

Procrustes



Larry Niven

Produced by calibre 0.6.40

Procrustes

by Larry Niven

Asleep, my mind plays it all back in fragments and dreams. From time to time a block of nerves wakes:

That's some kind of ARM weapon! Move it move it too late BLAM. My head rolls loose on black sand. Bones shattered, ribs and spine. Fear worse than the agony. Agony fading and I'm gone.

Legs try to kick. Nothing moves. Again, harder, _move! No go. The 'doc floats

nicely on the lift plate, but its mass is resisting me. Push! Voice behind me, I turn, she's holding some kind of tube. BLAM. My head bounces on sand. Agony flaring, sensation fading. Try to hang on, stay lucid ... but everything turns mellow._

My balance swings wildly around my inner ear. _Where's the planet's axis? Fafnir doesn't have polar caps. The ancient lander is flying itself. Carlos looks worried, but Feather's having the time of her life._

_Sprawled across the planet's face, a hurricane flattened along one edge. Under the vast cloud-fingerprint a ruddy snake divides the blue of a world-

girdling ocean. A long, narrow continent runs almost pole to pole._

The lander re-enters over featureless ocean. Nothing down there seems to be looking at us. I'm taking us down fast. Larger islands have low, flat buildings on them. Pick a little one. Hover while flame digs the lamplighter pit wider and deeper, until the lander sinks into the hole with inches to spare. Plan A is right on track.

I remember how Plan A ended. The Surgeon program senses my distress and turns me off.

I'm in Carlos Wu's 'doc, in the Intensive Care Cavity. The Surgeon program

prods my brain, running me through my memories, maintaining the patterns, lest they fuzz out to nothing while my brain and body heal.

I must be terribly damaged.

* * * *

Waking was sudden. My eyes popped open and I was on my back, my nose two inches from glass. Sunlight glared through scattered clouds. Display lights glowed above my eyebrows. I felt fine, charged with energy.

Ye gods, how long had I slept? All those dreams ... dream-memories.

I tried to move. I was shrink-wrapped in elastic. I wiggled my arm up across my chest, with considerable effort, and up to the displays. It took me a few seconds to figure them out.

Biomass tank: near empty.
Treatment: pages of data, horrifying ...
terminated, successful. _Date_: Omygod.
Four months! I was out for four months
and eleven days!

I typed, _Open_:

The dark glass lid retracted, sunlight flared, and I shut my eyes tight. After a while I pulled myself over the rim of the Intensive Care Cavity and rolled out.

My balance was all wrong. I landed like a lumpy sack, on sand, and managed not to yell or swear. Who might hear? Sat up, squinting painfully, and looked around.

I was still on the island.

It was weathered coral, nearly symmetrical, with a central peak. The air was sparkling clear and the ocean went on forever, with another pair of tiny islands just touching the horizon.

I was stark naked and white as a bone, in the glare of a yellow-white dwarf sun. The air was salty and thick with organic life, sea life.

Where was everybody?

I tried to stand; wobbled; gave it up and crawled around into the shadow of the 'doc. I still felt an amazing sense of well-being, as if I could solve anything the universe could throw at me.

During moments of half-wakefulness I'd somehow worked out where I must be. Here it stood, half coffin and half chemical lab, massive and abandoned on the narrow black sand beach. A vulnerable place to leave such a valuable thing; but this was where I'd last seen it, ready to be loaded into the boat.

Sunlight could damage me in minutes,

kill me in hours; but Carlos Wu's wonderful 'doc was no ordinary Mall autodocor. It was state-of-the-art, smarter than me in some respects. It would cure anything the sun could do to me.

I pulled myself to my feet and took a few steps. Ouch! The coral cut my feet. The 'doc could cure that too, but it hurt.

Standing, I could see most of the island. The center bulged up like a volcano. Fafnir coral builds a flat island with a shallow cone rising at the center, a housing for a symbiote, the lamplighter. I'd hovered the lander above the cone while belly jets scorched out the lamplighter nest, until it was big enough

to hold the lander.

Just me and the 'doc and a dead island. I'd have to live in the 'doc. Come out at night, like a vampire. My chance of being found must be poor, if no passing boat had found me in these past four-plus months.

I climbed. The coral cut my hands and feet, and knees. From the cone I'd be able to see the whole island.

The pit was two hundred feet across. The bottom was black and smooth, and seven or eight feet below me. Feather had set the lander to melt itself down, slowly, radiating not much heat over many hours. Several inches of rainwater

now covered the slag, and something sprawled in the muck.

It might be a man ... a tall man, possibly raised in low gravity. Too tall to be Carlos. Or Sharrol, or Feather, and who was left?

I jumped down. Landed clumsily on the smooth slag and splashed full length in the water. Picked myself up, unhurt. My toes could feel an oblong texture, lines and ridges, the shapes within the lander that wouldn't melt. Police could determine what this thing had been, if they ever looked; but why would they look?

The water felt good on my ruined feet.

And on my skin. I was already burned. Albinos can't take yellow dwarf sunlight.

A corpse was no surprise, given what I remembered. I looked it over. It had been wearing local clothing for a man: boots, loose pants with a rope tie, a jacket encrusted with pockets. The jacket was pierced with a great ragged hole front and back. That could only have been made by Feather's horrible ARM weapon. This close, the head ... I'd thought it must be under the water, but there was no head at all. There were clean white bones, and a neck vertebra cut smoothly in half.

I was hyperventilating. Dizzy. I sat down

next to the skeleton so that I wouldn't fall.

These long bones looked more than four months dead. Years, decades ... wait, now. We'd scorched the nest, but there would be lamplighter soldiers left outside. Those would have swarmed down and stripped the bones.

I found I was trying to push my back through a wall of fused coral. My empty stomach heaved. This was much worse than anything I'd imagined. I knew who this was.

Sunlight burned my back. My eyes were going wonky in the glare. Time was not on my side: I was going to be much

sicker much quicker than I liked.

I made myself pull the boots loose, shook the bones out and put them on. They were too big.

The jacket was a sailor's survival jacket, local style. The shoulders looked padded: shoulder floats. The front and sides had been all pockets, well stuffed; but front and back had been torn to confetti.

I stripped it off him and began searching pockets.

No wallet, no ID. Tissue pack. The shrapnel remains of a hand computer. Several pockets were sealed: emergency

gear, stuff you wouldn't want to open by accident; and some of those had survived.

A knife of exquisite sharpness in a built-in holster. Pocket torch. A ration brick. I bit into the brick and chewed while I searched. Mag specs, one lens shattered, but I put them on anyway. Without dark glasses my pink albino eyes would go blind.

Sun block spray, unharmed: good. A pill dispenser, broken, but in a pocket still airtight. Better! Tannin secretion pills!

The boots were shrinking, adapting to my feet. It felt friendly, reassuring. My most intimate friends on this island.

I was still dizzy. Better let the 'doc take care of me now; take the pills afterward. I shook broken ribs out of the jacket. Shook the pants empty. Balled the clothing and tossed it out of the hole. Tried to follow it.

My fingers wouldn't reach the rim.

"After all this, what a stupid way to die," I said to the memory of Sharrol Janz. "What do I do now? Build a ladder out of bones?" If I got out of this hole, I'd think it through before I ever did anything.

I knelt; I yelled and jumped. My fingers, palms, forearms gripped rough coral. I pulled myself out and lay panting,

sweating, bleeding, crying.

I limped back to the 'doc, wearing boots now, holding the suit spread above me for a parasol. I was feverish with sunburn.

I couldn't take boots into the ICC. _ Wait. Think. Wind? Waves?_ I tied the clothes in a bundle around the boots, and set it on the 'doc next to the faceplate. I climbed into the Intensive Care Cavity and pulled the lid down.

Sharrol would wait an hour longer, if she was still alive. And the kids. And Carlos.

I did not expect to fall asleep.

* * * *

Asleep, feverish with sunburn. The Surgeon program tickles blocks of nerves, plays me like a complex toy. In my sleep I feel raging thirst, hear a thunderclap, taste cinnamon or coffee, clench a phantom fist

My skin wakes. Piloerection runs in ripples along my body, then a universal tickle, then pressure ... like that feather-crested snakeskin Sharrol put me into for Carlos's party....

* * * *

Sharrol, sliding into her own rainbow-scaled body suit, stopped halfway. "You

don't really want to do this, do you?"

"I'll tough it out. How do I look?" I'd never developed the least sense of flatlander style. Sharrol picked my clothes.

"Half man, half snake," she said. "Me?"

"Like this snake's fitting mate." She didn't really. No flatlander is as supple as a crashlander. Raised in Earth's gravity, Sharrol was a foot shorter than I, and weighed the same as I did. Stocky.

The apartment was already in child mode: rounded surfaces everywhere, and all storage was locked or raised to eyeball height (mine.) Tanya was five

and Louis was four and both were agile as monkeys. I scanned for anything that might be dangerous within their reach.

Louis stared at us, solemn, awed. Tanya giggled. We must have looked odder than usual, though given flatlander styles, it's a wonder that any kid can recognize its parents. Why do they change their hair and skin color so often? When we hugged them goodbye Tanya made a game of tugging my hair out of shape and watching it flow back into a feathery crest. We set them down and turned on the Playmate program.

The lobby transfer booth jumped us three time zones east. We stepped out into a vestibule, facing an arc of picture

window. A flock of rainbow-hued fish panicked at the awful sight and flicked away. A huge fish passed in some internal dream.

For an instant I felt the weight of all those tons of water. I looked to see how Sharrol was taking it. She was smiling, admiring.

"Carlos lives near the Great Barrier Reef, you said. You didn't say he lived _in_ it."

"It's a great privilege," Sharrol told me. "I spent my first thirty years under water, but not on the Reef. The Reef's too fragile. The UN protects it."

"You never told me that!"

She grinned at my surprise. "My Dad had a lobster ranch near Boston. Later I worked for the Epcot-Atlantis police. The ecology isn't so fragile there, but -- Bey, I should take you there."

I said, "Maybe it's why we think alike. I grew up underground. You can't build above ground on We Made It."

"You told me. The winds."

"Sharrol, this isn't like Carlos."

She'd known Carlos Wu years longer than I had. "Carlos gets an idea and he follows it as far as it'll go. I don't know

what he's onto now. Maybe he's always wanted to share me with you. And he brought a date for, um -- "

"Ever met her?"

" -- Balance. No, Carlos won't even talk about Feather Filip. He just smiles mysteriously. Maybe it's love."

* * * *

_The children! Protect the children!
Where are the children?_ The Surgeon must be tickling my adrenal glands. I'm not awake, but I'm frantic, and a bit randy too. Then the sensations ease off. _The Playmate Program. It guards them and teaches them and plays with them.

They'll be fine. Can't take them to Carlos's place ... not tonight._

Sharrol was their mother and Carlos Wu had been their father. Earth's Fertility Board won't let an albino have children. Carlos's gene pattern they judge perfect; he's one of a hundred and twenty flatlanders who carry an unlimited birthright.

A man can love any child. That's hard-wired into the brain. A man can raise another man's children. And accept their father as a friend ... but there's a barrier. That's wired in too.

Sharrol knows. She's afraid I'll turn prickly and uncivilized. And _Carlos_

knows. So why...?

Tonight was billed as a foursome, sex and tapas. That was a developing custom: dinner strung out as a sequence of small dishes between bouts of recreational sex. Something inherited from the ancient Greeks or Italians, maybe. There's something lovers gain from feeding each other.

Feather --

The memory blurs. I wasn't afraid of her then, but I am now. When I remember Feather, the Surgeon puts me to sleep.

But the children! I've got to remember. We were down. Sharrol was out of the

'doc, but we left Louis and Tanya frozen. We floated their box into the boat. Feather and I disengaged the lift plate and slid it under the 'doc. Beneath that lumpy jacket she moved like a tigress. She spoke my name; I turned....

Feather.

* * * *

Carlos's sleepfield enclosed most of the bedroom. He'd hosted bigger parties than this in here. Tonight we were down to four, and a floating chaos of dishes Carlos said were Mexican.

"She's an ARM," Carlos said.

Feather Filip and I were sharing a tamale too spicy for Sharrol. Feather caught me staring and grinned back. An ARM?

I'd expected Feather to be striking. She wasn't exactly beautiful. She was strong: lean, almost gaunt, with prominent tendons in her neck, lumps flexing at the corners of her jaws. You don't get strength like that without training in illegal martial arts.

The Amalgamated Regional Militia is the United Nations police, and the United Nations took a powerful interest in Carlos Wu. What was she, Carlos's bodyguard? Was that how they'd met?

But whenever one of us spoke of the ARM that afternoon, Feather changed the subject.

I'd have thought Carlos would orchestrate our sleepfield dance. Certified genius that he is, would he not be superb at that too? But Feather had her own ideas, and Carlos let her lead. Her lovemaking was aggressive and acrobatic. I felt her strength, that afternoon. And my own lack, raised as I was in the lower gravity of We Made It.

And three hours passed in that fashion, while the wonderful colors of the reef darkened to light-amplified night.

And then Feather reached far out of the

field, limber as a snake ... reached inside her backpurse, and fiddled, and frowned, and rolled back and said, "We're shielded."

Carlos said, "They'll know."

"They know me," Feather said. "They're thinking that I let them use their monitors because I'm showing off, but now we're going to try something a little kinky. Or maybe I'm just putting them on. I've done it before -- "

"Then -- "

" -- Find a glitch so I can block their gear with something new. Then they fix it. They'll fix this one too, but not

tonight. It's just Feather coming down after a long week."

Carlos accepted that. "Stet. Sharrol, Beowulf, do you want to leave Earth? We'd be traveling as a group, Louis and Tanya and the four of us. This is for keeps."

Sharrol said, "I can't." Carlos knew that.

He said, "You can ride in cold sleep. Home's rotation period is six minutes shorter than Earth's. Mass the same, air about the same. Tectonic activity is higher, so it'll smell like there's just a trace of smog -- "

"Carlos, we talked this to death a few years ago." Sharrol was annoyed. "Sure, I could live on Home. I don't like the notion of flying from world to world like a, a corpse, but I'd do it. But the UN doesn't want me emigrating, and Home won't take flat phobes!"

The flatlander phobia is a bone-deep dread of being cut off from the Earth. Fear of flying and/or falling is an extreme case, but no flat phobe can travel in space. You find few flat phobes off Earth; in fact, Earthborn are called flatlanders no matter how well they adjust to life elsewhere.

But Feather was grinning at Sharrol. "We go by way of Fafnir. We'll get to

Home as Shashters. Home has already approved us for immigration -- "

"Under the name _Graynor_. We're all married," Carlos amplified.

I said, "Carlos, you've _been_ off Earth. You were on Jinx for a year."

"Yah. Bey, Sigmund Ausfaller and his gnomes never lost track of me. The United Nations thinks they own my genes. I'm supervised wherever I go."

But they keep you in luxury, I thought. And the grass is always greener. And Feather had her own complaint. "What do you know about the ARM?" she asked us.

"We listen to the vid," Sharrol said.

"Sharrol, dear, we vet that stuff. The ARM decides what you don't get to know about us. Most of us take psychoactive chemicals to keep us in a properly paranoid mindframe during working hours. We stay that way four days, then go sane for the weekend. If it's making us too crazy, they retire us."

Feather was nervous and trying to restrain it, but now hard-edged muscles flexed, and her elbows and knees were pulling in protectively against her torso. "But some of us are born this way. We go off chemicals when we go to work. The 'doc doses us back to sanity Thursday afternoon. I've been an ARM

schiz for thirty-five years. They're ready to retire me, but they'd never let me go to some other world, knowing what I know. And they don't want a schiz making babies."

I didn't say that I could see their point. I looked at Sharrol and saw hope in the set of her mouth, ready to smile but holding off. We were being brought into these plans _way_ late. Rising hackles had pulled me right out of any postcoital glow.

Feather told me, "They'll never let you go either, Beowulf."

And _that_ was nonsense. "Feather, I've been off Earth three times since I got

here."

"Don't try for four. You know too much. You know about the Core explosion, and diplomatic matters involving alien races -- "

"I've left Earth since -- "

" -- And Julian Forward's work." She gave it a dramatic pause. "We'll have some advanced weaponry out of that. We would not want the kzinti to know about that, or the trinocs, or certain human domains. That last trip, do you know how much talking you did while you were on Gummidgy and Jinx? You're a friendly, talkative guy with great stories, Beowulf!"

I shrugged. "So why trust me with this? Why didn't you and Carlos just go?"

She gestured at Carlos. He grinned and said, "I insisted."

"And we need a pilot," Feather said. "That's you, Beowulf. But I can bust us loose. I've set up something nobody but an ARM would ever dream of."

She told us about it.

* * * *

To the kzinti the world was only a number. Kzinti don't like ocean sports. The continent was Shasht, 'Burrowing Murder'. Shasht was nearly lifeless, but

the air was breathable and the mines were valuable. The kzinti had dredged up megatons of seabottom to fertilize a hunting jungle, and they got as far as seeding and planting before the Fourth Man-Kzin War.

After the war humankind took Shasht as reparations, and named the world _Fafnir_.

On Fafnir Feather's investigations found a family of six: two men, two women, two children. The Graynors were ready to emigrate. Local law would cause them to leave most of their wealth behind; but then, they'd lost most of it already, backing some kind of recreational facilities on the continent.

"I've recorded them twice. The Graynors'll find funding waiting for them at Wunderland. They won't talk. The _other_ Graynor family will emigrate to Home -- "

"That's us?"

Feather nodded. Carlos said, "But if you and the kids won't come, Feather'll have to find someone else."

I said, "Carlos, _you'll_ be watched. I don't suppose Feather can protect you from that."

"No. Feather's taken a much bigger risk -
- "

"They'll never miss it." She turned to me. "I got hold of a little stealth lander, Fourth War vintage, with a cold sleep box in back for you, Sharrol. We'll take that down to Fafnir. I've got an inflatable boat to take us to the Shasht North spaceport, and we'll get to Home on an Outbound Enterprises iceliner. Sharrol, you'll board the liner already frozen; I know how to bypass that stage." Feather was excited now. She gripped my arm and said, "We have to go get the lander, Beowulf. It's on Mars."

Sharrol said, "Tanya's a flat phobe too."

Feather's fingers closed with bruising force. I sensed that the lady didn't like seeing her plans altered.

"Wait one," Carlos said. "We can fix that. We're taking my 'doc, aren't we? It wouldn't be plausible, let alone intelligent, for Carlos Wu to go on vacation without his 'doc. Feather, how big is the lander's freezobox?"

"Yeah. Right. It'll hold Tanya ... better yet, both children. Sharrol can ride in your 'doc."

We talked it around. When we were satisfied, we went home.

* * * *

Three days out, three days returning, and a week on Mars while the ARM team

played with the spacecraft _Boy George_. It had to be Feather and me. I would familiarize myself with _Boy George_, Feather would supervise the ARM crews ... and neither of us were flat phobes.

I bought a dime disk, a tourist's guide of Fafnir system, and I studied it.

* * * *

Kzinti and human planetologists call Fafnir a typical water world in a system older than Sol. The system didn't actually retain much more water than Earth did; that isn't the problem. But the core is low in radioactives. The lithosphere is thick: no continental drift

here. Shallow oceans cover 93% of the planet. The oceans seethe with life, five billion years evolved, twice as old as Earth's.

And, where the thick crust cracked in early days, magma oozed through to build the world's single continent. Today a wandering line of volcanoes and bare rock stretches from the south pole nearly to the north. The continent's mass has been growing for billions of years.

On the opposite face of a lopsided planet, the ocean has grown shallow. Fafnir's life presently discovered the advantages of coral building. That side of the world is covered with tens of thousands of coral islands. Some stand

up to twenty meters tall: relics of a deeper ocean.

The mines are all on Shasht. So also are all the industry, both spaceports, and the seat of government. But the life -- recreation, housing, families are all on the islands.

* * * *

Finding the old lander had indeed been a stroke of luck. It was an identical backup for the craft that set Sinbad Jabar down on Meerowsk in the Fourth War, where he invaded the harem of the Patriarch's Voice. The disgrace caused the balance of power among the local kzinti to become unstable. The human alliance

took Meerowsk and renamed the planet, and it was Jabar's Prize until a later, pacifistic generation took power. Jabar's skin is displayed there still.

Somehow Feather had convinced the ARMs that (1) this twin of Jabar's lander was wanted for the Smithsonian Luna, and (2) the Belt peoples would raise hell if they knew it was to be removed from Mars. The project must be absolutely secret.

Ultimately the ARM crews grew tired of Feather's supervision, or else her company. Rapidly after that, Feather grew tired of watching me read. "We'll only be on Fafnir two days, Beowulf. What are you learning? It's a dull, dull,

dull place. All the land life is Earth imports -- "

"Their lifestyle is strange, Feather. They travel by transfer booths and dirigible balloons and boats, and almost nothing in between. A very laid-back society. Nobody's expected to be anywhere on time -- "

"Nobody's watching us here. You don't have to play tourist."

"I know." If the ARM had Boy George bugged ... but Feather would have thought of that.

Our ship was in the hands of ARM engineers, and that made for tension. But

we were getting on each other's nerves. Not a good sign, with a three week flight facing us.

Feather said, "You're not playing. You are a tourist!"

I admitted it. "And the first law of tourism is, read everything." But I switched the screen off and said, in the spirit of compromise, "All right. Show me. What is there to see on Mars?"

She hated to admit it. "Nothing."

* * * *

We left Mars with the little stealth lander in the fuel tank. The ARM was

doing things the ARM didn't know about. And I continued reading...

Fafnir's twenty-two-hour day has encouraged an active life. Couch potatoes court insomnia: it's easier to sleep if you're tired. But hurrying is something else. There are transfer booths, of course. You can jump instantly from a home on some coral extrusion to the bare rock of Shasht ... and buy yourself an eleven hour time lag.

Nobody's in a hurry to go home. They go by dirigible. Ultimately the floatliner companies wised up and began selling round trip tickets for the same price as one way.

"I do know all this, Beowulf."

"Mph? Oh, good."

"So what's the plan?" Feather asked.
"Find an island with nothing near it and put down, right? Get out and dance around on the sand while we blow the boat up and load it and go. How do we hide the lander?"

"Sink it."

"Read about lamplighters," she said, so I did.

After the war and the settlement, UN Advance Forces landed on Shasht, took over the kzinti structures, then began to

explore. Halfway around the planet were myriads of little round coral islands, each with a little peak at the center. At night the peaks glowed with a steady yellow light. Larger islands were chains of peaks, each with its yellow glow in the cup. Lamplighters were named before anyone knew what they were.

Close up ... well, they've been called piranha ant nests. The bioluminescence attracts scores of varieties of flying fish. Or, lured or just lost, a swimming thing may beach itself; and then the lamplighter horde flows down to the beach and cleans it to the bones.

You can't build a home, or beach a boat, until the nest has been burned out.

Then you have to wait another twelve days for the soldiers caught outside the nest to die. _Then_ cover the nest. Use it for a basement, put your house on it. Otherwise the sea may carry a queen to you, to use the nest again.

"You're ahead of me on this," I admitted. "What has this lander got for belly rockets?"

"Your basic hydrogen and oxygen," Feather said. "High heat and a water vapor exhaust. We'll burn the nest out."

"Good."

* * * *

Yo! Boy, when Carlos's 'doc is finished with you, you know it!

Open.

The sky was a brilliant sprawl of stars, some of them moving -- spacecraft, weather eyes, the wheel -- and a single lopsided moon. The island was shadow-teeth cutting into the starscape. I slid out carefully, into a blackness like the inside of my empty belly, and yelled as I dropped into seawater.

The water was hip deep, with no current to speak of. I wasn't going to drown, or be washed away, or lost. Fafnir's moon was a little one, close in. Tides would be shallow.

Still I'd been lucky: I could have wakened under water.

How did people feel about nudity here? But my bundle of clothes hadn't washed away. Now the boots clasped my feet like old friends. The sleeves of the dead man's survival jacket trailed way past my hands until I rolled them up, and of course the front and back were in shreds. The pants were better: too big, but with elastic ankle bands that I just pulled up to my knees. I swallowed a tannin secretion dose. I couldn't do that earlier. The 'doc would have read the albino gene in my DNA and "cured" me of an imposed tendency to tan.

There was nothing on all of Fafnir like

Carlos's 'doc. I'd have to hide it before I could ever think about rescue.

* * * *

"Our medical equipment," Carlos had called it; and Feather had answered, "Hardly ours."

Carlos was patient. "It's all we've got, Feather. Let me show you how to use it. First, the diagnostics -- "

The thing was as massive as the inflatable boat that would carry us to Shasht. Carlos had a gravity lift to shove under it. The Intensive Care Cavity was tailored just for Carlos Wu, naturally, but any of us could be served by the

tethers and sleeves and hypo-tipped tubes and readouts along one whole face of the thing: the service wall.

" -- These hookups do your diagnostics and set the chemical feeds going. Feather, it'll rebalance body chemistry, in case I ever go schiz or someone poisons me or something. I've reprogrammed it to take care of you too." I don't think Carlos noticed the way Feather looked at it, and him.

"Now the cavity. It's for the most serious injuries, but I've reprogrammed it for you, Sharrol my dear -- "

"But it's exactly Carlos's size," Feather told us pointedly. "The UN thinks a lot

of Carlos. _We_ can't use it."

Sharrol said, "It looks small. I don't mean the ICC cavity. I can get into that. But there's not much room for transplants in that storage space."

"Oh, no. This is advanced stuff. I had a hand in the design. One day we'll be able to use these techniques with everyone." Carlos patted the monster. "There's nothing in here in the way of cloned organs and such. There's the Surgeon program, and a reservoir of organic soup, and a googol of self-replicating machines a few hundred atoms long. If I lost a leg or an eye, they'd turn me off and rebuild it onto me. There's even ... here, pay attention. You

feed the organics reservoir through here, so the machine doesn't run out of material. You could even feed it Fafnir fish if you can catch them, but they're metal-deficient...."

When he had us thoroughly familiar with the beast, he helped Sharrol into the cavity, waited to be sure she was hooked up, and closed it. That made me nervous as hell. She climbed out a day later claiming that she hadn't felt a thing, wasn't hungry, didn't even have to use the bathroom.

* * * *

The 'doc was massive. I had to really heave against it to get it moving, and

then it wanted to move along the shore. I forced it to turn inland. The proper place to hide it was in the lamplighter nest, of course.

I was gasping like death itself, and the daylight had almost died, and I just couldn't push that mass uphill.

I left it on the beach. Maybe there was an answer. Let my hindbrain toy with it for awhile.

I trudged across sand to rough coral and kept walking to the peak. We'd picked the island partly for its isolation. Two distant yellow lights, eastward, marked two islands I'd noted earlier. I ran my mag specs (the side that worked) up to

20X and scanned the whole horizon, and found nothing but the twin lamplighter glows.

And nothing to do but wait.

I sat with my back against the lip of the dead lamplighter pit. I pictured her: she looked serious, a touch worried, under a feather crest and undyed skin: pink shading to brown, an Anglo tanned as if by Fafnir's yellow-white sun.

I said, "Sharrol."

Like the dead she had slept, her face slack beneath the faceplate, like Sleeping Beauty. I'd taken to talking to her, wondering if some part of her heard.

I'd never had the chance to ask.

"I never wondered why you loved me. Egotist, I am. But, you must have looked like me when you were younger. Thirty years underwater, no sunlight. Your uncles, your father, they must have looked a lot like me. Maybe even with white hair. How old are you? I never asked."

Her memory looked at me.

"Tanj that. Where are you? Where are Tanya and Louis? Where's Carlos? What happened after I was shot?"

Faint smile, shrug of eyebrows.

"You spent three weeks unconscious in the ICC followed by ten minutes on your feet. Wrong gravity, wrong air mix, wrong smells. We hit you with everything it might take to knock a flat phobe spinning. Then BLAM and your love interest is lying on the sand with a hole through him.

"Maybe you tried to kill her. I don't think you'd give her much trouble, but maybe Feather would kill you anyway. She'd still have the kids...."

I slammed my fist on coral. "What did she want? That crazy woman. I never hurt her at all."

Talking to Sharrol: Lifeless as she was,

maybe it wasn't quite as crazy as talking to myself. I couldn't talk to the others. They -- "You remember that night we planned it all? Feather was lucid then. Comparatively. We were there for her as people. On the trip to Mars she was a lot wilder. She was a hell of an active lover, but I never really got the feeling that I was there for her."

We never talked about each other's lovers. In truth, it was easier to say these things to Sharrol when she wasn't here.

"But most of the way to Fafnir, Feather was fine. But she wasn't sleeping with me. Just Carlos. She could hold a conversation, no problem there, but I was randy, love, and frustrated. She

liked that. I caught a look when Carlos wasn't looking. So I didn't want to talk to her. And she was always up against Carlos, and Carlos, he was a bit embarrassed about it all. We talked about plans, but for anything personal there was just you. Sleeping Beauty."

The night was warm and clear. By convention, boats would show any color except lamplighter yellow. I couldn't miss seeing a boat's lights.

"Then, fifteen hours out from the drop point, that night I found her floating in my sleeping plates. I suppose I could have sent her to her own room, I mean it was within the laws of physics, but I

didn't. I acted like conversation was the last thing I'd be interested in. But so did Feather.

"And the next morning it was all business, and a frantic business it was. We came in in devious fashion, and got off behind the moon. Boy George went on alone, decelerating. Passed too close to an ARM base on Claim 226 that even Feather wasn't supposed to know about. Turned around and accelerated away in clear and obvious terror, heading off in the general direction of Hrooshpith -- pithtcha -- of another of those used-to-be-kzinti systems where they've never got the population records straightened out. No doubt the ARM is

waiting for us there.

"And of course you missed the ride down ... but my point is that nothing ever got _said_.

"Okay. This whole scheme was schemed by Feather, carried through by Feather. It -- " I stared into the black night. "Oh." I really should have seen this earlier. Why did Feather need Carlos?

Through the ARM spy net Feather Filip had found a family of six Shashters ready to emigrate. Why not look for one or two? Where Carlos insisted on taking his children and Sharrol and me, another man might be more reasonable.

"She doesn't just want to be clear of Sol system. Doesn't just want to make babies. She wants _Carlos_. Carlos of the perfect genes. Hah! Carlos finally saw it. Maybe she told him. He must have let her know he didn't want children by an ARM schiz. Angry and randy, she took it out on me, and then...."

Then?

With my eyes open to the dark, entranced, I remembered that final night. _Yellow lights sprinkled on a black ocean. Some are the wrong color, too bright, too blue. Avoid those. They're houses. Pick one far from the rest. Hover. Organic matter burns lamplighter yellow below the drive flame, then

fades. I sink us in, an egg in an egg cup. Feather blasts the roof loose and we crawl out_ --

We hadn't wanted to use artificial lights. When dawn gave us enough light, we inflated the boat. Feather and Carlos used the gravity lift to settle the icebox in the boat. They were arguing in whispers. I didn't want to hear that, I thought.

I turned off the 'doc's "Maintenance" sequence. A minute later Sharrol sat up, a flat phobe wakened suddenly on an alien world. Sniffed the air. Kissed me and let me lift her out, heavy in Fafnir's gravity. I set her on the sand. Her nerve

seemed to be holding. Feather had procured local clothing; I pushed the bundle into her arms.

Feather came toward me towing the gravity lift. She looked shapeless, with bulging pockets fore and aft. We slid the lift into place, and I pushed the 'doc toward Carlos and the boat. Feather called my name. I turned. BLAM. Agony and scrambled senses, but I saw Carlos leap for the boat, reflexes like a jackrabbit. My head hit the black sand.

Then?

"She wanted hostages. Our children, but Carlos's children. They're frozen, they won't give her any trouble. But me, why

would she need me? Killing me lets Carlos know she means it. Maybe I told too many stories: maybe she thinks I'm dangerous. Maybe -- "

For an instant I saw just how superfluous I was, from Feather Filip's psychotic viewpoint. Feather wanted Carlos. Carlos wanted the children. Sharrol came with the children. Beowulf Shaeffer was along because he was with Sharrol. If Feather shot Beowulf, how much would Carlos mind? BLAM.

Presently I said, "She shot me to prove she would. But it looked to me like Carlos just ran. There weren't any weapons in the boat, we'd only just inflated it. All he could do was start it

and go. That takes -- " When I thought about it, it was actually a good move. He'd gotten away with himself and Tanya and Louis, with both hostages. Protect them now, negotiate later.

And he'd left Feather in a killing rage, with that horrible tube and one living target. I stopped talking to Sharrol then, because it seemed to me she must be dead.

No! "Feather had you. She had to have you." It could happen. It could. "What else can she threaten Carlos with? She has to keep you alive." I tried to believe it. "She certainly didn't kill you in the first minute. Somebody had to put

me in the 'doc. Feather had no interest in doing that."

But she had no interest in letting Sharrol do that either. "Tanj dammit! Why did Feather let you put me in the 'doc? She even let you...." What about the biomass reserve?

My damaged body must have needed some major restructuring. The biomass reserve had been feeding Sharrol, and doing incidental repairs on us all, for the entire three week trip. Healing me would take another ... fifty kilograms? More? "She must have let you fill the biomass reserve with...." Fish?

Feather showing Carlos how reasonable

she could be ... too reasonable. It felt wrong, wrong. "The other body, the headless one. Why not just push that in the hopper? So much easier. Unless -- "

Unless material was even closer to hand.

I felt no sudden inspiration. It was a matter of making myself believe. I tried to remember Sharrol ... pulling her clothes on quickly, shivering and dancing on the sand, in the chilly dawn breeze. Hands brushing back through her hair, hair half grown out. A tiny grimace for the way the survival jacket made her look, bulges everywhere. Patting pockets, opening some of them.

The 'doc had snapped her out of a three

week sleep. Like me: awake, alert, ready.

It didn't go away, the answer. It just ... I still didn't know where Sharrol was, or Carlos, or the children. What if I was wrong? Feather had mapped my route to Home, every step of the way. I knew exactly where Feather was now, if a line of logic could point my way. But -- one wrong assumption, and Feather Filip could pop up behind my ear.

I could make myself safer, and Sharrol too, if I mapped out a worst-case scenario.

Feather's Plan B: Kill Shaeffer. Take the rest prisoners, to impose her will on

Carlos ... but Carlos flees with the boat. So, Plan B-1: Feather holds Sharrol at gunpoint. (Alive.) Some days later she waves down a boat. BLAM, and a stolen boat sails toward Shasht. Or stops to stow Sharrol somewhere, maybe on another coral island, maybe prisoned inside a plastic tent with a live lamplighter horde prowling outside.

And Carlos? He's had four months, now, to find Sharrol and Feather. He's a genius, ask anyone. And Feather wants to get in touch ... unless she's given up on Carlos, decided to kill him.

If I could trace Carlos's path, I would find Louis and Tanya and even Sharrol.

Carlos Plan B-1 follows Plan A as originally conceived by Feather. The kids would be stowed aboard the iceliner as if already registered. Carlos would register and be frozen. Feather could follow him to Home ... maybe on the same ship, if she hustled. But --

No way could Feather get herself frozen with a gun in her hand. That would be the moment to take her, coming out of freeze on Home.

There, I had a target. On Shasht they could tell me who had boarded the Zombie Queen for Home. What did I have to do to get to Shasht?

"Feed myself, that's easy. Collect

rainwater too. Get off the island...." That, at least, was not a puzzle. I couldn't build a raft. I couldn't swim to another island. But a sailor lost at sea will die if cast ashore; therefore local tradition decrees that he must be rescued.

"Collect some money. Get to Shasht. Hide myself." Whatever else was lost to me, to us -- whoever had died, whoever still lived -- there was still the mission, and that was to be free of the United Nations and Earth.

And Carlos Wu's 'doc would finger me instantly. It was advanced nanotechnology: it screamed its Earthly origin. It might be the most valuable item

on Fafnir, and I had no wealth at all, and I was going to have to abandon it.

* * * *

Come daylight, I moved the 'doc. I still wanted to hide it in the lamplighter nest. The gravity lift would lift it but not push it uphill. But I solved it.

One of the secrets of life: know when and what to give up.

I waited for low tide and then pushed it out to sea, and turned off the lift. The water came almost to the faceplate. Seven hours later it didn't show at all. And the next emergency might kill me unless it happened at low tide.

The nights were as warm as the days. As the tourist material had promised, it rained just before dawn. I set up my pants to funnel rainwater into a hole I chopped in the coral.

The tour guide had told me how to feed myself. It isn't that rare for a lamplighter nest to die. Sooner or later an unlit island will be discovered by any of several species of swimming things. Some ride the waves at night and spawn in the sand.

I spent the second night running through the shallows and scooping sunbunnies up in my jacket. Bigger flying fish came gliding off the crests of the breakers. They wanted the sunbunnies. Three or

four wanted me, but I was able to dodge. One I had to gut in midair.

The tour guide hadn't told me how to clean sunbunnies. I had to fake that. I poached them in seawater, using my pocket torch on high; and I ate until I was bloated. I fed more of them into the biomass reservoir.

With some distaste, I fed those long human bones in too. Fafnir fish meat was deficient in metals. Ultimately that might kill me; but the 'doc could compensate for a time.

There was nothing to build a boat with. The burnt-out lamplighter nest didn't show by daylight, so any passing boat

would be afraid to rescue me. I thought of swimming; I thought of riding away on the gravity lift, wherever the wind might carry me. But I couldn't feed myself at sea, and how could I approach another island?

On the fourth evening a great winged shape passed over the island, then dived into the sea. Later I heard a slapping sound as that flyer and a companion kicked themselves free of the water, soared, passed over the crater and settled into it. They made a great deal of noise. Presently the big one glided down to the water and was gone.

At dawn I fed myself again, on the clutch of eggs that had been laid in the body of

the smaller flyer: male or female, whichever. The dime disk hadn't told me about this creature. A pity I wouldn't have the chance to write it up.

At just past sunset on the eighth night I saw a light flicker blue-green-red.

My mag specs showed a boat that wasn't moving.

I fired a flare straight up, and watched it burn blue-white for twenty minutes. I fired another at midnight. Then I stuffed my boots partway into my biggest pockets, inflated my shoulder floats, and walked into the sea until I had to swim.

I couldn't see the boat with my eyes this

close to water level. I fired another flare before dawn. One of those had to catch someone awake ... and if not, I had three more. I kept swimming.

It was peaceful as a dream. Fafnir's ecology is very old, evolved on a placid world not prone to drifting continents and ice ages, where earthquakes and volcanoes know their place.

The sea had teeth, of course, but the carnivores were specialized; they knew the sounds of their prey. There were a few terrifying exceptions. Reason and logic weren't enough to wash out those memories, holograms of creatures the match for any white shark.

I grew tired fast. The air felt warm enough, the water did too, but it was leeching the heat from my flesh and bones. I kept swimming.

A rescuer should have no way of knowing that I had been on an island. The further I could get, the better. I did not want a rescuer to find Carlos Wu's 'doc.

* * * *

At first I saw nothing more of the boat than the great white wings of its sails. I set the pocket torch on wide focus and high power, to compete with what was now broad daylight, and poured vivid green light on the sails.

And I waited for it to turn toward me, but for a long time it didn't. It came in a zigzag motion, aimed by the wind, never straight at me. It took forever to pull alongside.

A woman with fluffy golden hair studied me in some curiosity, then stripped in two quick motions and dived in.

I was numb with cold, hardly capable of wiggling a finger. This was the worst moment, and I couldn't muster strength to appreciate it. I passively let the woman noose me under the armpits, watched the man lift me aboard, utterly unable to protect myself.

Feather could have killed me before the

'doc released me. Why wait? I'd worked out what must have happened to her; it was almost plausible; but I couldn't shake the notion that Feather was waiting above me, watching me come aboard.

There was only a brawny golden man with slanted brown eyes and golden hair bleached nearly as white as mine. Tor, she'd called him, and she was Wil. He wrapped me in a silver bubble blanket and pushed a bulb of something hot into my hands.

My hands shook. A cup would have splashed everything out. I got the bulb to my lips and sucked. Strange taste, augmented with a splash of rum. The

warmth went to the core of me like life itself.

The woman climbed up, dripping. She had eyes like his, a golden tan like his. He handed her a bulb. They looked me over amiably. I tried to say something; my teeth turned into castanets. I sucked and listened to them arguing over who and what I might be, and what could have torn up my jacket that way.

When I had my teeth under some kind of control, I said, "I'm Persial January Hebert, and I'm eternally in your debt."

* * * *

Leaving all our Earthly wealth behind us

was a pain. Feather could help: she contrived to divert a stream of ARM funds to Fafnir, replacing it from Carlos's wealth.

Riiight. But Sharrol and I would be sponging off Carlos ... and maybe it wouldn't be Carlos. Feather controlled that wealth for now, and Feather liked control. She had not said that she expected to keep some for herself. That bothered me. It must have bothered Carlos too, though we never found privacy to talk about it.

I wondered how Carlos would work it. Had he known Feather Filip before he reached Jinx? I could picture him designing something that would be

useless on Earth: say, an upgraded version of the mass driver system that runs through the vacuum across Jinx's East Pole, replacing a more normal world's Pinwheel launcher. Design something, copyright it on Jinx under a pseudonym, form a company. Just in case he ever found the means to flee Sol system.

Me, I went to my oldest friend on Earth. General Products owed Elephant a considerable sum, and Elephant -- Gregory Pelton -- owed me. He got General Products to arrange for credit on Home and Fafnir. Feather wouldn't have approved the breach in secrecy, but the aliens who run General Products

don't reveal secrets. We'd never even located their home world.

And Feather must have expected to control Carlos's funding and Carlos with it.

And Sharrol ... was with me.

She'd trusted me. Now she was a flat phobe broke and stranded on an alien world, if she still lived, if she wasn't the prisoner of a homicidal maniac. Four months, going on five. Long enough to drive her crazy, I thought.

How could I hurry to her rescue? The word hurry was said to be forgotten on Fafnir; but perhaps I'd thought of a

way.

* * * *

They let me sleep. When I woke there was soup. I was ravenous. We talked while we ate.

The boat was Gullfish. The owners were Wilhelmin and Toranaga, brother and sister, both recently separated from mates and enjoying a certain freedom. Clean air, exercise, celibacy, before they returned to the mating dance, its embarrassments and frustrations and rewards.

There was a curious turn to their accents. I tagged it as Australian at first,

then as Plateau softened by speech training, or by a generation or two in other company. This was said to be typical of Fafnir. There was no Fafnir accent. The planet had been settled too recently and from too many directions.

Wil finished her soup, went to a locker, and came back with a jacket. It was not quite like mine, and new, untouched. They helped me into it, and let me fish through the pockets of my own ragged garment before they tossed it in the locker.

They had given me my life. By Fafnir custom my response would be a gift expressing my value as perceived by myself ... but Wil and Tor hadn't told me

their full names. I hinted at this; they failed to understand. Hmm.

My dime disk hadn't spoken of this. It might be a new custom: the rescuer conceals data, so that an impoverished rescuee need not be embarrassed. He sends no life gift instead of a cheap one. But I was guessing. I couldn't follow the vibes yet.

As for my own history --

"I just gave up," I blurted. "It was so stupid. I hadn't -- hadn't tried everything at all."

Toranaga said, "What kind of everything were you after?"

"I lost my wife four months ago. A rogue wave -- you know how waves crossing can build into a mountain of water? It rolled our boat under. A trawler picked me up, the Triton." A civil being must be able to name his rescuer. Surely there must be a boat named Triton? "There's no record of anyone finding Milcenta. I bought another boat and searched. It's been four months. I was doing more drinking than looking lately, and three nights ago something rammed the boat. A torpedo ray, I think. I didn't sink, but my power was out, even my lights. I got tired of it all and just started swimming."

They looked at each other, then at their soup. Sympathy was there, with a trace

of contempt beneath.

"Middle of the night, I was cold as the sea bottom, and it crossed my mind that maybe Mil was rescued under another name. We aren't registered as a partnership. If Mil was in a coma, they'd check her retina prints -- "

"Use our caller," Wilhelmin said

I thanked them. "With your permission, I'll establish some credit too. I've run myself broke, but there's credit at Shasht."

They left me alone in the cabin.

* * * *

The caller was set into a well in the cabin table. It was a portable -- just a projector plate and a few keys that would get me a display of virtual keys and a screen -- but a sailor's portable, with a watertight case and several small cleats. I found the master program unfamiliar but user-friendly.

I set up a search program for Milcenta Adelaide Graynor, in any combination. Milcenta was Sharrol and Adelaide was Feather, as determined by their iceliner tickets and retina prints. Milcenta's name popped up at once.

I bellowed out of the hatch. "They saved her!" Wil and Tor bolted into the cabin to read over my shoulder.

Hand of Allah, a fishing boat. Milcenta but not Adelaide! Sharrol had been picked up alone. I'd been at least half right: she'd escaped from Feather. I realized I was crying.

And -- "No life gift." That was the other side of it: if she sent a proper gift, the embarrassment of needing to be rescued at sea need never become public record. We'd drilled each other on such matters. "She must have been in bad shape."

"Yes, if she didn't call you," Wilhelmin said. "And she didn't go home either?"

I told Martin Graynor's story: "We sold our home. We were on one last cruise

before boarding an iceliner. She could be anywhere by now, if she thought the wave killed me. I'll have to check."

I did something about money first. There was nothing aboard Gullfish that could read Persial January Hebert's retina prints, but I could at least establish that money was there.

I tried to summon passenger records from the iceliner Zombie Queen. This was disallowed. I showed disappointment and some impatience; but of course they wouldn't be shown to Hebert. They'd be opened to Martin Wallace Graynor.

* * * *

They taught me to sail.

Gullfish was built for sails, not for people. The floors weren't flat. Ropes lay all over every surface. The mast stood upright through the middle of the cabin. You didn't walk in, you climbed. There were no lift plates; you slept in an odd-shaped box small enough to let you brace yourself in storms.

I had to learn a peculiar slang, as if I were learning to fly a spacecraft, and for the same reason. If a sailor hears a yell, he has to know what is meant, instantly.

I was working hard and my body was adjusting to the shorter day. Sure I had insomnia; but nobody sleeps well on a

small boat. The idea is to snap awake instantly, where any stimulus could mean trouble. The boat was giving my body time to adjust to Fafnir.

Once I passed a mirror, and froze. I barely knew myself.

That was all to the good. My skin was darkening and, despite sunblock, would darken further. But -- when we landed, my hair had been cut to Fafnir styles. It had grown during four months in the 'doc. The 'doc had "cured" my depilation treatment: I had a beard too. When we reached civilization I would be far too conspicuous: a pink-eyed, pale-skinned man with long, wild white hair.

My hosts hadn't said anything about my appearance. It was easy to guess what they'd thought. They'd found a neurotic who sailed in search of his dead wife until his love of life left him entirely.

I went to Tor in some embarrassment and asked if they had anything like a styler aboard.

They had scissors. Riiight. Wil tried to shape my hair, laughed at the result, and suggested I finish the job at Booty Island.

So I tried to forget the rest of the world and just sail. It was what Wilhelmin and Toranaga were doing. One day at a time. Islands and boats grew more common as

we neared the Central Isles. Another day for Feather to forget me, or lose me. Another day of safety for Sharrol, if Feather followed me to her. I'd have to watch for that.

And peace would have been mine, but that my ragged vest was in a locker that wouldn't open to my fingerprints

Wil and Tor talked about themselves, a little, but I still didn't know their identities. They slept in a locked cabin. I noticed also an absence. Wil was a lovely woman, not unlike Sharrol herself; but her demeanor and body language showed no sign that she considered herself female, or me male, let alone that she might welcome a pass.

It might mean anything, in an alien culture: that my hair style or shape of nose or skin color were distasteful, or I didn't know the local body language, or I lacked documentation for my gene pattern. But I wondered if they wanted no life gift, in any sense, from a man they might have to give to the police

What would a police detective think of those holes? Why, he'd think some kinetic weapon had torn a hole through the occupant, killing him instantly, after which someone (the killer?) had stolen the vest for himself. And if Wil and Tor were thinking that way... What I did at the caller, might it be saved

automatically?

Now there was a notion.

I borrowed the caller again. I summoned the encyclopedia and set a search for a creature with boneless arms. There were several on Fafnir, all small. I sought data on the biggest, particularly those local to the North Coral Quadrant. There were stories ... no hard evidence....

And another day passed, and I learned that I could cook while a kitchen was rolling randomly.

At dinner that night Wil got to talking about Fafnir sea life. She'd worked at Pacifica, which I gathered was a kind of

underwater zoo; and had I ever heard of a Kdatlyno life form like a blind squid?

"No," I said. "Would the kzinti bring one here?"

"I wouldn't think so. The kzinti aren't surfers," Tor said, and we laughed.

Wil didn't. She said, "They meant it for the hunting jungle. On Kdat the damn things can come ashore and drag big animals back into the ocean. But they've pretty well died out around Shasht, and we never managed to get one for Pacifica."

"Well," I said, and hesitated, and, "I think I was attacked by something like

that. But huge. And it wasn't around Shasht, it was where you picked me up."

"Jan, you should report it."

"Wil, I can't. I was fast asleep and half dead of cold, lost at sea at midnight. I woke up under water. Something was squeezing my chest and back. I got my knife out and slashed. Slashed something rubbery. It pulled apart. It pulled my jacket apart. If it had ripped the shoulder floats I'd still be down there. But I never saw a thing."

Thus are legends born.

* * * *

Booty Island is several islands merged. I counted eight peaks coming in; there must have been more. We had been sailing for twelve days.

Buildings sat on each of the lamplighter nests. They looked like government buildings or museums. No two were alike. Houses were scattered across the flatlands between. A mile or so of shopping center ran like a suspension bridge between two peaks. On Earth this would have been a park. Here, a center of civilization.

A line of transfer booths in the mall bore the familiar flickering Pelton logo. They were all big cargo booths, and old. I didn't instantly see the significance.

We stopped in a hotel and used a coin caller. The system read my retina prints: Persial January Hebert, sure enough. Wil and Tor waited while I moved some money, collected some cash and a transfer booth card, and registered for a room. I tried again for records of Milcenta Adelaide Graynor. Sharrol's rescue was still there. Nothing for Feather.

Wil said, "Jan, she may have been recovering from a head injury. See if she's tried to find you."

I couldn't be Mart Graynor while Wil and Tor were watching. The net registered no messages for Jan Hebert.

Feather didn't know that name. Sharrol did; but Sharrol thought I was dead.

Or maybe she was crazy, incapacitated. With Tor and Wil watching I tried two worst-cases.

First: executions. A public 'doc can cure most varieties of madness. Madness is curable, therefore voluntary. A capital crime committed during a period of madness has carried the death penalty for seven hundred years, on Earth and on every world I knew.

It was true on Fafnir too. But Sharrol had not been executed for any random homicide, and neither, worse luck, had Feather.

Next: There are still centers for the study of madness. The best known is on Jinx. On Earth there are several, plus one secret branch of the ARM. There was only one mental institution to serve all of Fafnir, and that seemed to be half empty. Neither Feather's nor Sharrol's retina prints showed on the records.

The third possibility would have to wait.

* * * *

We all needed the hotel's styler, though I was worst off. The device left my hair long at the neck, and theirs too, a local style to protect against sunburn. I let it tame my beard without baring my face. The sun had had its way with me: I

looked like an older man.

I took Wil and Tor to lunch. I found 'gullfish' on the menu, and tried it. Like much of Fafnir sea life, it tasted like something that had almost managed to become red meat.

I worked some points casually into conversation, just checking. It was their last chance to probe me too, and I had to improvise details of a childhood in the North Sea. Tor found me plausible; Wil was harder to read. Nothing was said of a vest or a great sea monster. In their minds I was already gone.

I was Schroedinger's cat: I had murdered and not murdered the owner of a

shredded vest.

* * * *

At the caller in my room I established myself as Martin Wallace Graynor. That gave me access to my wives' autodoc records. A public 'doc will correct any of the chemical imbalances we lump under the term 'crazy', but it also records such service.

Milcenta Graynor -- Sharrol -- had used a 'doc eight times in four-plus months, starting a week after our disastrous landing. The record showed much improvement over that period, beginning at a startling adrenalin level, acid indigestion and some dangerous lesser

symptoms. Eight times within the Central Islands ... none on Shasht.

If she'd never reached the mainland, then she'd never tried to reach Outbound Enterprises. Never tried to find Carlos, or Louis and Tanya.

Adelaide Graynor -- Feather -- had no 'doc record on this world. The most obvious conclusion was that wherever she was, she must be mad as a March hare.

Boats named Gullfish were everywhere on Fafnir. Fifty-one registries. Twenty-nine had sail. Ten of those would sleep four. I scanned for first names: no Wilhelmin, no Toranaga.

Maybe Gullfish belonged to a parent, or to one of the departed spouses.

I'd learned a term for Gullfish's sail and mast configuration: sloop rig.

Every one of the ten candidates was a sloop rig!

Wait, now. Wil had worked at Pacifica?

I did some research. Pacifica wasn't just a zoo. It looked more like an underwater village, with listings for caterers, costume shops, subs, repair work, travel, hotels ... but Wil had worked with sea life. Might that give me a handle?

I couldn't see how.

It wasn't that I didn't have an answer; I just didn't like it. Wil and Tor had to hand my vest to the cops. When Persial January Hebert was reported rescued, I would send them a gift.

Feather didn't know my alternate name. But if she had access to the Fafnir police, she'd tanj sure recognize that vest!

* * * *

With the rest of the afternoon I bought survival gear: a backpurse, luggage, clothing.

On Earth I could have vanished behind a thousand shades of dyes. Here ... I settled for a double dose of tannin secretion, an underdose of sunblock, a darkened pair of mag specs, my height, a local beard and hairstyle.

Arming myself was a problem.

The disk hadn't spoken of weapons on Fafnir. My safest guess was that Fafnir was like Earth: they didn't put weapons in the hands of civilians. Handguns, rifles, martial arts training belong to the police.

The good news: everyone on the islands carried knives. Those flying sharks that attacked me during the sunbunny run

were one predator out of thousands.

Feather would arm herself somehow. She'd look through a sporting goods store, steal a hunting rifle ... nope, no hunting rifles. No large prey on Fafnir, unless in the kzinti jungle, or underwater.

There were listings for scuba stores. I found a stun gun with a big parabolic reflector, big enough to knock out a one-gulp, too big for a pocket. I took it home, with more diving gear for verisimilitude, and a little tool kit for repairing diving equipment. With that I removed the reflector.

Now I couldn't use it underwater; it

would knock me out, because water conducts sound very well. But it would fit my pocket.

* * * *

I took my time over a sushi dinner, quite strange. Some time after sunset I stepped into a transfer booth, and stepped out into a brilliant dawn on Shasht.

Outbound Enterprises was open. I let a Ms. Machti take Martin Wallace Graynor's retina prints. "Your ticket is still good, Mr. Graynor," Ms. Machti said. "The service charge will be eight hundred stars. You're four months late!"

"I was shipwrecked," I told her. "Did my

companions make it?"

Iceliner passengers are in no hurry. The ships keep prices down by launching when they're full. I learned that the Zombie Queen had departed a week after our landing, about as expected. I gave Ms. Machti the names. She set the phone system searching, and presently said, "Your husband and the children boarded and departed. Your wives' tickets are still outstanding."

"Both?"

"Yes." She did a double-take. "Oh, good heavens, they must think you're dead!"

"That's what I'm afraid of. At least, John

and Tweena and Nathan would. They were revived in good shape?"

"Yes, of course. But the women, could they have waited for you?"

Stet: Carlos, Tanya, and Louis were all safe on Home and had left the spaceport under their own power. Feather and Sharrol -- "Waited? But they'd have left a message."

She was still looking at her screen. "Not for you, Mr. Graynor, but Mr. John Graynor has recorded a message for Mrs. Graynor ... for Mrs. Adelaide Graynor."

For Feather. "But nothing for Milcenta?"

But they both stayed? How strange." Ms. Machti seemed the type of person who might wonder about other people's sexual arrangements. I wanted her curious, because this next question -- "Can you show me what John had to say to Adelaide?"

She shook her head firmly. "I don't see how -- "

"Now, John wouldn't have said anything someone else couldn't hear. You can watch it yourself -- " Her head was still turning left, right, left. "In fact, you should. Then you can at least tell me if there's been, if, well. I have to know, don't I? If Milcenta's dead."

That stopped her. She nodded, barely, and tapped in the code to summon Carlos's message to Feather.

She read it all the way through. Her lip curled just a bit; but she showed only solemn pity when she turned the monitor to face me.

* * * *

It was a posed scene. Carlos looked like a man hiding a sickness. The view behind him could have been a manor garden in England, a tamed wilderness. Tanya and Louis were playing in the distance, hide-and-seek in and out of some Earthly tree that dripped a cage of foliage. Alive. Ever since I first saw

them frozen, I must have been thinking of them as dead.

Carlos looked earnestly out of the monitor screen. "Adelaide, you can see that the children and I arrived safely. I have an income. The plans we made together, half of us have carried out. Your own iceliner slots are still available.

"I know nothing of Mart. I hope you've heard from him, but he should never have gone sailing alone. I fear the worst.

"Addie, I can't pretend to understand how you've changed, how Mil changed, or why. I can only hope you'll both change your mind and come back to me.

But understand me, Addie: you are not welcome without Milcenta. Your claim on family funds is void without Milcenta. And whatever relationship we can shape from these ashes, I would prefer to leave the children out of it."

He had the money!

Carlos stood and walked a half-circle as he spoke. The camera followed him on automatic, and now it showed a huge, sprawling house of architectural coral, pink and slightly rounded everywhere. Carlos gestured. "I've waited. The house isn't finished because you and Milcenta will have your own tastes. But come soon.

"I've set credit with Outbound. Messages sent to Home by hyperwave will be charged to me. I'll get the service charges when you and Milcenta board. Call first. We can work this out."

* * * *

The record began to repeat. I heard it through again, then turned the monitor around.

Ms. Machti asked, "You went sailing alone?"

She thought I'd tried to commit suicide after our wives changed parity and locked the men out: an implication Carlos had shaped with some skill. I

made a brush-off gesture and said, "I've got to tell him I'm still alive."

"The credit he left doesn't apply -- "

"I want to send a hyperwave message, my expense. Let's see ... does Outbound Enterprises keep a camera around?"

"No."

"I'll fax it from the hotel. When's the next flight out?"

"At least two weeks, but we can suspend you any time."

* * * *

I used a camera at the hotel. The first disk I made would go through Outbound Enterprises. "John, I'm all right. I was on a dead island eating fish for awhile." A slightly belligerent tone: "I haven't heard a word from Adelaide or Milcenta. I know Milcenta better than you do, and frankly, I believe they must have separated by now. Home looks like a new life, but I haven't given up on the old one. I'll let you know when I know myself."

So much for the ears of Ms. Machti.

Time lag had me suddenly wiped out. I floated between the sleeping plates ... exhausted but awake. What should I put in a _real_ message?

Carlos's tape was a wonderful lesson in communication. He wants to talk to Feather. The children are not to be put at risk. Beowulf is presumed dead, c'est la vie, Carlos will not seek vengeance. But he wants Sharrol alive. Feather is not to come to Home without Sharrol. Carlos can enforce any agreement. He hadn't said so because it's too obvious. A frozen Feather, arriving at Home unaccompanied, need never wake.

And he had the money! Not just his own funds, but the money Feather knew about, "family funds": he must have reached civilization ahead of her and somehow sequestered what Feather

funneled through the ARM. If Feather was loose on Fafnir, then she was also broke. She owned nothing but the credit that would get her a hyperwave call to Home, or herself and Sharrol shipped frozen. Though Carlos didn't know it, even Sharrol had escaped.

Nearly five months. How was Feather living? Did she have a job? Something I could track? With her training she might be better off as a thief.

Yah! I tumbled out of the sleepfield and tapped out my needs in some haste. She hadn't been caught at any capital crime, but any jail on Shasht would record Adelaide Graynor's retina prints. The caller ran its search....

Nothing.

Okay, _job_. Feather needed something that would allow her time to take care of a prisoner. She had to have that if she had Sharrol, or in case she recaptured Sharrol, or captured _Beowulf_.

So I looked through some job listings, but nothing suggested itself. I turned off the caller and hoped for sleep. Perhaps I dozed a little.

Sometime in the night I realized that I had nothing more to say to Carlos.

Even Sharrol's escape wasn't information unless she stayed loose.

Feather was a trained ARM. I was a self-trained tourist; I couldn't possibly hunt her down. There was only one way to hunt Feather.

It was still black outside, and I was wide awake. The caller gave me a listing of all night restaurants.

I ordered an elaborate breakfast, six kinds of fish eggs, gulper bacon, cappuccino. Five people at a table demanded I join them, so I did. They were fresh from the coral isles via dirigible, still timelagged, looking for new jokes. I tried to oblige. And somewhere in there I forgot all about missing ladies.

We broke up at dawn. I walked back to the hotel alone. I had sidetracked my mind, hoping it would come up with something if I left it alone; but my answer hadn't changed. The way to hunt Feather was to pretend to be Feather, and hunt Sharrol.

Stet, I'm Feather Filip. What do I know about Sharrol? Feather must have researched her; she sure as tanj had researched me!

Back up. How did Sharrol get loose?

The simplest possible answer was that Sharrol dove into the water and swam away. Feather could beat her at most things, but a woman who lived beneath

the ocean for thirty years would swim just fine.

Eventually a boat would find her.

Eventually, an island. Penniless. She needs work now. What kind of work is that? It has to suit a flat phobe. She's being hunted by a murderer, and the alien planet around her forces itself into her awareness every second. Dirigible stewardess is probably out. Hotel work would be better.

Feather, days behind her, seeks work for herself; but the listings will tell her Sharrol's choices too. And now I was back in the room and scanning through work listings.

Qualifications -- I couldn't remember what Milcenta Graynor was supposed to be able to do. Sharrol's skills wouldn't match anyway, any more than mine matched Mart Graynor's. So look for _unskilled_.

Low salaries, of course. Except here: _servant, kzinti embassy_. Was that a joke? No: here was _museum maintenance, must work with kzinti_. Some of them had stayed with the embassy, or even become citizens. Could Sharrol handle that? She got along with strangers ... even near-aliens, like me.

_Fishing boats, period of training needed. Hotel work. Underwater porter

work, unskilled labor in Pacifica. _

Pacifica. Of course.

Briefly I considered putting in for the porter job. Sharrol and/or Feather must have done that, grabbed whatever was to be had ... but I told myself that Feather thought I had no money. She'd never look for me in Pacifica's second-best ... ah, _best_ hotel.

The truth is, I prefer playing tourist.

I scanned price listings for hotels in Pacifica; called and negotiated for a room at the Pequod. Then I left Shasht in untraditional fashion, via oversized transfer booth, still in early morning.

It was night in Pacifica. I checked in, crawled between sleeping plates and zonked out, my timelagged body back on track.

* * * *

I woke late, fully rested for the first time in days. There was a little round window next to my nose. I gazed out, floating half mesmerized, remembering the Great Barrier Reef outside Carlos Wu's apartment.

The strangeness and variety of Earth's sea life had stunned me then. But these oceans were older. Evolution had filled ecological niches not yet dreamed on Earth.

It was shady out there, under a wonderful variety of seaweed growths, like a forest in fog. Life was everywhere. Here a school of transparent bell jars, nearly invisible, opened and closed to jet themselves along. Quasi-terrestrial fish glowed as if alien graffiti had been scrawled across them in Dayglow ink to identify them to potential mates. Predators hid in the green treetops: torpedo shapes dived from cover and disappeared back into the foliage with prey wriggling in long jaws.

A boneless arm swept straight down from a floating seaweed island, toward the orange neon fish swimming just

above the sandy bottom. Its stinger-armed hand flexed and fell like a net over its wriggling prey ... and a great mouth flexed wider and closed over the wrist. The killer was dark and massive, shaped like a ray of Earth's sea. The smaller fish was painted on its back; it moved with the motion of the ray. The ray chewed, reeling the arm in, until a one-armed black oyster was ripped out of the seaweed-tree and pulled down to death.

One big beast, like a long dolphin with gills and great round eyes, stopped to look me over. Owl rams were said to be no brighter than a good dog, but Fafnir scientists had been hard put to

demonstrate that, and Fafnir fishers still didn't believe it.

I waved solemnly. It bowed ... well, bobbed in place before it flicked away.

My gear was arrayed in a tidy row, with the stunner nearest my hand. I'd put the reflector back on. I could reach it in an instant. Your Honor, of course it's for scuba swimming. Why else would I be in possession of a device that can knock Feather Filip into a coma before she can blow a great bloody hole through my torso?

I didn't actually want to go scuba swimming.

Sharrol swam like a fish; she could be out there right now. Still, at a distance and underwater, would I know her? And Feather might know me, and Feather would certainly swim better than me, and I could hardly ignore Feather.

Sharrol had to be living underwater. It was the only way she could stay sane. Life beyond the glass was alien, stet, but the life of Earth's seas seems alien too. My slow wits hadn't seen that at first, but Feather's skills would solve that puzzle.

And Beowulf Shaeffer had to be underwater, to avoid sunlight. Feather could find me for the wrong reasons!

And the police of Fafnir, of whom I knew nothing at all, might well be studying me in bemused interest. _He's bought a weapon! But why, if he has the blaster that blew a hole through this vest? And it's a fishing weapon, and he's gone to Pacifica_ ... which might cause them to hold off a few hours longer.

So, with time breathing hot on my neck, I found the hotel restaurant and took my time over fruit, fish eggs in a baked potato, and cappuccino.

My time wasn't wasted. The window overlooked a main street of Pacifica's village-sized collection of bubbles. I saw swimsuits, and casually dressed people carrying diving or fishing gear.

Almost nobody dressed formally. That would be for Shasht, for going to work. In the breakfast room itself I saw four business tunics in a crowd of a hundred. And two men in dark blue police uniforms that left arms and legs bare: you could swim in them.

And one long table, empty, with huge chairs widely spaced. I wondered how often kzinti came in. It was hard to believe they'd be numerous, two hundred years after mankind took over.

Back in the room, I fished out the little repair kit and set to work on my transfer booth card.

We learned this as kids. The idea is to

make a bridge of superconductor wire across the central circuits. Transport companies charge citizens a quarterly fee to cover local jumps. The authorities don't get upset if you stay away from the borders of the card. The borders are area codes.

Well, it looked like the kind of card we'd used then. Fafnir's booth system served a small population that didn't use booths much. It could well be decades old, long due for replacement. So I'd try it.

I got into casuals. I rolled my wet suit around the rest of my scuba gear and stuffed the stunner into one end where I could grab it fast. Stuffed the bundle into

my backpack -- it stuck way out -- and left the room.

Elevators led to the roof. Admissions was here, and a line of the big transfer booths, and a transparent roof with an awesome view up into the sea forest. I stepped into a booth and inserted my card. The random walk began.

A shopping mall, high up above a central well. Booths in a line, just inside a big water lock. A restaurant; another; an apartment building. I was jumping every second and a half.

Nobody noticed me flicking in; would they notice how quickly I flicked out? Nobody gets upset at a random walk

unless the kids do it often enough to tie up circuits. But they might remember an adult. How long before someone called the police?

A dozen kzinti, lying about in cool half-darkness gnawing oddly shaped bones, rolled to a defensive four-footed crouch at the sight of me. I couldn't help it: I threw myself against the back wall. I must have looked crazed with terror when the random walk popped me into a Solarico Omni center. I was trying to straighten my face when the jump came. Hey -- A travel terminal of some kind; I turned and saw the dirigible, like an underpressured planet, before the scene changed. -- Her!

Beyond a thick glass wall, the seaweed forest swarmed with men and women wearing fins: farmers picking spheres that glowed softly in oil-slick colors. I waited my moment and snatched my card out of the slot. Was it really -- I tapped quickly to get an instant billing, counted two back along the booth numbers. I couldn't use the jimmed card for this, so I'd picked up a handful of coins. -- Her?

Solarico Omni, top floor. I stepped out of the booth, and saw the gates that would stop a shoplifter, and a stack of lockers.

For the first time I had second thoughts about the way I was dressed. Nothing

wrong with the clothes, but I couldn't carry a mucking great package of diving gear into a shopping center, with a stunner so handy. I pushed my backpack into a locker and stepped through the gates.

The whole complex was visible from the rim of the central well. It was darker down there than I was used to. Pacifica citizens must like their underwater gloom, I thought.

Two floors down, an open fast-food center: wasn't that where I'd seen her? She was gone now. I'd seen only a face, and I could have been wrong. At least she'd never spot me, not before I was

much closer.

But where was she? Dressed how? Employee or customer? It was midmorning: she couldn't be on lunch break. Customer, then. Only, Shashters kept poor track of time.

Three floors down, the Sports Department. Good enough. I rode down the escalator. I'd buy a spear gun or another stunner, shove everything into the bag that came with it. Then I could start window shopping for faces.

The Sports Department aisles were pleasantly wide. Most of what it sold was fishing gear, a daunting variety. There was skiing equipment too. And

hunting, it looked like: huge weapons built for hands bigger than a baseball mitt. The smallest was a fat tube as long as my forearm, with a grip no bigger than a kzinti kitten's hand. Oh, sure, kzinti just love going to humans for their weapons. Maybe the display was there to entertain human customers.

The clerks were leaving me alone to browse. Customs differ. _What the tanj was that?_

Two kzinti in the aisle, spaced three yards apart, hissing the Hero's Tongue at each other. A handful of human customers watched in some amusement. There didn't seem to be danger there. One wore what might be a loose dark

blue swimsuit with a hole for the tail. The other (sleeveless brown tunic) took down four yards of disassembled fishing rod. A kzinti _clerk_?

The corner of my eye caught a clerk's hands (human) opening the case and reaching in for that smaller tube, with a grip built for a kzin child. Or a man --

My breath froze in my throat. I was looking into Feather's horrible ARM weapon. I looked up into the clerk's face.

It came out as a whisper. "No, Sharrol, no no no. It's me. It's Beowulf."

She didn't fire. But she was pale with

terror, her jaw set like rock, and the black tube looked at the bridge of my nose.

I eased two inches to the right, very slowly, to put myself between the tube and the kzin cop. That wasn't a swimsuit he was wearing: it was the same sleeveless, legless police uniform I'd seen at breakfast.

We were eye to eye. The whites showed wide around her irises. I said, "My face. Look at my face. Under the beard. It's Bey, love. I'm a foot shorter. Remember?"

She remembered. It terrified her.

"I wouldn't fit. The cavity was built for Carlos. My heart and lungs were shredded, my back was shattered, my brain was dying, and you had to get me into the cavity. But I wouldn't fit, remember? Sharrol, I have to know." I looked around quick. An aisle over, kzinti noses came up, smelling fear. "Did you kill Feather?"

"Kill Feather." She set the tube down carefully on the display case. Her brow wrinkled. "I was going through my pockets. It was distracting me, keeping me sane. I needed that. The light was wrong, the gravity was wrong, the Earth was so far away -- "

"Shh."

"Survival gear, always know what you have, you taught me that." She began to tremble. "I heard a sonic boom. I looked up just as you were blown backward. I thought I must be c-crazy. I couldn't have seen that."

It was my back that felt vulnerable now. I felt all those floors behind and above me, all those eyes. The kzin cop had lost interest. If there was a moment for Feather Filip to take us both, this was it.

But the ARM weapon was in Sharrol's hands --

"But Carlos jumped into the boat and roared off, and Feather screamed at him,

and you were all blood and sprawled out like -- like dead -- and I, I can't remember."

"Yes, dear," I took her hand, greatly daring, "but I have to know if she's still chasing us."

She shook her head violently. "I jumped on her back and cut her throat. She tried to point that tube at me. I held her arm down, she elbowed me in the ribs, I hung on, she fell down. I cut her head off. But Bey, there you were, and Carlos was gone and the kids were too, and what was I going to do?" She came around the counter and put her arms around me and said, "We're the same height. Futz!"

I was starting to relax. Feather was nowhere. We were free of her. "I kept telling myself you must have killed her. A trained ARM psychotic, but she didn't take you seriously. She couldn't have guessed how quick you'd wake up."

"I fed her into the organics reservoir."

"Yah. There was nowhere else all that biomass could have come from. It had to be Feather -- "

"And I couldn't lift your body, and you wouldn't fit anyway. I had to cut off your h-h-" She pulled close and tried to push her head under my jaw, but I wasn't tall enough any more. "Head. I cut as low as I could. Tanj, we're the same height."

Did it work? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm just short. The 'doc rebuilt me from my DNA, from the throat down, but it built me in Fafnir gravity. Good thing, too, I guess."

"Yah." She was trying to laugh, gripping my arms as if I might disappear. "There wouldn't have been room for your feet. Bey, we shouldn't be talking here. That kzin is a cop, and nobody knows how good their hearing is. Bey, I get off at sixteen hundred."

"I'll shop. We're both overdue on life gifts."

* * * *

"How do I look? How should I look?"

I had posed us on the roof of the Pequod, with the camera looking upward past us into the green seaweed forest. I said, "Just right. Pretty, cheerful, the kind of woman a man might drown himself for. A little bewildered. You didn't contact me because you got a blow to the head. You're only just healing. You ready? Take one, now." I keyed the vidcamera.

Me: "Wilhelmin, Toranaga, I hope you're feeling as good as we are. I had no trouble finding Milcenta once I got my head on straight -- "

Sharrol, bubbling: "Hello! Thank you

for Jan's life, and thank you for teaching him to sail. I never could show him how to do that. We're going to buy a boat as soon as we can afford it."

Me : "I'm ready to face the human race again. I hope you are too. This may help." I turned the camera off.

"What are you giving them?" Sharrol asked.

"Silverware, service for a dozen. Now they'll have to develop a social life."

"Do you think they turned you in?"

"They had to. They did well by me, love. What bothers me is, they'll never be

sure I'm not a murderer. Neither will the police. This is a wonderful planet for getting rid of a corpse. I'll be looking over my shoulder for that kzinti cop -- "

"No, Bey -- "

"He smelled our fear."

"They smell everyone's fear. They make wonderful police, but they can't react every time a kzin makes a human nervous. He may have pegged you as an outworlder, though."

"Oop. Why?"

"Bey, the kzinti are everywhere on Fafnir, mostly on the mainland, but

they're on site at the fishing sources too. Fafnir sea life feeds the whole Patriarchy, and it's strictly a kzinti operation. Shashters are used to kzin. But kids and wimps and outworlders all get twitchy around them, and they're used to that."

He might have smelled more than our fear, I thought. Our genetic makeup, our diet ... but we'd been eating Fafnir fish for over a month, and Fafnir's people were every breed of man.

"Stet. Shall we deal with the _Hand of Allah_?"

Now she looked nervous. "I must have driven them half crazy. And worried

them sick. It's a good gift, isn't it? Shorty and Isfahan were constantly complaining about fish, fish, fish -- "

"They'll love it. It's about five ounces of red meat per crewman -- I suppose that's -- "

"Free range life forms from the hunting parks."

" -- and fresh vegetables to match. I bet the kzinti don't grow those. Okay, take one -- "

Sharrol: "Captain Muh'mad, I was a long time recovering my memory. I expect the 'docs did more repair work every time I went under. My husband's

found me, we both have jobs, and this is to entertain you and your crew in my absence."

Me: "For my wife's life, blessings and thanks." I turned it off. "Now Carlos."

Her hand stopped me. "I can't leave, you know," Sharrol said. "I'm not a coward - -"

"Feather learned that!"

"It's just ... overkill. I've been through too much."

"It's all right. Carlos has Louis and Tanya for awhile, and that's fine, they love him. We're free of the UN.

Everything went just as we planned it, more or less, except from Feather's viewpoint."

"Do you mind? Do you like it here?"

"There are transfer booths if I want to go anywhere. Sharrol, I was raised underground. It feels just like home if I don't look out a window. I wouldn't mind spending the rest of our lives here. Now, this is for Ms. Machti at Outbound, not to mention any watching ARMs. Ready? Take one."

Me: "Hi, John! Hello, kids! We've got a more or less happy ending here, brought to you with some effort."

Sharrol: "I'm pregnant. It happened yesterday morning. That's why we waited to call."

I was calling as Martin Wallace Graynor. Carlos/John could reach us the same way. We wanted no connection between Mart Graynor and Jan Hebert.

Visuals were important to the message. The undersea forest was behind us. I stood next to Sharrol, our eyes exactly level. That'd give him a jolt.

Me: "John, I know you were worried about Mil, and so was I, but she's recovered. Mil's a lot tougher than even Addie gave her credit for."

Sharrol: "Still, the situation was sticky at first. Messy." She rubbed her hands. "But that's all over. Bey's got a job working outside in the water orchards -- "

Me: "It's just like working in free fall. I've got a real knack for it."

Sharrol: "We've got some money too, and after the baby's born I'll take Bey's job. It'll be just like I'm back in my teens."

Me: "You did the right thing, protecting the children first. It's worked out very well."

Sharrol: "We're happy here, John."

This is a good place to raise a child, or several. Some day we'll come to you, I think, but not now. The changes in my life are too new. I couldn't take it. Mart is willing to indulge me."

Me: [sorrowfully] "Addie is gone, John. We never expect to see her again, and we're just as glad, but I feel she'll always be a part of me." I waved the camera off.

Now let's see Carlos figure that out. He does like puzzles.

Visit www.fictionwise.com for information on additional titles by this

and other authors.