substantially more sophisticated but equally inexpensive hardware. Next time the Russians "discipline" Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan, they're in for a humiliating shock.

So, for that matter, are the Israelis.

I hopped onto a walkway and rode upstairs a couple of levels into a more conventional underground intersection. Colorfully dressed shoppers gawked briefly at my otherworldly shirt and tie, beat-up felt hat, gray tubular suit, and comfortable brown loafers. (Once a cop, always a cop—had to change before I went out to the club.) Then, perhaps remembering the terminal below, they went about their business, respecting my fundamental right to unmolested eccentricity.

I found a Telecom and punched our combination. Clarissa's a blonde, sort of cuddly and golden, with eyes that are difficult to label: green, hazel, something like that; they change. Her features welled up in three dimensions before the flat white screen, but I hardly got a word in—

“This is Clarissa Olson-Bear, or rather a recording of me. I’m not home right now, and Win’s...out of town. Please call our professional numbers for referrals or messages—and if you’re a house burglar, you’ll be interested to hear we’re covered by Griswold’s Security.”

Brr. I was almost afraid of them *myself*. Their company motto wasn’t *quite* “We Don’t Take Prisoners,” but they gave that impression. Too bad Captain Forsyth, our old Professional Protectives man, had retired last year.

I diddled with the keyboard again, my Neova HoverSport answered with a cheery loyal *Honk!* I gave it some instructions and escalated on up into the Confederate sunshine. Standing at the fancy pastel curbing, I looked over my shoulder. The foothills west, outside the kindly influence of Cheyenne Ridge Power & Climate, were buried under three feet of wet slush. Yechhh.

Given its head, the little Neova’s a conservative driver, so I had some minutes to kill. There was a Turner Vendicom right in front of me, its supporting post anchored in the rubbery curbside. I fumbled for a copper, dropped it in, and let the seat unfold, flipping channels randomly as I got comfortable.

Must be news time somewhere.

The little screen seemed to expand before my eyes. “—at radio observatories throughout the System, continue fascinated by allegedly intelligent signals originating in the constellation Cygnus. A spaceship would require hundreds of years to get out there and see what’s really going on, but in the meantime, here’s commentary on this baffling phenomenon by Channel 1572’s resident philosopher, Rod Mac—”

Click! No point listening to that jerk. This stuff was stale news years before I’d come to the Confederacy: inarticulate groanings, mouthings of apparent distress; something like intercepting single sideband on an AM radio, or listening to Dutch or Norwegian—sounds you somehow just miss understanding. But hell, whales often make noises like they’re being slowly barbecued, and that’s when they’re having a party. Ask me, it’s interstellar swamp gas.

I turned to channel 1789: “—unethical and imprudent,” declared the sober tones of the System’s premier newscaster—and self-styled Voice of the Stars. He nodded his fatherly gray head into the camera. “Centuries may pass before the final results are in, but interference with another culture’s values, the right of the United States to take whatever course it chooses no matter how we disapprove, endangers fundamental balances no human, simian, or cetacean truly understands. We may have reason to regret such tampering. At least that’s the way it looks, Tuesday, February twenty-third, 223 A.L. This is Voltaire Malaise, Ceres Central, good night.”

Good night, Voltaire, and good timing. The HoverSport pulled up and I poured myself in. After two days manhandling smelly rubber-tired infernal-combustion Brazilian-made contraptions around on concrete, sulfur, and asphalt-covered streets, it was a relief to set my fusion-powered toy on automatic, feel its electrostatic impellers fluff the skirt out, whisking me home along the green and grassy thoroughfares of Laporte.

I checked the routing program and grimaced. No wonder the car had taken so long. It'd come by way of the McKinley Bypass, whose owners recently had gone on an irrational STAY ALIVE—DRIVE 85 kick. Another week of that and they'd be in receivership. I reprogrammed the Neova and goosed up to a safe and proper hundred and ten.

That's Jeffersonian metric miles per hour.

Voltaire Malaise: funny how the public, even in a country geared to three or four centuries' life expectancy, still associates wrinkles and graying hair with wisdom, instead of what they really are: symptoms of a terminal disease. Easy enough for an expatriated pundit like him to crab about "interference with another culture's values"—he hadn't Broached victims of those values out of torture chambers and "mental hospitals," maimed, broken, Thorazined out of their skulls.

I had.

My world had been a fucked-up mess before the Confederacy butted in: depression, hyperinflation, stultifying regulations, and continuous brushwar to distract the gullible. People fought back: fully half the economy had gone to underground barter, but hysterical government countermeasures—toll-free IRS finklines, highly publicized black-market prosecutions, magnetically coded neobucks, and finally, the feds' last desperate grab, the Value-Added Tax—had ground the wheels of national survival to a tooth-rending halt.

Maybe I even agreed with old Voltaire on a couple of points. Americans needed the help they were getting, but was it right to keep it secret? Malaise insisted the Confederacy's real frontier was outward; he'd gone so far as to move his entire operation to the asteroids. Nowadays, half the folks I knew seemed to be following his example. I even caught myself daydreaming about it.

But hell, I was happy as a clam in Laporte with Clarissa, and my work—unethical and imprudent though it may be—was going to be important for a long while. The U.S.A. wasn't out of the woods yet.



626 Genêt Place, and home. I tripped out of the shower, fresh and dry, and lasered off a few whiskers, admiring myself in the mirror. Not bad for fifty-nine—in fact, not bad for thirty-nine, thanks to Confederate medicine. The minor bulges here and there lent me a little dignity, I thought. God knows I needed it at five feet seven and an eighth. And a full head

of bushy black hair didn't hurt, either—when I'd blown into this universe, it'd been with a rapidly retreating fringe of gray. So I looked like an underweight Sumo wrestler; Clarissa said I was handsome, and her word was good enough for me.

I changed into conventional baggy pants and poncho, pulled on hand-tooled gaucho boots, and switched my .41 Magnum from the shoulder rig to a wide, comfortable gumbelt. It's an elderly Model 58, a spare, no-nonsense punkin'-roller whose original bluing has long since worn through to a mellow gray patina. Since this was golf day, I pocketed some extra rounds of the special 240-grain load I prefer, grabbed a box of snake-charmers for the tricky shots, and went back down to the garage.

Owl Canyon Country Club nestles at the foot of Cheyenne Ridge where potent unseen thermals from the fusion power plant enhance the protective nature of the hogback nature provided. In another universe, there's often dry footing in Fort Collins when Denver's up to its asshole in dozerbait. Here, as in Camelot, it never snows, nor rains, nor hails, nor even sleet, except by appointment. If the mails weren't electronic, postmen'd have a cushy job.

I found Clarissa and Captain Forsyth at the third green, affectionately nicknamed *El Presidente*. It was just going dusk, but a utility satellite shone brightly on the prairie. Not wanting to disturb my darling pregnant roommate, fetchingly attired in a suitably expanded scarlet coverall, I leaned back against a Greyhound-size boulder, torched up a stogie, and watched her getting ready. At her right, a telecom extension was just winding up its recorded instructions: "*When you hear the tone, the clock will start. Par for El Presidente is ten seconds. Take your position.*"

Easiest green on the whole course. As the rules demand, Clarissa turned her back to the fairway, lifting her arms above her shoulders. She caught me loitering against the rock, lighted up about a megawatt's worth, with dimples, then returned her concentration to the matter at hand. An .11-caliber Wesley Electric hung at her waist in that goddamned suede cross-draw holster I've been trying to talk her out of for years. Hard convincing her, since she's faster on the draw than I am.

The Telecom went *Boop!* Clarissa wheeled gracefully, pistol materializing in her hands before the man-shaped plastic silhouettes—three of them, in hard-to-pick-up camouflage—finished popping erect.

Pfff! *Pfff!* *Pfff!* The linear-induction weapon ripped each target twice, shock waves from its tiny ultrasonic projectiles blasting through the buff-colored plastic. She reloaded in a twinkling of highly competent fingers, compliant to the six-shot rule (despite its basic stupidity—Webley magazines contain two hundred inch-long steel needles), and raked each target twice again. Time: 5.47 seconds, faster than I'd ever seen her; poten-

tial motherhood wasn't slowing her down a bit. Score: the Telecom read fifty-six, four points shy of perfect.

"*Oh, shit!*" observed my refined, genteel wife. "Win, you're home!" To negate any possible connection between this pair of statements, she came running before I could caution her not to, and threw her arms around me. I felt her weapon bobble against my shoulder blades where it dangled from her fingers. Forsyth stared discreetly into the distance, a old-fashioned monkey if ever there was one.

We came up for air, and I patted her well-rounded five-month tummy. "I trust you're skipping the obstacle course today?"

"Who's the Healer around here? Of course I'm skipping obstacles, silly, why do you think we're over here on the baby course?" Before I could get in the obvious rejoinder, she added, "Now say hello to the Captain, and take your shot. We'll average scores and spot you ten points."

"Better make it twenty, I've had a hard couple of days. How y'doing, Cap?" I shook hands with the pistol-champ emeritus of Greater Laporte, gin-rummy shark *par excellence*, and one of my oldest, closest friends. He's also a fully qualified chimpanzee.

"All right, I guess." He didn't really speak: chimpanzees can't. Instead he used a wristwatch-size synthesizer that picked up subliminal muscular movements and translated them into speech. "Nobody told me retirement was such bloody hard work! Be glad to get rid of this arthritis, though. Sorry I left it so long. Win, as soon as I'm through rejuvenating, I'm thinking about going back into business on my own. Ceres, maybe Pallas—need a partner, maybe."

"That does it. We're going to have to emigrate if we ever want to see our friends again. How about it, sweetheart, once the baby comes?"

"Why wait? Take your shot, and we'll do it right now!"

"In front of the Captain, here? It's only been two days, honey, and he embarrasses so easily." I waggled my cigar and did obscene things with my eyebrows.

"Oh shut up and take your shot!"

I like a girl who turns that color. I clamped the cigar firmly in my teeth, stepped up and waited through the instructions, back to the targets, hands above my shoulders—*Boop!*—and turned, feet planted wide, elbows locked, left arm pulling back. The front sight rose to the 5-ring.

Blam, Blam! Blam, Blam! Blam, Blam! I thumbed the cylinder open, working the ejector-rod with my left palm. My right hand found a loader at my belt and slammed the fresh rounds home. I gripped again and snapped the weapon closed. *Blam, Blam! Blam, Blam! Blam, Blam!* Score: a perfect sixty. Time...

Eight and a half seconds? Well, you can't have everything.

I reloaded once again, scrounging up my precious hand-imported brass, and stepped to the line to join my companions, who still had their hands over their ears.

“You *ever* gonna trade that plague-eaten noise-maker off?” Forsyth gave me the sourest of looks. “If muzzle-blast was stopping-power, son, you’d be the deadliest gunman in North America!” He stepped forward, limbering up his well-worn .476 Savage, and turned toward us, disregarding the instructions as he waited for the tone. “Bloody firecracker!”

“He never listens on that subject, Cap, I’ve been trying for years to— Oops! The baby just moved—probably covering *her* ears, too!”

I put a gentle arm around my mate. “Hush, the Captain’s trying to concentrate.”

“I’ll concentrate better when my ears stop ringing! Apologize to your daughter, Win, otherwise she may not want to come into the—”

Boop! Forsyth spun around and drew his autopistol, ripping through six rounds so fast I could hardly tell them apart. He dropped the empty magazine, rammed home a spare, and zipped through another quick six. Score: sixty, of course. Time: four and a tiny fraction seconds.

Arthritis be damned, remind me never to get the Captain *really* riled.

BEEP! Only the old chimp failed to go for his gun: I reholstered mine and watched my blushing bride do likewise, sticking out her tongue at me as I reached into a belt pouch for my pocket-pager, the only one in Laporte, possibly unique in all the Confederacy.

“And that’s another thing,” she told him. “How any civilized being tolerates a nosy, interrupting nuisance like that. . .”

“Then don’t interrupt so often, dear.” I wasn’t quite adroit enough to spare my shin a wifely kick. Forsyth simply shrugged his furry shoulders. He knew me, almost as well as Clarissa pretends not to sometimes, and understands how an old cop’s habits die hard. I limped dramatically to the Telecom and undedicated it. There, relayed from our machine at home, was another pretty face. Just my lucky day, I guess.

“Winnie? Clarissa, girl? This here’s Lucy!” Only this face hadn’t been so pretty when I’d first seen it, splotched and withered, wrinkled with old age and radiation sickness, topped with a mop of snow-white hair and an outrageous paisley sunbonnet.

Lucille Gallegos Kropotkin had lived next door to the house Clarissa and I now occupied, neighbor and friend to a good friend of mine, Edward William Bear—my *own* counterpart in this world. Lucy had gotten well, regained her youth, hitched up with Ed, and moved out to the asteroids. I looked closely now at her warm dark eyes, olive skin, and glossy black hair. Pretty sexy for 148.

“Listen, you two,” she advised, “this here’s a recordin’—can’t wait around fer signals t’get there an’ back. I was gonna call anyway, see how

th' baby's comin' along an' all, but...well, it ain't gonna be as pleasant as all that, now."

She glanced down at some object in her hand and shook her head.

"I got trouble. Somethin' fishy goin' on out here, an' Ed—th' dummy—started pokin' round, rusty at detectivin' as he was..."

She stopped, squinted hard against a flow of tears that was visibly only seconds away. "Anyhow, he—Win, I hate like th' dickens t'put you out, a daughter on th' way, an all, but—Ed's been missin' fer *days*, an' I found *this* in his desk an hour ago. You'll know what it means."

She held a medallion to the pickup, round, about an inch and a half in diameter, bronze. I didn't have to inspect it to know there was a date on one side, 1789. On the reverse loomed the eerie trademark of the System's foremost enemies of liberty: the Hamiltonian Eye-in-the-Pyramid.

"Win, get out here pronto! He may already be d-dead by now!"

3: GORILLA MY DREAMS

Wednesday, February 24, 223 A.L.

"I am *not!*" Clarissa stamped a foot she hadn't seen in weeks. In the thick carpeting of our gymnasium-size living room, the effect was lost.

"You are too!" I sat, chomping on my cigar, and glowered at her.

"*I am not!*"

"You are *too!*"

Clickety-click-click. "Can I be excused from this colloquium?" My chief assistant and apprentice gumshoe, Koko Featherstone-Haugh, leaned back on a sofa, knitting a sweater for the baby. Koko's a youngish female gorilla, favorite niece of the President of the North American Confederacy.

And they pronounce it "Fanshaw."

"Sure," I growled back, "go on out in the kitchen and peel yourself a plantain. You're on her side, anyway."

Koko hitched her holster into a more comfortable position and took a sip of King Kong Kola, a brand suddenly popular since the recent importation of a certain movie. *Click-click-clickety.* "I am not."

"You are too! Say, this sounds familiar. Did I not hear you, with my very own ears, state that 'mere pregnancy' is no reason Clarissa shouldn't go to the asteroids with me?" I looked closer at her knitting, wondering if I should mention that the arms were getting a bit long.

Click-clickety-click. "Is that a question from my employer, or merely the husband of my dearest friend?" *Clickety-click-click.*

"Waffling already! Look, even without Hamiltonians mixed up in this, space travel's no kind of risk for—"

Clarissa sat down beside me. “Win, I’m a Healer. I’m also a fully grown sapient being...”

I’d seen this independent mood before. Unfortunately it was a major reason I loved the woman. “Yes?”

“I *know what I’m doing!* Maybe they fly around on giant firecrackers where *you* come from—”

“Unfair! Just because my country’s economically depressed—”

“And technologically backward.” *Click-click-clickety.*

“Butt out, banana-breath! *And* technologically backward, that’s no reason to...Listen: how many gees you figure to pull, just getting up to the liner?”

“Hmm. Well, the liner itself starts out at one gee, gradually dropping to a tenth of that by the time it reaches Ceres. That can’t be too bad, can it?”

“*You* can it. Answer my question: how many gees aboard the *shuttle?*”

“Uh, six—but there are ways, Win, heart patients do it all the—”

“Swell. You’ll qualify sometime the middle of the twenty-fifth century. *I’m* leaving at the end of the week. You think I *like* going off a hundred million miles, maybe missing the baby—certainly missing you?” I leaned over to kiss her and hesitated. “Hey, Miss Simian Collegiate, I thought you wanted to be excused.”

“Don’t mind me, this’ll be terrific for the anthro paper I’m doing: ‘Love among the Humans—Ennui or Boredom?’” *Click-click-clickety-clack!* “Dirty bad—I’ve dropped another...I wonder who *that* can be?”

I got up and crossed to the windows. It was difficult to see in the evening twilight; Confederate tastes run to generous acreage, lots of trees, hedges, miscellaneous bushery. The folks at Cheyenne Ridge had grudgingly let a little white stuff through, not enough to dampen the electrically warmed streets, but plenty for postcard scenery, maybe a snowman or two in the morning. I gave the window knob a twirl, doubling the amplification. Sure enough, through the gate and up the gracefully curving rubber-surfaced drive, a hovercraft skated to a landing and two familiar furry shapes climbed out.

I turned to my companions. “How about something in the fireplace? And kill the fatted whiskey bottle. It’s Captain Forsyth—and the monkey’s uncle.”



Olongo Featherstone-Haugh, a mountain among gorillas, handed me forty yards of dampened overcloak, unwinding a mile or two of muffler from around his massive neck. “Can’t be too careful, old boy”—he wiped an errant snowdrop from his pistol grip—“*awfully* prone to respiratory complications, don’t you know.”

True enough. Even given current medical technology, no gorilla took unnecessary chances that way. I added Forsyth’s ancient yellow slicker to

a heap of steaming garments on the stair rail. Upstairs, Koko had a roaring fire started. Clarissa handed the President about a gallon and a half of Scotch.

“Ahh! A wintry evening among friends. Thanks indeed, dear lady.”

“Catch your prowler yet?” I asked. Some fool had broken into his office last weekend. Putting in some overtime, Olongo had come back from the john and interrupted them in mid-burgle.

He settled in my biggest chair, arms stretched comfortably across his ample frontage, firelight flickering in his eyes. “Afraid not, old man. Stupid sod that I am, I left my life-preserver in the office when I stepped out. Spot of luck they didn’t shoot me with it—had it halfway out of the holster when I threw that wastebasket. Next time I’ll be ready for them. Now tell me about this emergency of Lucy’s before I perish from curiosity.”

“Not much to tell.” I pushed my somewhat less-magnificent facade aside to reach into my sporran for a Bic—another popular import—rekindling my cigar. Clarissa wrinkled her nose and punched the ventilation up on the Telecom pad lying in her lap. I passed a tiny datachip across to Olongo. “Been trying all day to get more than this from her, but—”

“I understand.” The gorilla nodded. “Something about solar interference.”

“Mighty *odd* solar interference,” Forsyth muttered as he took another swallow of Kola—he preferred soft drinks, too, a legacy of many years’ abstinence on duty. “Wrong time of year, wrong part of the solar cycle. Lucy’s right—something funny going on.”

“My dear Captain, these things happen.” The President lifted a weighty paw and set it down again. There was a distinctly reddish quality to his pelt; I never had the nerve to ask about orangutans in the woodpile. “The cycle’s only an approximation, after all.” He handed back the chip. “Why not observe for ourselves what Lucy had to say?”

I slid the chip into another ‘com pad—we keep several around—the fireplace winked out of existence, and the wall lit up with Lucy’s face.

“*Winnie! Clarissa, girl! This here’s Lucy! ...*”

This time I ignored her words, concentrating on the surroundings. A commercial booth. Not her homestead, then, on—what was it?—Bulfinch 4137, a tiny planetoid she and Ed owned outright. Behind her people bustled through a crowded corridor. Ceres, I guessed, first stop on my space-liner’s itinerary. But why Ceres and not her home?

The message ended. I turned the fireplace display back on, felt its radiation warm my face again and shimmer softly on the polished wood and metal of the weapons in the case across the room.

“Intriguing,” Olongo mused, “if not very informative. Notice how she kept looking back over her shoulder? What do you plan doing about it, Win?”

I watched the fireplace a moment. “Well, I’m booked aboard the *In-domitabile Spirit*, leaving day after tomorrow. When you guys showed up, we’d finally decided that Clarissa wasn’t—”

“Just a minute, Win Bear!” She looked up from the ‘com pad where she’d been telemetering her critical patients off and on all evening. “We never decided any such—”

“Clarissa”—I took her hand and patted it gently—“if it were just the baby, I might not...I mean, I love our daughter as if she were already born, but you can always make another kid.”

“That’s easy for *you* to say!” This from my shaggy apprentice, sprawled across the floor beside the fire. She ran a pickup down each nearly finished sweater arm, stared at the slip of paper in her hand and at the conflicting data on the tiny screen, a look of simian puzzlement on her face.

“Shut up, Koko.”

“Can he talk to me that way, Uncle President?”

“Not when I’m around—to *do it for him*. Shut up, dear, there’s a good ape.”

Clarissa squeezed my hand. “I know what you’re trying to say, Win, but—”

“No buts! I *can’t* get another Clarissa, in this universe or any other. I didn’t mean to make this a public debate, but what would you be saying if it were *me* who was pregnant?”

She opened her mouth, glanced down at my generously developed middle, and giggled. Maybe a dissertation on married telepathy might do Koko’s anthropology grades some good, but hell, let her find out for herself.

“I hate it when you’re right,” Clarissa sighed. “To tell the truth, I was *wondering* how I’d stand up to six gees. So what are we going to do?” There was that sad look on her face. Any more of this, I’d probably let her come along.

“Be miserable for a while.” In all our married years, we’d spent maybe five, six nights apart. “I’ll try making it as short a while as possible. Wish I could get hold of Lucy—thought we’d killed off all those Hamiltonian bastards years ago.”

The President leaned forward slightly. “Might I offer a suggestion? Although I must confess to certain reservations...”

“Fire away, old primate, I need all the help I can get.”

“Very well, to paraphrase one of your greatest statesmen—or was he a religious leader?—take my niece, *please*.” His ponderous stomach jiggled in imitation of human laughter.

Koko dropped her knitting and bounded to her feet, resembling a cross between Orson Welles and shag carpet rampant. “Honest? You’re not just—”

“No, my dear, I’m not just. But I’m logical: you visited Ceres with me not so many years ago. If you strive to overcome that youthful impetuosity of yours...Come see me in the morning, I’ll make all the arrangements.”

“Oh, boy! The *asteroids!*”

I shook my head. “Don’t get too excited. I want to think about this.”

“*Think?* What’s to *think* about? Oh, boy! The *asteroids!*”

“*Quiet!* Unless you’d rather spend the voyage in a cargo hold...”

“Then I *can* go! Gee thanks, Boss! Oh, boy! The— ”

“Don’t thank me. It’s your uncle’s idea, and I understand his reservations. On the other hand, *two* investigators might...Say, should we be interrupting your education for a field trip? Olongo?”

“Win, my friend, time is passing this planet by, along with everything it has to teach us. Were it my decision—and it’s not, it’s Koko’s—I’d say go! *And never come back!*” He looked around the room. I knew what he was seeing, I was seeing it, too: furniture, fixtures, nanoelectronic appliances—if not actually manufactured in the asteroids, then made from asteroid raw materials.

“It isn’t only consumer goods,” Olongo said, “it’s the *future*. And, I might add, a considerable portion of the present. Thank Lysander we were able to talk your Propertarians out of their demand for a strict gold standard.”

“I wasn’t aware that you had! Gold’s as important to them as...” I trickled to a stop, unable to think of anything *that* important.

“Win, my boy, in this one minuscule respect, the Keynesians approach the truth: gold has no particularly magical properties that make it the only kind of money possible. A stable economy relies upon a myriad of commodities; you can draw a check as easily from a petroleum account, or on helium, or wheat.”

“Yes, yes, but why this sudden allergy to gold?” What little economics I knew were being ripped out from underneath me.

“Hardly sudden. Confederate metals have been declining—relative to nonmetallic standards—for a considerable time. The asteroids, you understand.”

I understood. When something gets more abundant, it gets cheaper—Marginal Utility, they call it. The Belt was cranking heavy metals out like popcorn—one advantage to working the debris of a planet that never quite got its shit (or anything else) together. You don’t have to dig very deep. No matter, something scarcer would turn up to base our currencies on.

But Olongo was still pontificating: “—down to Earth on a nice, easy ballistic spiral. Your United State will benefit as well, eventually. But the Invisible Hand is going to have to manage some readjustments along the way.”

“Great. So sometime next year I can get a black mask and start ordering my bullets cast out of solid silver. People will want to thank me. I—”

“Say, Win, speaking of bullets...” Captain Forsyth stood and stretched a little, wincing at the arthritic pain in his shoulder. He slapped the weapon at his hip. “Were you planning to take that old Smith & Wesson with you?”

Terrific. Time for another ribbing. “Sure. Why not?”

The chimpanzee shrugged—and winced again. “Well, for starters, think what the cold will do to its mainspring: first time you pull the trigger, *crunch!*— powdered steel.”

“For that matter,” added Olongo, “the entire weapon’s steel. Drop it to a few degrees above Absolute, then suddenly subject it to—forty thousand psi? I shudder at the thought!”

“Now hold on a minute, I can have the springs replaced. And it isn’t any forty thousand pounds. The custom loads I use—”

“That reminds me,” interrupted Captain Forsyth, “those lead-alloy bullets of yours, they’re lubricated, right? Little grooves around each slug, filled with some kind of grease?”

“Right, beeswax and—”

“Volatiles evaporate in hard vacuum. Same goes for that antiquated nitro powder, not to mention primers.”

“Okay, wise-ass, let’s look over the inventory and see what *you* suggest.” I rose reluctantly and went to the gun case, Forsyth and Olongo right behind me. The lock yields for only two thumbprints in the world, mine and Clarissa’s—three, if you count Ed Bear, who uses the same fingerprints I do. I opened the double doors.

“Well, I suppose this lets out most of my collection.” There was the handmade .41 hideout derringer I’d brought with me to this world with the Smith, and almost a dozen other souvenirs of various misadventures since. “Hold on, what about this?”

I reached up and took down a Walther-Zeiss hand-laser. “No ammo to evaporate, no steel. This was made in your world, gentlemen. Think it might do?”

Forsyth took the pistol and turned it over in his hands. “It’s proofed for space, anyway.” He showed me a tiny stylized spaceship stamped into the base of the trigger guard. “But this overgrown flashlight has some drawbacks, wouldn’t you say, Mr. President?”

“Rawther. In the first place, smartsuits are designed to absorb all the energy they can, and reflect any—”

“Smart *suits?*”

“Absolutely *de rigueur*, old boy. A solid-state invention in the form of a tough, lightweight rubbery garment. A bit like ocean divers wear, though

infinitely more sophisticated. You didn't imagine we'd still be using that clumsy armor your astronauts—"

"Olongo, we've already had our critique of NASA for the evening. Besides, I've seen these smartsuits on TV—pardon, the Telecom—now that I think of it. Can't get anything these days but goddamned space opera. Anyway, lasers, I take it, are out?"

The Captain rubbed his chin in contemplation. "Well, this toy *might* overload a smartsuit, but you'd really have to bear down—no pun intended, Win. Be like hunting elk with that Browning 9 mm hanging there—theoretically possible, but chancy."

I thought about the years I'd worn a puny .38 as a cop, never very happy in a cruel world filled with .45s and magnums of assorted lethality. "Don't say another word. I get your drift." I stretched and placed the Walther back on its hooks. "So what do you advise—time's getting short?"

Olongo glanced briefly at Forsyth. The Captain nodded confirmation and the President drew his pistol. "I'd be honored if you'd consider taking this."

Across the room, Clarissa peeked up from her Telecom, smiled, and went back to work. She missed my look of helpless exasperation.

It wasn't *quite* the ugliest thing I'd ever seen: a Webley & Scott, big brother to the little electric quick-shooter my wife favored. It was .17 caliber—about the size of pellet guns back home—but I knew it threw its little steel darts at eleven or twelve thousand feet per second—call it Mach 10—enough to mess up anybody's outlook. The magazine was good for a hundred rounds. The handle, shaped to suit a gorilla's fingers, was awkward in my own.

"Let's find the original stocks," Olongo suggested. "I've got them in the car someplace. I also brought some special projectiles you might want to try."

Forsyth grinned. "If you've got any *big* enemies."

"The good Captain refers, in his elliptical manner, to Owen tubes—a hollow contrivance which slips *over* the front end. You see, the drive currents also flow along the outside of the—"

"My God!" I interrupted, looking at the hefty barrel coils. "What would the diameter amount to?"

"A little under two inches," the Captain replied evenly, "just right for putting an ape-size dent in a personal flivver. That's what they use for hovercraft out there, little tiny spaceships that—"

"I *said* I watch the Telecom. Sounds like I oughta invest in some of these Owen goodies. You're sure I'll need a nasty thing like that out there?"

"Oh, it's quite up to you, dear boy. However, with Hamiltonian Federalists involved, I assume you want to be adequately defended."

“I just don’t care to think about it so soon after dinner.” I started to shut the gun case.

“One more thing, Win.” Forsyth reached past me. “You won’t want to leave this toadsticker behind. It’s a spaceman’s knife, or I never saw one before.”

“You mean that old Bowie—*Rezin*, rather?” Named after the fellow who invented them in both worlds, Jim’s little brother, the specimen in question was another “trophy”; I hadn’t more than looked at it in years. Eighteen inches from pommel to point, it had a foot-long blade two and a half inches wide and a quarter thick, razor sharp halfway along the back edge, as well. The alloy was something called Stellite, and the grip aft of the heavy brass guards was long enough for a hand and a half—somebody like Olongo excepted. The damn thing weighed better than two pounds, and gave me the papercut shudders just thinking about it.

“Swords, already. Don’t you clowns realize it’s almost the twenty-first century?”

“Not by *my* calendar.” Forsyth took the knife, ran his thumb along the edge with a casual swipe that made me cringe, and handed it back. “You wanted to know about smartsuits? Well, they *heal up*, better and faster than ordinary window glass. You can’t always count on a gun to do the job. Knives make bigger, messier holes.”

“And,” Olongo offered, “asteroiders have a highly sensible custom regarding personal weapons: pistols, for the most part, are for outdoors; blades are for indoors. Reasonable, when you live in a pressurized environment, wouldn’t you say?”



Friday, February 26, 223 A.L.

You’d think of all the places they’d control the climate, it’d be the airport. For some reason, Confederates don’t see it that way. The Lilienthal Aeronautics Building, planted smack in the middle of town, pokes up a couple hundred stories, right into the real weather. We were at the very top, waiting for the shuttle to depart.

I stood shivering with my cloak wrapped around me as many times as it would go, wondering if Clarissa was really dressed warmly enough. Through blowing snow I could see my assistant huddling against her uncle, who had come to see us off. Despite a four-hour briefing the day before, he was still piling on last-minute advice. She looked up at me in silent appeal, then went resignedly back to having her furry little ear bent.

I felt sorry for the old gorilla, too. He’d caught his burglar last night: an attractive young American woman who’d apparently expected the ape to be unarmed again. He hadn’t been—his spare persuader’s a .375 Nauvoo Browning; she was DOA before she hit the floor, a sawed-off .22 Colt

Woodman clenched in her rapidly cooling fingers. Some people take a while understanding why we have so little crime here.

Others never get the chance.

Now Koko and I were off on some mysterious adventure, while the President had nothing to return to but the same old grind, the continuing subversion of my homeworld. Olongo was personally involved, and for a good reason: his species is damned near extinct back there, getting extincter all the time. In order to survive, they had to be educated to the culture their more fortunate Confederate fellows had adopted. Just considering the human politics in that neighborhood, it was going to be a long, dangerous job. The Voice of the Stars, good old Voltaire, had mentioned it last evening, in a slightly different context:

“The simian population of the other Earth is doomed without our help, but this is little justification for tampering with human affairs in that continuum. Yes, let us lead chimpanzees and gorillas to a better world, but let the established civilizations go their own way. We have better things to do. At least that’s the way it looks, Thursday, February 25, 223 A.L. This is Voltaire Malaise, Ceres Central, good night.”

Trouble is, nobody could possibly round up all the wild simians. Voltaire hadn’t bothered mentioning porpoises and killer whales—the cetaceans of both worlds, civilized for millennia, had gotten things straightened out right away. Likewise, teach a few apes to speak, and in a few years they’d be rounding *themselves* up, and not just to escape.

After all, it’s their planet, too.

Koko pried herself away and disappeared into the saucer-shaped shuttle. I turned to Clarissa, who looked pretty, pink, and pregnant, the kind of woman no sane man would be leaving. “Well, I—”

“Oh, Win, promise me you’ll—”

“Honey, I’ll eat *all* my galoshes and wear my spinach every day.”

“Idiot! Take care of yourself!” She threw her arms around me, hot tears trickling into my tunic collar. “I want you back, and so, no doubt, will your daughter...*I love you so!*”

I grinned, nuzzling her hair. “Yeah, and I’ve been trying to figure out why for years. I was a worn-out, half-senile old—”

“Oh shut up! Three reasons, silly—no, not *those*, well, yes, those, too, but—because you make me think, and because you make me laugh—”

“That was simple. All I had to do was show you my—”

“And because you make me horny! You’d better be back soon, or I swear I’ll come looking for you!”

“Clarissa, I thought we had that settled.”

“Well, you know what I mean.” She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling. That, and her little red nose, suddenly made her so appealing I almost started crying myself.

“I hope so. And I love you, too—don’t ask *me* why, or I’ll never get on that shuttle. Now don’t stay to wave good-bye, I hate that. And it’s cold out here! Take care of our little girl; I’ll try to get back here before she does, okay?”

She nodded, wiping her eyes. “Oh! I almost forgot...” She handed me a gift-wrapped package the size and shape of a paperback book. “And the Captain sent you this.” Another small parcel, heavier, tied up in plain brown plastic. “I wouldn’t let him bring it himself, the cold’s bad for his—”

“And it’s bad for *yours*, too. Get downstairs where it’s warm!” I kissed her hard and turned, not daring to look back. Even in the dead of Rocky Mountain winter, the shuttle’s gaily-painted hull shone cheery red and white: LAKER SPACEWAYS ELECTROJET.

Good thing I brought my own lunch. I crossed the catwalk protecting the impeller grid, climbed the three-step boarding ladder, handed Olongo’s Webley to the stewardess, who racked it with a hundred other assorted pieces of artillery, and clumped around the aisle to find a seat beside my assistant. She’d brought a brown-bag lunch herself.

“Hey, Boss, want a banana? Frozen clean through, I’m afraid, but I brought an extra one for you!”

The shuttle began to vibrate, lifting slowly. Clarissa stood outside in the cold, obedient as ever, tearfully waving me good-bye.

4: BREAKHEART HOTEL

Six gees ain’t so bad, I can take ‘em standing on my head.

Which is more or less the way it felt.

Laporte vanished below us in the clouds as the electrojet was driven skyward by an outboard ring of high-voltage impellers, basically similar to those in my Neova, but powered by a ground-based microwave array. Inside, seats were arranged in concentric circles beneath a transparent dome. In the center, a pylon stretched through the roof: elevator or stairs to the control module; on Laker Spaceways, probably the ladder.

Fifteen minutes later, we’d gained a hundred fifty-odd thousand feet, where even anaerobic bacteria have trouble catching their breath, and where the impellers ended their usefulness. The major drag on a bullet, I’m told, isn’t so much gravity as air. Presumably the same holds true for spaceships, which is why it pays to use a ground-powered boost before torching off the main machinery.

Spaceships? *I was on a spaceship!* Beside me, Koko munched away, humming dementedly to herself as she gazed in rapture through the ceiling. A stewardess came by to fold our seats back like psychiatrists’ couches,

tucking us in for a stomach-thrilling moment of freefall as the impellers folded like a cheap flashbulb reflector. Wind whistled past the plummeting hull, then...

Whaaamm! I suddenly weighed more than Nero Wolfe ever dreamed of, my breathing a matter of conscious exercise. Three minutes' acceleration—my features melting toward my ears like Silly Putty—didn't seem much longer than an hour. How time flies when you're having fun. Abruptly, the fusion drives seemed to cut, my seat straightened up, I could breathe again.

Zero gee? *This* I'd been looking forward to: I groped past the safety-webbing, extracted my favorite felt-tip pen, LAPORTE PARATRONICS, LTD. stenciled along its barrel, and held it a foot or so in front of my face. I let go.

It fell in my lap and rolled off onto the cabin floor.

"*Gravity and government stop here!*" A central panel displayed the daredevil visage of a chimpanzee in a space-black tunic. I folded myself painfully in half, head between my knees, and groped beneath the seat in front of me for my pen, only to discover I was *wedged* in that position. "Welcome aboard Laker's Electrojet service to synchronous rendezvous. Sorry about that lift-off, folks, heh, heh. We'll be pushing along now at a comfortable and convenient one gee for approximately twenty-eight more minutes. Thanks for flying Laker, and good morning."

One gee? *Now* he tells me! "*Koko!*" I whispered in embarrassment.

"What's up, Boss?" She bent and stared down at the veins bulging in my forehead. "View's better through the windows, y'know."

"Get me out of here! Mother didn't raise me to do slapstick!"

"Okay, okay! Move your shoulders a little to the right...that's it. Now, lift your leg and...want me to call the stewardess?"

"For godsake, *no!*" Something went *scrunch!* in the back of my neck, and I was free. The passenger ahead craned around and glared. I grinned sheepishly and tried to straighten a tie I wasn't wearing. Comfortable and convenient? Have to check *that* out with my chiropractor.



The void around the liner glittered with a thousand fireflies; shuttles like ours, vehicles from Luna, the Lagrange stations, synchronous and near-Earth satellites. But as we swam nearer with little puffs and bumps of course-correction and the giant ship gradually acquired recognizable shape, I knew it wasn't the vessel I had tickets for. According to the tourist brochure, *Indomitable Spirit* was a big round ball, half a mile across, propulsion assemblies sticking out behind like the stem of a pumpkin. The apparition ahead of us was at least four times that size, a collection of giant silvery mailing-tubes glued to a cigar box. As we swept by her colossal drivers, it was spelled out for us in hundred-foot letters:

BONAVENTURA
LOS ANGELES, N.A.C.

A nominal registry, to say the least. This thing would never make it to the surface whole. But what had happened to *Indomitable Spirit*? Were we all being shanghaied or something? There followed a funny elevatory queasiness: zero gee at last—though I wasn't going to risk my souvenir pen (or my dignity) twice in one day. The shuttle aimed for the liner's rectangular stern, slid into an enormous hangar on one edge, where it clanged gently to a stop. Weight returned; the seatbelt light went out.

Koko favored me with an uninformative shrug.

At the lock, the stewardess was passing out briefcases, umbrellas, and guns. "*Indomitable Spirit* has been chartered for scientific purposes. This is *Bonaventura*. All reservations will be honored. *Indomitable Spirit* has been chartered for..."

For scientific purposes? A whole spaceliner? Glad *I* didn't have to pay for it! I followed Koko's waddling bulk into an accordion-pleated tunnel stretching from the shuttle to an inner wall of the hangar. We filed through a submarine-type door that shut behind us with a hiss. Wondering where all this free gravity was coming from, I nudged my assistant and turned back to a window: the passenger tunnel had retracted, the shuttle was buttoning up. Mist filled the hangar, and the electrojet slid outward across the threshold, dropping instantly from view. Now I understood: we were underway!



The ticket they swapped me said Stateroom 12-22. Koko's, some seventy-seven levels forward, was 89-141. I don't usually cotton to cute little three-foot robots, but this one had wheels and brought back memories of a time and place where Good Humor men were pedal-powered. Besides, it volunteered to carry my luggage. I bade adieu to my apprentice and let the machine show me through the confusing lobby several decks above the hangar, a maze of pathways and irregularly shaped pools where dolphins squeaked and paddled, conversing with humans and simians seated at the water's edge in little oval cocktail bays. Laced about with curving stairs and escalators, a dozen lapping, overhanging mezzanine levels created a bewildering perspective overhead. The suitcase-critter led me to an impressive ochre-hued column, one of many varicolored cylinders that appeared to be holding up the lobby roof. A pair of doors slid open, admitted us, and closed.

"*Ohmygodwhatthefuckisthis!*" The elevator shot past mezzanines and stairways, through the very ceiling, and suddenly the little glassy cage was *outside* the ship, skimming along its leviathan hull. I huddled numbly by the doors, peeking between my fingers with a sort of suicidal fascination.

The little robot emitted a disgusted snigger. I glared at it: “R2, Brutus?” It swiveled its head, staring pointedly the other way.

It was almost a religious experience for me when the elevator surged to a halt and its blessed portals slid aside. I was *indoors* again, being dazedly directed leftward around a corridor to my room. There, another spell of vertigo awaited: one entire wall was transparent from ceiling to floor, riveting my paralyzed attention like a cobra hypnotizing dinner. The bellbot polarized the glass a trifle and waited, humming softly.

With sweating hands I fumbled for a coin—anything round and shiny—and dropped it in the little machine’s receptacle. It departed, vibrating a cheerful octave and a quarter higher. I counted my change—I’d given it half an ounce of gold! The architect who built this mind-bending Disneyland for claustrophobes must have been taking payola from the Business Machines’ Union!

Polarization or not, there was still quite a fireworks display visible through the wall-sized window. The elevators, four of them from my vantage point—one pair reflected by another silvery tower across the way—were capped with little haloes of blue flame. The damned things had their own rocket motors! Intermittent brilliant flashes sparkled in the greater distance, I knew not why. And, despite acceleration, we were still admitting last-minute shuttles. I watched one from AntarcticAir slide into the hangar-deck below.

Out of the corner of an eye I caught a frigidly official-looking face staring from the ‘com screen on the right-hand wall. I turned up the sound: “. . . your Captain, Edwin H. Spoonbill III. Those bursts of color you see to starboard are tests of our debris-defenses. Nothing to worry about, the flying’s so clean here that our gunnery computer’s had to throw chaff out to practice on. ETA for Ceres: three hundred forty hours—about two weeks—so just relax and enjoy the ride. If you have any questions, our Information Section can—”

Click! The bathroom was at the opposite end of the cabin, as far from those goddamned windows as I could get. I decided I could use another shower. Maybe three or four, if the microminiature bar of soap held out.



Half an hour later, the sack lunch I’d forgotten about until now demonstrated another verity of space travel, to wit: six gees and soft-boiled eggs mix *entirely* too well. I found a disposal chute and consigned my erstwhile nutriment to the furies of the engine room.

This reminded me of my going-away presents. Captain Forsyth’s was right in character: half a dozen fully-stuffed, rechargeable Webley magazines. Good old Forsyth. I plugged a pair into the wall and let their guc-cione cells juice up on Captain Spoonbill’s tab.

Next I carefully undid Clarissa's giftwrapping. (She always saves it.) A paperback-sized brick of the same flat white pseudoceramic Telecom screens are made of. No instruction booklet, no nothing. Just a manufacturer's card advising me to punch the single activating button on the edge, then type out K-E-Y.

Nice trick, without a keyboard.

At the bottom of the card, in her professionally indecipherable scrawl, my wife had added, *Type out W-I-N first!* Same problem, dearest. Oh, well, I pushed the little button. The image of a keyboard materialized across the surface of the gadget. Okay, I touched each phantom letter in succession: W-I-N.

The keyboard vanished. Clarissa's picture appeared, dressed in the same golden-brown outfit she'd been wearing this morning to see me off. She stretched sexily across our emperor-size bed like an aftershave commercial; the fact that she was five months pregnant, and the homey sight of my age-stained shoulder holster hanging from the cornerpost, may have spoiled the effect—for anyone but me.

"Have a good trip, darling, and hurry home. While you're gone, I hope this gimmick keeps you entertained almost as well as I could!"

She glanced over her shoulder as the bathroom door swung open behind her. I recognized the hairy body that emerged, dripping wet. "Did you say something, dear?" The naked figure had a towel draped over his face, rubbing his hair dry. I really do need to lose some weight.

"Bye!" Clarissa winked conspiratorially, grabbed a corner of the duvet, and flipped it over the pickup. Shucks—I'd thought she'd been making the bed. The underside of the quilt lingered for a moment on the screen, then faded.

I was already homesick.

This time I punched out K-E-Y: "*Congratulations!*" congratulated a congratulatory congratulator. "*You have acquired the latest in nanoelectronic miracles, the [blare of trumpets, followed by angel chorus] Helmers Gigacom 67G!* Contained within its sixty-seven gigabyte memories are movies, books, audio recordings, interactive games, and plenty of room for any audio or visual information you might wish to store. The 67G also functions as computer, calculator, encyclopedia, alarm clock, cigarette lighter..."

I let the unnecessary sales pitch run down. Nice picking, sweetheart, and thanks. I punched out I-N-S-T-R and, as soon as I felt competent, very carefully lifted Clarissa's message from temporary storage, where she'd modestly recorded it, burning it permanently into the machine where it would stay like the inscription on a watch.

Thumbing through the contents, I found hundreds of films, thousands of novels and records, a good many of them custom-selected. She'd in-

cluded all the Mike Morrison movies I'd learned to love, and a surprising number of my favorites from the States: Cornell Wilde's *The Naked Prey*; *Thirty-six Hours* with James Garner. I conjured up a particularly cherished Maria Muldaur album and let it fill the cabin with weird and lovely music while I finished unpacking. Some call it corn, but others call it heart.

First thing to attend to: alterations and familiarization on the Webley. All I got when I tried calling Koko was an animated cartoon, a little green chimpanzee, antennae and all, informing me the line was busy. Probably out of bananas and calling room service. Next, another try at Lucy. No go. I wired her a note, care of General Delivery, Ceres Central, and called Clarissa. "Hi! It's me!"

"Hi, me!" She was still wearing that hormone-inspiring outfit. "Gee, I'm glad to see you. The house feels lonely already. Like my present?"

"Give a listen to the background—'Midnight at the Oasis.' Where'd you dig up all the American flicks?"

"Jenny Noble, bless her, those Propertarians have quite a library. How was the shuttle ride?"

"Koko enjoyed it. *You* wouldn't have, and neither would our prospective offspring. Olongo get back to his office all right?"

"I guess so, he took off in some kind of big hurry. Listen, do you think our budget could stand it if you called me every day? Why I ever let you talk me out of—"

"Baby, it was *awful* getting up here. You should see my lunch."

"Oh dear, you didn't—"

"I never had the chance. You take care of yourself, now."

"I promise. See you tomorrow, then?"

"You got it, kiddo, every day until the lightlag gets impossible."

Her image disappeared, leaving behind that slightly better/slightly worse feeling you get from such conversations. I holstered my Tom Swift Electric Popgun and went out to find a drink.



Saturday, February 27, 223 A.L.

It took an amazing amount of shiptime to get the hang of the *Bonaventura*. The layout was simple in conception, all but impossible in practice: take four old-fashioned U.S. pennies—the copper kind, I mean—and arrange them in a square, edges touching a quarter in the center. That's a cross-section of the ship. Now place all five coins on a pack of cigarettes, and convert them into stacks, say fifty quarters and forty pennies high: five enormous towers planted kitty-corner on a blocky rectangular base. The outer cylinders are mostly staterooms, arranged in wedges, so that everybody gets a chance at tossing his acrophobic cookies. The center tower, all seven hundred and ninety-two stories, is services, shops, restaurants, rec-

reational facilities, with a slowly revolving saloon at the top, just beneath Captain Spoonbill's domain, the bridge.

Three elevators ran up and down in tracks along each connective structure between cylinders, a dozen captive miniature rocket ships in all. I didn't discover until the final day of the cruise that there's an internal transport system for us craven yellowbellies. Each residential tower is coded inside, mine gold, the others blue, green, and orange. The center column's white—another thing I didn't notice until a few days out; kept turning the wrong way from the elevators and winding up lost.

One such occasion proved intriguing. Koko was at a beauty shop, getting covered with plastic curlers from sagittal crest to prehensile toes. Killing time before lunch, I misnavigated into the bar on the 790th floor, and when it rotated around sufficiently, I could see Earth dwindling steadily through the glass, and a bright yellow splinter surging gamely toward the *Bonaventura* at what must have been eight or nine gees. Somebody was determined not to miss the boat. I finished my Coke and hurried to an elevator like a Rocky Mountain yokel heading downtown to watch the traffic lights change.

From a porthole above the hangar deck, I watched the speedy vessel come alongside, too big for the liner to take aboard, very long and slender, her reentry-blackened nosecone and glowing pink stern drives contrasting brightly with her yellow-painted hull. Along her fuselage, in striking metallic green, the lettering stood out clearly:

TICONDEROGA
JERSEY CITY, N.A.C.

She locked fast to the outside of the giant ship.

They brought her passenger aboard through the extended accordion tube. Whoever it was—an auburn-coated elderly gorilla, it appeared—he looked the way I'd felt the morning they relieved me of my appendix, lying on a gurney, swathed in pale-green drapery that matched my complexion. His limbs were festooned with plastic tubing and telemetry, an oxygen tent obscured his features further. Going to the asteroids for his health? Maybe the high-acceleration rocket ride had proven more than he'd bargained for. At least it'd be something interesting to tell Koko about over lunch.

I met her, as agreed, at a little hamburger joint two or three overhangs above the lobby floor, where we could watch the finny folk cavorting below. The proprietor leaned casually on the counter, joshing with the customers.

“—so I finally gave up trying to make money,” he was telling Koko. “It wasn't worth anything once I got it, and the IRS took it anyway, everything, including the royalties on my books. Learned welding and bartered my services for what I needed.” The husky bearded hash-slinger was apparently a fellow refugee. Somehow, he looked familiar.

“Unbelievable.” Koko shook her head. “Good thing for you the Propertarians— Win! Karyl Hetzer, this is Win Bear, a United Statesian from Saint Charles Town. Win, Karyl.”

“That’s Denver, my dear Whatsit. Hey, guess what I just saw arriving!”

“Er, Karyl’s got a son who lives in Denver, don’t you, Karyl?”

“No, Koko, Laporte—the *little* Laporte, just outside Fort Collins. You know the place, Mr. Bear?”

“That’s Win. Yes, I know it—know about *you*, too: *Government, The Mindless Marv*, by Karyl Hetzer. I thought you looked familiar; Jenny Noble gave me a copy. How’d you wind up taking short orders aboard the *Enterprise*, here?”

“Welding. I helped build her, had a little money to invest—for once—and decided to stay on. What’ll it be, Win?”

I looked the menu over as it flickered on the countertop. Either of the Jennies would’ve loved this place. “Think I’ll try a Spoonerburger, and pour me out a shot of Scotch and a glass of milk.”

“It’s your stomach,” Karyl observed, punching in the order.

“And a Free System. What have *you* been up to, faithful simian companion?”

“Uh, not much, *kemo sabe*—getting beautifuller, didn’t you notice?” She spun around on her stool, showing off her freshly curled pelt. “Never know aboard these cruises, I might run into a handsome young ape who’s a captain of industry or something. Say, did you know there are seven hundred and ninety—”

“I read the brochure, too. Here’s our food, let’s eat.”

Monday, March 1, 223 A.L.

A couple of days later, I finally found the gunsmith. He was listed under *Ranges, shooting*. There were also *Ranges, cattle and sheep* (breeding stock for the colonies), and *Ranges, golf*—the kind where you use a little white ball. Never touch the stuff, myself.

The sign taped to his window said:

THERE’S ONLY 24 HOURS IN A DAY
THERE’S ONLY 1 OF ME
YOU CAN HAVE A *FASTJOB* OR A *GOOD JOB*
YOUR CHOICE

The overweight unsanitary-looking character behind the counter folded his muscular arms, cultivating the sour-looking expression creased permanently into his face. “You wanna ruin a fine piece of ordnance, dontcha?”

I’ve never run across one of these characters who wasn’t like this. I think they take classes in it at trade school: Cranky 201, hr. arr. “Look, the customer is always right—”

“Except sometimes.” Two inches of ash fell from the butt screwed into the corner of his mouth and rolled down his greasy shop apron. “Friend, you’ve gotta perfectly good coaxial sighting-laser built into that piece. Just haul up on the trigger slack, and the needles’ll land wherever the little red dot is pointing. Iron sights? Downright medieval!”

Koko looked up from a coffee-stained display case where she’d been drooling over some new engine of destruction. “Medieval is right, firmly rooted in the bedrock of—”

“Koko, when I need your help, I’ll send up a semaphore—maybe even a *whole* phore.” I glowered right back at the ‘smith. “Can you put the sights on, or can’t you?”

He rubbed a grimy thumb over his unshaven chin. “Well, it means unshipping the front coil, and I gotta find someplace t’mount the rear sight. Take me at least a week. Wanna loaner?”

“Make it twenty-four hours. And what have you got?”

“Well, how about a nice .14 Edison—one in the back room I got stuck with on a bad debt—you bein’ an electric man?”

“I’m a *Smith & Wesson* man. Tell me, what have you got that’s *very* small?”

“Small?” He rummaged around in the fascinating debris under the counter. “Nothin’ that’d interest you. What’s a Smith & Wrestling, some kinda European number? Got a couple of kids’ guns here.” He handed me a tiny weapon, no bigger than a matchbook, marked Kolibri. “Electric .09—probably got a barrel liner around here’ll beef it up to .17, so you can use your own ammo. Single-shot, though. What you want with a dinky little—”

“Ever hear of a holdout gun?” He hadn’t. In this whole enormous trigger-happy civilization, concealed backup guns were a novelty. I decided to skip it—I could get along for a day or two unarmed. I persuaded him to complete the alterations in two days, but I wanted to get some practice with the Webley first.

“Hold on, what’s this?” The gunsmith had the rotor housing off already, peering down the barrel from the muzzle end. He fumbled absently on the bench behind him for a brass cleaning rod.

“Something wrong?” Odd, I’d figured Glongo for a fellow who’d keep his hardware spotless, inside and out.

“Dunno. Let’s—” The rod went halfway down the barrel. And stopped.

I took the weapon and sighted down the smooth, shiny bore. Not much to get dirty in there. The .17 caliber needles, magnetically suspended in flight, never contacted the inside walls. A bias in the windings put spin on the projectiles. “Looks okay to me. I can see daylight just fine.”

“Yeah, and you’ll see *stars*, too, right before the end. There’s something—” He put some pressure on the rod. It bent a little, then slid stub-

bornly until an object popped out on the counter and rolled to the floor. He squatted with a grunt and picked it up.

“Here’s your ‘daylight,’ mister.” It was a tiny, bore-size cylinder of incredibly transparent plastic, about a quarter of an inch long. “Fella, you pull the trigger on that thing—at eleven thousand foot-seconds—it woulda blown you clean away. Couldn’ta got in there by accident. Somebody don’t like you.”



“*El Presidente*,” I told the terminal, turning my back. “*Boop!*” the machine answered. I wheeled, taking up a little on the trigger. A brilliant spot of crimson splashed the target center, followed by a pair of steel needles as I pulled the trigger through. I shifted to the next silhouette, and on to the third. A fast reload, and once over lightly. Score: 42. Time: 9.67.

This was going to take some practice.

I examined the Webley: ambidextrous controls—something U.S. manufacturers had never gotten around to, as if a seventh of their clientele weren’t southpaws—the safety fit nicely under my thumb, and, further forward, a lever, marked with three positions. The first was SAFE, the second had delivered one shot at a time, each time I pulled the trigger. Now I slid the lever to the middle BURST position and called for a target.

D-d-dit! Three ragged holes in the plastic. Experimenting with a knob at the back of the rotor housing allowed me to adjust the burst-length anywhere from two shots to a dozen. I set it on five and left it there.

Next lever-position was *full* automatic: an empty magazine (about four seconds) later, and the plastic target looked like a sheet of badly woven lace. I switched back to BURST and called for a solid target, something approximating the fluid characteristics of living tissue.

D-d-d-d-dit! When the ventilators finished pulling steam out of the room, I took a good look at the pseudocarcass downrange, and set the BURST control back to three. No use getting penalized for unnecessary roughness.

I left the Webley with the ‘smith, reminding myself to double whatever his bill came to—small payment to the guy who saves your life. Question: was it *my* life the sabotage had been aimed at terminating, or Olongo’s?

Koko complained so loudly about my “social nakedness” that I gave in and went up to my cabin for the Rezin. The Telecom was blinking on and off in red—probably my apprentice downstairs hollering at me to get a move on. Strapping the unwieldy knife to my hip, I hurried back down to see the sights.



One whole tower, the blue, of course, was for porpoises and killer whales. I resisted Koko’s urgings that we rent some scuba gear, following

the air-filled parallel corridors, instead. We stared at the marine critters on the other side of the glass; they stared right back at us. In a sort of aquarium, they were holding a class in the use of smartsuits.

Funny, I hadn't thought of smartsuits for the water-walkers. The instructor was a chimp, the same guy I'd signed us up with for later in the week. Floating in the middle of the theater, he was demonstrating the advantages of rubber spacewear, pointing out to the cetaceans that, in zero gee, they could maneuver in a *waterless* environment just as well as any anthropoid. I was tempted to have the engineer stop the train so I could see that, but I couldn't find the emergency cord.

Without much effort, we soon found ourselves turned around and completely lost in a cargo area deep within the *Bonaventura's* rectangular stern, something like a huge apartment building parking garage, filled from wall to wall with the slumbering shapes of a thousand inert hovercraft, gleaming in the subterranean twilight.

I always thought it was nifty how Apollo took an aluminum Lizzie to the Moon. Confederates, too, adore any contraption that'll move under its own impetus, and they've harnessed every conceivable form (and not a few *inconceivable* forms) of energy to operate them: steam, internal combustion, electricity, flywheels; there've been attempts to run hoverbuggies on enormous rubber bands, spring clockworks, charges of dynamite, now even thermonuclear fusion.

Secretly playing Prussian War ace in a cloud of impeller dust, reading quietly while their computer-guided vehicles whisk them down the Greenway at five hundred miles per, Confederates don't really care very much about the power source. In the portable privacy of their road machines, they've discovered a far greater fountain of energy, a sort of deep contemplative self-reliance which is the wellspring of all their "lesser" miracles.

Then I looked closer: these "hovercraft" had no impellers, no skirts, just fusion-powered drivers, perfect little copies of the monumental hellburners pushing *Bonaventura* along by now at several hundred *thousand* miles an hour. So these were flivvers, miniature personal spaceships which were the asteroid equivalent of the private automobile. Reminded me of an argument I'd overheard in Denver, something about mass transit.

"But that's exactly what we've got already!" insisted Jenny (I forget which one). "And it takes you from exactly where you are to precisely where you want to go, whenever you want, in comfort, relative safety, and total privacy—at a hell of a lot less money per passenger mile than any BART or Metro system. Look it up: I'm right."

I'd looked it up: she was.

Your basic asteroid flivver is capable of sustaining standard thrust—one-tenth of a gee—for a couple of days in a row. I was admiring a big

candy-striped 223 Truax, when I discovered something even more interesting under a canvas cover on its port fender.

“What is this heap, Koko, a police cruiser?”

“A what?” She lumbered nearer and saw what I was talking about. “Oh, that—it’s just a darling gun.”

“And I think it’s just the *cutest* thing, myself,” I lisped, peering into a cluster of six wicked-looking muzzles in a foot-long pod. “What the hell is it for?”

“A hybrid of the Dardick and the Gatling: slugs from triangular plastic cartridges at maybe twenty thousand rounds a minute. Probably going to a prospector who struck it rich—helps discourage piracy and claim-jumping. Or maybe to a Registration Patrol, who knows?”

I glanced around the hold, suddenly aware that most of these innocent-looking vehicles were fitted out for Armageddon. “Registration Patrol? *That* has a decidedly un-Confederate ring to it.”

“Naww,” she sighted along the weapon, squinting a little. “They’re just insurance companies, sort of. They travel around making sure their customers’ property doesn’t get involuntarily transferred. Kind of friendly—sometimes a patrol person is all the company a hardrock miner’ll have for months.”

Like Sergeant Preston and his dog, Tyge. A small reminder I was headed for the frontier. I slipped the protective shroud back over the cannon and continued looking for the egress.

Instead, I found another storage hold. The light was even dimmer here, blocked off by stacks of crates that threw a million eerie angular shadows. I stopped out of curiosity: three quarters of the loot in this section was invoiced to some character named J. V. Tormount, of Aphrodite, Ltd. The interesting datum was the manufacturer: good old Laporte Paratronics, Ltd., creator of fine Telecommery, electric pencil sharpeners, and refrigerator parts. Also, through the scientific talents of my friends Ooloorie P’wheet and DeeJay Thorens, originator of the Probability Broach.

I wondered what was inside these crates, and who the devil J. V. Tormount was. Halfway through my ruminations, I heard a little scuffling noise behind me. “Koko?”

Silence. I turned, slowly, extremely conscious I was armed with only a hyperthyroid kitchen knife. I wrapped my hand around the pommel, then felt silly. Probably a spacefaring bilge rat—or some crewman wanting to know what the hell *I* was up to down here.

Another skittling noise, this time to my left. I tippy-toed in that direction, wondering what made me do these things. Peering down an aisle between two mountains of containers, I saw a graceful ankle disappear around a corner. Something lay on the floor between me and the fleeing

feminine extremity. Four or five cautious steps took me to the object: a length of hefty jewelry chain, attached to a—

“Boss! Look out!”

A shadow loomed above me, getting larger, fast. I grabbed the chain and rolled forward as something landed behind me with a crash that shook the deck and hurt my molars clear down to my insteps.

Koko shoved her way through the shattered remnants of the fallen crate. Interesting: I’d spent enough time in DeeJay’s laboratory to recognize loose Broach parts when I see them. “Win! Are you all right?” Her paw was shaking as she touched my bruised shoulder. I patted it.

“Yes, Koko, and thanks. I’m just rattled a little.” I glanced down at the bangle dangling by its chain from my own unsteady fingers. “And not just from being dumped on like that.” I showed her the medallion. She’d never met an Eye-in-the-Pyramid in person before.



Naturally, there was no other trace of the person or persons who’d dropped the medallion—and several thousand ounces of expensive paratronic gear. We found our way back to my stateroom, intending to call the purser or Captain Spoonbill, or whoever was in charge of damaged goods, human and otherwise. But there was that red light, still blinking on my Telecom console.

“Win?” Clarissa’s voice was strained, I forgot my aching muscles and stripped a mental gear or two worrying about her and the baby at the same time.

“You okay, honey?”

“Yes, dear, I’m fine, and so is your daughter. *You* don’t look so good—are you getting enough exercise?”

I let it pass.

“I’m disturbed about Olongo,” she continued. “Remember how I told you he seemed preoccupied last time we saw him?”

“Sure. He hurried off somewhere as soon as the shuttle lifted.”

“That’s right. Well, I’ve tried several times to call him, and Win, Vice-President Carlson and the rest of the staff finally admitted this afternoon that he hasn’t been to work for three days. His secretary can’t find him, and neither can his family.”

I looked over my shoulder. Koko’s eyes were big and round.

“First Ed,” said my wife, “then Lucy—now Olongo’s disappeared!”

5: THE BLUES MY NAUGHTY SWEETIE GIVES TO ME

"Look, Sherlock Junior, the less you worry about your uncle, the sooner we can start figuring out what's going on." I lit a cigar, rubbing my rapidly stiffening shoulder.

Koko gave up her pacing to plunk down wearily on the floor beside the window, in perfect disregard of the terrifying void outside. "You're right, I guess. Anyway, we don't really know for sure he's—"

"Hold that thought. Now let's see...Olongo's Webley: the only time it's been out of my sight was in the shower, here. *And* once aboard the shuttle craft. Question is, who booby-trapped it, and why?"

She grinned up at me, a lot gamier than I'd have expected, given the circumstances. "Try again, Boss. *Which* booby did they really want to trap?"

"I see what you mean. Okay, maybe it *was* already gimmicked when he gave it to me. But, Koko, he's only the President, who'd want to—"

"Politics just aren't important enough to figure into it." She got an odd look on her face. "Say, you don't suppose this has anything to do with those two burglaries?"

A light dawned: "They were never burglaries, at all! Did Olongo mention anything being stolen? No, but he did catch the first intruder *fooling with his gun*. And the second time around, she walked in boldly, knowing damned well the Webley would blow up in his face! Too bad for her he'd given it to me."

She digested that a while. "Then what about the little ballet in the cargo hold this afternoon? If you *weren't* the intended..."

She was right. Someone was sure as hell trying to kill me now, the medallion obviously bait, and the only connection there was to Lucy, not Olongo. That led to another bright idea: "Listen, was it me or the *location*?"

"What do you mean?" She held a paw across her mouth, stifling a yawn.

"Well, I'd begun envisioning some evil-doer lurking around, plotting to bump me off. But maybe they just wanted that shipment left alone."

"Why bother? There's a regular security detail aboard to—"

"Hell, I don't know. No customs barriers to get around, no regulated substances in this nutty civilization. Kind of puts a crimp in any smuggling theory." I scratched my head. When I'd begun this caper, there'd been too *little* information. Now I seemed to be suffocating under an avalanche of unconnected facts.

Koko yawned again. "O Guru of Deduction, methinks your mind wandereth."

"Don't worry, it's too weak to get very far." My cigar had gone out. I considered relighting it, looked at it again, then chucked it down the dis-

posal. “Back to basics, then: people missing, Ed, Lucy, possibly your uncle, and—hey, don’t get me off the subject—what really disturbs me is that crate. Free trade or not, you’re too young to remember the last time Broach technology wound up in unfriendly hands. I’d like to know why that shipment’s headed for the asteroids. Hell, the only thing the other side of Reality out there is *rocks*—and none of them with good hotels. Aphrodite, Ltd., is it? Well, we’ve got a chance of pinning *that* one down, anyway.”

She watched me belly up to the Telecom. “What you doing, Win?”

“I just happen to have a little pull at Laporte Paratronics—Deejay and Ooloorie, not to mention the Chairman of the Board himself, Freeman K. Bertram, a Hamiltonian, incidentally, until they tried burning his gizzard out with a laser. Let’s see what they can—”

“Is that a good idea? I mean, the time-lag’s getting nasty now—and they may not like handing out confidential—”

“Listen, Bertram saved my life once, that’s how he picked up that laser-burn. Ever hear of a Chinese obligation?”

“Is that anything like ‘Confucian to the Enemy?’” She yawned again—it was starting to be catching.

“Someday, hairy person, you’ll press your luck too far.” I diddled keys, waiting for the results to wend their ethery way to Earth.

“Laporte Paratronics, may I help you?” A real-live, real-time receptionist: nice traditional touch, even if she was a chimp. This was company headquarters, north of town, in a huge Aztec-modern pyramid Bertram had constructed before his rigorous and painful conversion to the side of Law and Disorder.

“Sure, extension 4511, please.” That’d ring bells down at Laporte University, Ltd., four or five blocks from my place.

Another pause while radio waves got there and back. “To whom did you wish to speak, sir?”

“To Deejay Thorens, that’s to whom, or Ooloorie, if her relay’s up. Problems?”

“I’m afraid so, sir. Professors Thorens and P’wheet are no longer with the company.”

“*What?* Then give me Mr. Bertram. Tell him Homicide Lieutenant Bear—tell him the jig is up and he should—”

“I’m ringing the Executive Suite.” I could see her other hand trace out an Ameslan pattern she thought was private: “Tell him yourself, asshole.”

“*Win?*” Freeman K. Bertram squinted into the ‘com over his antiquated horn-rimmed glasses. “What happened to your eye?” Bertram was a skin-gink, an engineer-type by profession and personality.

I turned around, looking in the mirror. Sure enough, I’d copped a shiner in the cargo bay. “One of your crates fell on me, Freeman, and I’m gonna sue. Seriously, I’m calling from three—make that four—days out-

bound to Ceres.” I gave him an abbreviated run-down. “Now what’s this crap about DeeJay and Ooloorie?”

He looked mournful, making steeples with his fingers—scratch “engineer” and insert “mortician.” “We let them go on a cordial basis, we assure you.” The “we” was only Bertram; whether he was secretly a royalist at heart, or a frustrated editorialist, I’d never had the heart to ask. “They had some research they insisted doing on their own.”

“DeeJay’s in San Francisco, then?” Ooloorie made her home there, a big tank of seawater at the Emperor Norton University, communicating with Laporte by various electronic means.

“Why, no. Perhaps this shouldn’t be made public, but we weren’t happy letting either of them go, and did some quiet checking around. Can you keep a secret?”

“Over several zillion miles of open Telecom?”

“Oh. Well, there are rumors, Win. An expedition to Mercury, attempts to tap the Sun directly, using a modified double-Broach—talk about fusion power! All we know is, they’re the foremost experts on Broach physics, and the *Indomitable Spirit* has been chartered, inbound. Neither of them can be reached, their final paychecks came back unopened—you’d think they could arrange to—”

“*Indomitable Spirit*? Well, that clears up one mystery. What do you know about an Aphrodite, Ltd., or somebody named J.V. Tormount?”

“Win where did you get *that* information?” He had a strangled expression on his face. Somehow it suited him, I thought.

“A little bird dropped it on my head. What’s the big secret?”

“I—Win, it’s a perfectly legitimate operation, and we can’t tell you any more. As you pointed out, unsecured communications, and so forth. Sorry.”

“I wish you’d reconsider. Maybe I should lean a little harder, but your business is your business. I don’t promise to leave it at that.”

“There’s certainly no harm in asking. Nothing personal, old friend.”

“Right.” I switched off. “Well, what do you think about that, Koko? Koko?”

She lay, propped up against those goddamned windows, snoring energetically. Well, my shoulder ached, I could stand some z’s, myself. I gently got her somnambulated toward the elevator. Room service charged a philosophically impossible amount for the soup and sandwich which arrived a few minutes later. I settled into the sack with my meal and a fresh cigar, noting it was news time out on Ceres.

And somehow, I’d gotten entangled in the headlines.

“Tonight’s special report concerns the mysterious privately held company known as Aphrodite, Ltd.”

Voltaire was at his authoritative best this evening, lean, gray, paternal-ly disapproving. “Just what *is* Aphrodite, Ltd., and who are its principals? We endeavored to find out.” Following was a chronicle of futile attempts to interview one J. V. Tormount at his Ceres office. Or *her* Ceres office—Malaise couldn’t even find out that much. Whatever gender, Tormount wasn’t in.

Tormount, it appeared, was *never* in.

He’d been a busy little dickens, though, buying up hundreds of homesteaders in the isolated Sargasso asteroid cluster, importing unspecified heavy machinery—and sophisticated paratronics. “The privacy of business is sacred in our society,” lamented Voltaire, “yet the people have a right to know.” (Where had he picked *that* up?) “Our attempts to penetrate this new but powerful and well-financed firm will continue. It may well be that ‘Aphrodite’ conceals something sinister in her bosom. At least that’s the way it looks, Monday, March first, 223 A.L. This is Voltaire Malaise, Ceres Central, good night.”

I wished him better luck than I was having, put out my cigar, set the Gigacom (fanfare, angel chorus) for morning, and crawled between the covers onto my good shoulder.

In her *bosom*? C’mon, Voltaire, that one went out with honest lawyers!



“*Yaaaawp! Yaaaawp!*” The Gigacom awoke me—*proximity alarm!* A giant shadow hovered overhead, striking downward. I snatched the descending blanket away from my face before it landed, and lashed out for the wrist—the *furry* wrist!—controlling it, planted a foot in somebody’s midsection, and *pushed!* The figure whirled away in a flap of ill-gotten bedclothes, stumbled backward, and rebounded off the windows as I fumbled vainly for the light.

The intruder leaped again, damn near crushing my ribs in the process. We thumped to the floor, thrashing in the darkness, my face suddenly exploding in painful collision with a misplaced elbow. I grabbed a handful of pelt, hoping for an ear or something else to bite. My other hand found the pommel of the Rezin, fallen from the nightstand, and flung away the sheath, to— *Ungh!* The stranger’s knee had found a place I couldn’t disregard.

I doubled, slashing blindly in confused shock. The blade caught something, sliced and grated. A terrifying scream—and I was free! Light blazed briefly into the cabin from the hall and shuttered off again. I wrenched upright, blood from my nose streaming down my chin, and staggered out into the corridor.

Empty. I glanced at my watch; it wasn’t there. Neither were my clothes.

Just as I turned, the cabin door swung shut with a positive *click*. The knob wouldn’t move. I wiped my face, left hand coming away sticky crim-

son. The right still gripped a foot of gory steel. Trying not to drip on Captain Spoonbill's hall carpet, I focused with difficulty: yes, a trail of someone else's blood. I wondered how solidly I'd connected. That *knee* had connected solidly enough; I could hardly stand upright: gas pains amplified a hundredfold.

The naked, sword-swinging barbarian routine has been oversold, I think. Locked out in the middle of the night, gasping, drenched in someone else's blood, I care not what course Conan may take: I lowered myself to the floor against the wall and practiced groaning. A couple of timid passers-by ran screaming at the sight of me, then a uniform arrived, gun in hand, to let me explain what had happened. She passkeyed me in, promising to send a medic, and followed the trail of gore away.

Healer Francis W. Pololo had something absolutely *wonderful* for pain. He also took blood samples from my Rezin as I rummaged around for some nice, easy-fitting trousers, but wouldn't listen about fingerprints. Guess he had that theory filed away with phrenology and palm-reading. Nice fellow, though, and not bad-looking for a gorilla. I thought of Koko, wondering if he was spoken for, and as I gingerly fastened my pants, I thought of Clarissa, too, glad we hadn't made this a second honeymoon. Then I asked the doctor for another pain pill.



Full of nerve-deadeners, I didn't want to mix my highs, but the Level 790 bar was a well-lit public place where nobody could sneak up on me, and I wasn't planning to sleep again until I got my Webley back. That infernal gadget of Clarissa's was all that had kept me out of *Bonaventura's* meatlocker.

A bit slow on the nanoelectronic uptake, though: my assailant had had plenty of time to pull out every drawer in the bureau and empty it on the carpet. Something told me it wasn't just a scavenger hunt.

Despite the nighttime emptiness of the Yellow Tower corridors, the bar seemed almost crowded. "Western Hemisphere" the bartender answered as he poured me out a double—King Kong Kola. "Every-one in Yellow's up from North or South America. Breakfasttime in Green right now, supertime in Orange."

I sipped my drink; definitely not the Real Thing. "What about the Blue?"

"Whatever time suits their porpoises," he snickered.

I considered throwing up all over his nice clean bar. Instead I turned my back, hitching up my elbows to watch the natives as the sky turned round and round outside. Some were talking, drinking, playing cards or electronic games. Others watched a stage where a young gorilla was taking off her clothes. Seemed like a waste of time, to me.

The place began to fill up even more. More likely *cocktail* time in the Orange Tower. All this joint needed was a big tank for the dolphins, and—

“Hey!” The guy beside me stumbled sideways, knocking over his drink. He wheeled on the person next to him. “Whaddyou wanna do that for, sister?” he slurred, peering sadly down inside his empty glass. The pale, sophisticated type beside him turned slowly, gave him a silent sneer down her nose, and turned away.

“Hey! You can’t jog my arm like that an’ broff it osh . . . *brush it off!* Whaddabout my drink?” He extended a wobbly arm and poked her shoulder savagely.

“Take it easy, friend,” I said, my tongue doing its own thinking as usual. “Let her alone, I’ll buy you another—”

“Who aksed *you*, buddy?” He jabbed me in the chest with stiffened fingers, setting off a number of accumulated pains.

I seized the offending digits, bending them back a little. “*Now, buddy, you want that drink or not?*”

Wrenching his hand free, he drew it back for a punch. “I’ll teach you to—” and let fly craftily with his other fist, but I ducked, and he bashed it meatily into the bar. I slid under his second flailing punch and planted my own stiffened fingers dead-center in his solar plexus.

“*Whoof!*”

He doubled, staggering against a chair, and fell across a nearby table, scattering crockery. The occupants jumped up, knocking others down around them in a rapidly expanding circle. Napkins, liquids, curses flew. Somebody threw a punch. In seconds, while my erstwhile antagonist barfed all over the floor, the saloon erupted in a joyous free-for-all, a hundred combatants gaily socking everyone around them. A chimpanzee swung from the chandelier, bombing people with onion dip. The stripper stopped, disgusted at losing her audience, gathered up her clothing, and sat down on the stage, feet over the edge, kicking anyone who stumbled near.

Baap! Seeing sudden stars, I shook my head, swung to grab the shoulder of a tall form looming over me. I raised a fist.

“Whoa...Pilgrim, I’m on *your* side!” He cocked his head and grinned a crooked grin, holding a little chimp—the guy who’d socked me—by the scruff, then casually tossing him out into the riot to fend for himself. “Plucky, but too small—had t’throw ’im...back.”

I gave someone behind me an elbow in the guts, snap-kicked a bottle-waver coming at my head, and turned to my now familiar ally. “Say, you’re not really...” I recognized this seamed and ugly-beautiful mug, the big Roman nose, and crinkled squint. “Mike Morrison?”

He snatched a pair of fighters, cracked their heads together, and easily side-stepped a wildly thrown chair, which bounced harmlessly off the

mirror behind the bar. “Guilty,” came the answer in that famous sandy-textured voice, cadence plodding forward in oddly shaped chunks, “but don’t tell nobody—headed out t’make m’first...space opera.” He shook his head, a sour look passed across his leathery face. “Only thing th’ people wanna see, these...days. Feels downright silly ’thout a...horse under me—*unb!*”

Someone brained him with a serving tray. He crossed his eyes and swayed in little circles, a big hand on the bar to right himself, then grabbed the astounded tray-wielder by the lapels. “Mister, somebody oughta smack you fer that.” His eyes narrowed in anger, slanted, almost Mongolian. “But I won’t, I won’t...like *hell* I won’t!”

Crack! The unfortunate assailant followed a ballistic curve across the room and landed in a fountaining of drinks and pretzels. Morrison blew on his battered knuckles, shaking out the sting, and sort of looked directly at me, sideways. “Pilgrim, I like a good...dust-up, but let’s—*look out!*”

I whirled, by reflex whipping out my Rezin. The pale “sophisticated” lady, composure vanished with a snarl, was shoving something at my face. It snapped into focus—a tiny gun barrel, bullet glinting visibly deep inside the chamber. I slapped the gun aside, left-handed, she lunged, carried by momentum onto my extended blade.

The weapon sank to the guards with a ghastly sucking noise, pommel jammed against my hip. Her eyes, an inch from mine, widened abruptly as if she were just waking up. She gave a tiny gasp, looked down at her midriff, the ultimate despair written on her face, stumbled backward off the blade, and crumpled, her life coursing onto the floor.

Silence swept the room.

I threw the knife aside, her little gun still in my other hand, and knelt beside her in a pool of smoking blood. Not a sound, not a movement. I felt for a pulse—nothing. She was gone. I’d killed a woman, and she was gone.

A huge rough hand descended gently on my shoulder. “She walked right into it, Pilgrim, some kinda...suicide, I’d call it. C’mon, get up outa there.” He pried me away from the floor, hooked a chair with the toe of his boot, and slid it under me, carefully extracting the little pistol from my hand and laying it on the bar.

I closed my eyes hard, and opened them again.

Morrison stood slowly shaking his head, hands spread on his narrow waist, a finger curled and locked into the high side of his canvas-like gun-belt. The big, plain military automatic perched where his right hip pocket should have been, rendered tiny by his sheer, larger-than-life presence, its smoothly worn ivory stocks checked and yellowed by handling and hard use. “There ain’t much...point, but somebody call a Healer!”

He thrust a tumbler into my hands. I sipped it absently—it burned.

But the Healer was already there, along with security people, alerted by the fighting. He set his bag on a barstool, glanced around the rapidly emptying room, then knelt down by the body, confirming that's what it was. He looked up at me. "Haven't I seen you once already tonight?"

I sat there, nodding dumbly, my hands beginning to shake. "Earlier th-this evening. Someone b-broke into my—"

"So you *said*" answered the gorilla. He stood, glared down at my dripping knife lying on the bar beside the tiny autopistol, then back at the dead woman—girl, really, I could see that now—and gave me an expression I'd never had before from anyone on the right side of the law. "Call the Captain," he instructed the bartender. "Something stinks in here."

Morrison started to speak, paused, twisting the thin gold circlet around his massive wrist. "I saw the whole...thing, *bureaucrat*." Then he looked at me. "She's the one shoved that *borracho* into ya, an' started this whole...brannigan. Lookin' t'backshoot ya'n all the excitement." He stopped, running a large confident hand through his thinning, crewcut hair, then continued in that relaxed, inexorable, singsongy tone.

"Pilgrim, you gonna play with that, or drink it? An' don't fret s'much. I mean t'see you vouched for with security, at Cap'n Spoonbill's...convenience."

He stepped away, one knee bent slightly inward, a shoulder carried low, then paused and turned back to me. "Pilgrim, you'll be all right. I like your...sand." Then he limped out of my life and into the sunset.

In whichever tower *that* was going on.



Tuesday, March 2, 223 A.L.

As played out as I was, sleeping soundly that night should have been a cinch, especially with the armed guards outside my stateroom door to protect me from the boogie-person. Though if I'd tried to leave, it might have looked like something else. Those suddenly widening eyes kept coming back to me, but the Healer had a pill for that.

It almost worked, too.

Next morning, they brought me back my Bowie knife, cleaned and polished, along with my victim's tiny gun and holster. It was a Bauer .25, a nine-ounce stainless-steel seven-shot vest-pocket number, of practically no stopping-power.

Made in the United States.

Somehow, I'd been reprieved. With the grisly trophies came a message from the Captain to look him up as soon as I got dressed. I peeked outside my cabin. The guard was still there, but she smiled sympathetically and promised to escort me to the infirmary, which was where the brass seemed to be awaiting my pleasure. The sick bay's down in the rectangular stern, as buried in the middle of the ship as anything can be, and not too

far from all those crates for Mr., Ms., or Mrs. Tormount. Inside, Healer Pololo stood waiting, along with Koko and a grim-visaged fellow in Spartan black and gold.

We sat down in the waiting room.

“Mr. Bear,” the simian physician offered, “I owe you an apology. I simply figured that no wholly innocent party could be involved in two violent incidents in the same evening.”

“Try running a liquor store on East Colfax Avenue sometime.”

He removed his wire-rimmed glasses and gave them a self-conscious scrub. “Well, you know what I mean. Captain Spoonbill, this is Mr. Bear.”

Sounded like feeding time at the zoo. Spoonbill was an imposing block of a man, conveying in attitude and bearing, rather than literal appearance, the same frozen unreachability as those statues on Easter Island. He shook my hand, striving for the neutral expression that served him for a smile.

“Mr. Bear, concerning your detention last night...”

“That’s okay, I’d already done my partying. I take it you’ve decided I’m ‘wholly innocent,’ too?” I wondered how they’d feel about smoking in here.

“You have some powerful allies, it appears.” He nodded microscopically, indicating Koko who seemed unusually reserved in her brand-new rubbery-looking smartsuit. “Miss Featherstone-Haugh assures me the President will vouch for you unquestioningly. There’s also Mr. Morrison—I had a lot of trouble getting off the com with him last night, and several times this morning. He explained how the whole thing happened, though what it means...”

“I’d like to know that, myself. But you’re not letting me off on character testimony, are you?”

“Not a chance. Miss Featherstone-Haugh informs me you were a security guard in the United States, is that correct?” Was that approval in his eye or merely gas, as obstetricians like to claim?

I stifled the usual insulting answer. “As close as you can describe it in the Confederacy. I was the fuzz, a pig, a flatfoot—working Homicide detail.”

“Then,” the doctor interrupted, “you can view a deceased person without...”

“Not too badly anyway.” I’d always been a little squeamish, one reason I hate murderers so much. “What’s all this working up to?” Koko looked distinctly uncomfortable as she squirmed on the plastic waiting-room chair. Pololo led us to a back room where a silent, supine form lay draped upon a cold titanium table. He folded back the sheet. Koko doubled over and ran from the room, making funny mewling noises. I gulped and took another step forward.

“That’s her, all right. I never killed a woman before. Funny, it doesn’t feel too different, just sort of sad and stupid.”

“More sad and stupid than you may realize,” answered the stonefaced Captain Spoonbill. “Tell him, Francis.”

The doctor brushed aside a lock of the decedent’s hair. “Ever see something like this before?” Curved tightly against a shaved patch on the scalp was a small, leech-shaped transparent plastic object, filled with nanocircuitry. “Brain-bore,” the Healer enunciated with disgust. “Given the right drugs and commensurate skill, the perpetrator can create any reality of his choosing inside the victim’s mind, a twisted world by means of which the victim’s behavior can be manipulated. Maybe—maybe you Americans are right: in this case there *ought* to be a law.”

“Forget that, Doc, it’s habit-forming.” I peeked beneath the little instrument where wires led into a nylon plug through the skull. “You mean this thing made her try to kill me?” And what was that discoloration on her thumb?

“Not exactly,” said the Healer, covering the girl’s face again. He pulled a small flat tin from his sporrán, hinged it open, and offered me a brown Dutch cigarillo. “She could have been experiencing anything subjectively—believing you were Clarence the Ripper incarnate, say, or avenging some fictional evil you did to her or someone she loved.” I lit his smoke and my own. “Nothing—no one—*made* her do it, only created some illusionary case of the horrors, some context under which it was a foregone conclusion that she’d try.”

And I thought I’d heard of everything that was sickening.

“Seems I’m acquiring a sort of fan club,” I observed, “with *real* clubs. First the attack in my stateroom, now this. I’d be superhuman if I could avoid jumping to the conclusion there’s some connection.” I reached beneath the sheeting to examine the cold dead hand again. A minute drop of dried blood glinted blackly on the thumbnail.

The physician gave me an odd look. “You’re the detective, but what connection could there be between a Soviet human female and a gorilla?”

“What?”

“That’s what the samples from your cabin say: a gorilla, also probably female, judging by cosmetic residue on the hair samples. And this poor child was Russian or I’ll throw my brand-new dental references out and sue the dealer who brought them through the Broach.” He started looking absently for a place to flick his ashes, settled on an unused bedpan. “Look, if you ever get to the bottom of this...I’d *love* getting my hands on a brain-tapper, Hippocrates forgive me.”

“For my part,” said the Captain, “and without prejudice, Mr. Bear, I’ll be satisfied just to dock at Gunter’s Landing, where you can take your mystery—and the violence that attends it—*off* my ship!”

This didn't seem the time to mention the booby-trapped Webley or the near-miss belowdecks. And, thinking of another nearby Miss, I wondered how Koko was.



Upstairs, I tried organizing my recent escapades—with an accent on “escape”—for the daily call home. I don't know how other couples handle it—actually, my first wife and I never talked about things that mattered—but Clarissa and I never hold back. It's made for a wonderful life so far, with a few unpleasant minutes, followed by some supremely satisfying ones. Hours, even.

But there was that bit of extra evidence I'd noticed in the infirmary: *wood* is still rare enough out here in space that every scrap is eagerly received. Back home, they make packing boxes of plastic, but goods exported to the asteroids go timber-wrapped by specific request and as an extra selling-point. There'd been a three-quarter-inch splinter underneath the Russian girl's left thumbnail. Must've hurt like the dickens (or did it, with the brain-bore?). It hadn't been there quite long enough to fester, just long enough to give me an idea who'd levered that crate onto my head.

So how was I gonna tell my wife the Healer how badly Confederate forensics need an overhaul? Luckily, I had another call to make first—that little Bauer autopistol and the Woodsman Olongo was attacked with: obsolete U.S.-type weapons, collector-rare in the Confederacy. Why were they showing up over here?

Koko seemed to have other things to do. I was just as happy: it was getting to be perilous in my vicinity, and I still have a few Neanderthal opinions concerning womenfolk and danger, even when the girls're covered with fur and have ten times my strength. I shooed her off to a smart-suit lesson, promising to catch up later, and grabbed the com.

The lag was terrible now, but Captain Spoonbill grudgingly surrendered his strongest beam for a solid hour, at only nominally rapacious rates. Talking through a Broach is complicated by the weird influence it has on radiation, gravity, the very fabric of reality. Try sending regular radio or lasergram through; they wind up, well, twisted, requiring special equipment to hammer them back into sense. I hired the appropriate gadgetry via Laporte Interworld, and punched up a certain broom closet in the good old U.S.A.

“Jenny?” The picture was an informationless gray pudding. “I got a problem you could help me with.” I waited through the lightspeed lag, trying to figure out which Jenny I was talking to.

“If I can, Win, but I've got a problem of my own right now...”

“The Fraser campaign—but this—” I stopped; she was still talking.

“*We've been ransacked!* They broke in last night, tore the place apart, and set fire to what was left. Even with Confederate fire-control systems...”

“Jenny, something weird is going on all over. Attempted murders, break-ins, disappearances—we’ve got enemies, and I’m beginning to think they’re organized.” She didn’t much like the details I gave her, but then neither did I.

Finally: “If I get any useful information on those weapons, I’ll relay it through Clarissa once you’re out on Ceres.”

“Right. She’s got a little digging to do—no pun intended—to find out if Olongo’s burglar was brain-bored.” A little more expensive gab and we rang off. The delay connecting with home was somewhat longer than could be accounted for by Dr. Einstein. An elderly chimp materialized: Captain Forsyth, dirty and disheveled.

“That you, Win? Brace yourself, son, there’s bad news: someone broke into your house last night. Place is a wreck, though nothing I can tell is missing, except—hold on, son—*Clarissa*. Win, I can’t find her *anywhere*. For what it’s worth, there are no signs of, well, of blood or anything. I’m doing all I can to track her down, and— You listening, son? You haven’t said a word.”

What the bloody steaming hell could I say? Ayn Rand and Harry Browne and Robert Ringer can go on *Looking Out for Number One*: my only reason for living had suddenly evaporated.

Clarissa!

What else could possibly go wrong now?

6: THE MIND IN THE PYRAMID

Friday, March 12, 223 A.L.

We arrived at Ceres just in time for Lucy’s funeral. Concerning the remainder of the voyage, perhaps the less said the better. Maybe Lucy and Ed were the best friends I’d ever had, but Clarissa—well, she was *Clarissa*. I was going straight home, if possible at something better than the one-tenth gee *Bonaventura* had tapered down to in the last few days—a stasis-tank aboard a three- or four-gee unmanned freight drone—I didn’t care.

Letting others steer me by the elbow, I wandered past the next ten days half-conscious, groping dazedly through the motions. Koko insisted I learn to wear a smartsuit; I argued feebly I wasn’t planning to hang around where I could use one; she told me to shut up and march to class. Amazingly, despite a soul-draining ache that never left me, I found the classes mildly interesting, enjoyed myself enough to feel guilty about it, and came to hate that moment each day when the practice sessions ended and I had to go back to my lonely, haunted cabin.