

BLOODHYPE

ALAN DEAN FOSTER



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Alan Dean Foster

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I eat, therefore I am.

Such was the extent of the Vom's consciousness.

This had not always been so, but at the moment there was no way the Vom could become aware of it. The mechanical process of remembering required energy the Vom did not have to spare. All of the tiny amount of radiant energy from the system's sun that the Vom could convert was needed to preserve the life-sense.

To do this the Vom had assumed a special configuration. At present it varied in thickness from a few millimeters to several microns. It had done this out of necessity, millennia ago. How many millennia the Vom did not know or remember.

It couldn't spare the energy.

The System hadn't always been dead. At one time this planet had harbored a modestly successful ecosystem: plants and animals from the one-celled to the very complex; vertebrates, invertebrates, things warm- and coldblooded, gymnosperms, fungi, lichens, fliers, burrowers, crawlers, runners and swimmers. It was ruled by an undistinguished if moderately intelligent race. It had begun to die when the Vom arrived.

As to the method of arrival, the Vom could recall neither when nor how. Dimly it could remember a state of former greatness, of which its present self was less than a shadow. In that state it had dominated a thousand systems.

Arriving in this one, it had toyed with the local dominants. Its persistent and strenuous attempts at achieving mental assimilation with another life-form failed, as it had failed a hundred thousand times before. That didn't keep the Vom from trying.

The race resisted with violence. It was consumed. The planet was rich in life-force of more primitive kind. Having absorbed that of the most intelligent beings, the Vom began on those less so. It worked its voracious way slowly through the ecosystem, down through the simple plants and fungi and even the bacteria and viroids. The Vom was frighteningly efficient. It ate until the globe was scoured clean. Then nothing moved on its surface or in its seas except wind, water, and the Vom.

Sated, the Vom rested for a long time. Then, using its always successful ploy of contacting another intelligent race and taking control of the curious vessels that would come to investigate, it broadcast into the space around it. Once carried by unwilling servitors to a new planet, it would begin the cycle of feeding anew.

But this time the Vom had waited too long. The race it contacted came, but they were strong—stronger than any the Vom had ever encountered. Its mental control wavered. For the first time in its well-ordered existence, the Vom panicked. It destroyed all aboard the approaching ships. A fatal error. The race was made aware of the true nature of the horror that had contacted it. The next time, it sent robot warships with a single prepared Guardian. One of their most powerful and capable minds, the Guardian was not understood even by its own kind. The Vom now tried to attract the ships of another species, but space-going races were scarce in this section of the galaxy. Those few who did send ships were warned away or destroyed by the robot watchers. As its stored energy was drained by these efforts the Vom grew progressively weaker, shrinking in power and ability. No longer necessary, many of the robot warships were recalled by their builders. There was a great war with another race tormenting the center of the galaxy.

Almost, the Vom escaped. A wild photonic storm tore through that section of space. The few remaining robot controls were incapacitated. Even the Guardian itself was weakened. The Vom drew some strength from the strange life-forms that rode the storm, but . . . not enough. In utter terror the Vom discovered that every space-going race within its reduced sphere of influence had died off or perished in the storm. Its mental collapse was hastened by hopelessness.

Now the Vom had plenty of time to reflect on its mistakes. It had used the planet too thoroughly, scoured it too clean of life. The system had been overemployed. Enough should have been left to reproduce and maintain a reasonable ecosystem, for just such an emergency. But the Vom had glutted itself thoroughly. Not a living cell had existed on the planet for a thousand years. Great as it was, it could not create life.

So, one by one, the higher functions were shut down, lost, as the great organic factory that was the Vom ran down, until only the barest flicker of life remained.

One day—the Vom knew it was day because of the presence of solar energy—a ship came down. It was not a large ship, being midway between courier and destroyer classification. But it was quite well armed and very functional, as were all the ships of the AAnn.

By rights the reptiles had no business in this part of space, on the fringes of the Humanx Commonwealth. The immensity of nothingness, however, made an excellent hiding place. Occasionally, daring scouts penetrated the humanx patrol cordon in search of unexplored systems possessed of exploitable resources—and sometimes on even less savory missions.

They nosed around, nowtimes finding something, nowtimes running afoul of a Church patrol (and there would be empty places in many nests), rarely discovering something. All traveled without Empire sanction. Since by treaty with the Commonwealth this was prohibited, all such activities were of course quite illegal. However, since goods not traded for on a legal footing were exempt from taxation, the rewards for the AAnn businessman who backed a successful incursion were often enormous. In this respect the Emperor indirectly condoned such actions.

Rockets flared at the base of the small vessel. Being a scout, it was expected to have to land on planets not equipped with shuttle facilities. This was as expensive as it was necessary. Naturally, it could not land on interstellar drive (the AAnn equivalent of the advanced humanx KK drive propulsive system). The gigantic artificial mass generated by a KK or similar drive system could not impinge on the real mass of a planetary surface without something giving. Matter caught in such a manner invariably

reacted. Violently. So ships used advanced shuttle-vessels to transfer passengers and goods from the surface to orbiting ships. A scout could, in effect, become its own shuttle.

The vessel set down close by the southern edge of the Vom. That section of the creature reveled in the sudden, unexpected surge of radiant energy. Within the metal capsule that rode the column of energy it sensed far stronger forces in the form of clean life-force. Almost, it reached out for them. Then a feeble spark of thought overrode primal instincts.

Not yet! Not yet! Patience! Besides, there was a more urgent need for the surprise gift of energy.

The Vom began to wake itself up.

Navigator-First Paayton RPHGLM was chewing reflectively on his tail, staring out the port of the captain's cabin. He spoke without turning.

“Well, Exalted Captain, *I* have surely never seen anything like it!” The bright red pupils were unblinking.

Exalted Captain Laccota SJFD scratched his belly where two of his ventral plates joined and turned to his principal scientific advisor. “Well, Carmot, this is where you start earning the credits Lord Ilogia—his scales be thrice-blessed!—has been paying you. You've sat on your tail for four time-lengths while we've sweated dodging humanx sting-ships.”

Carmot MMYM was shorter than the other two. In fact, he was the shortest lizard on the ship. Externally he was rather a foppish specimen, addicted to brightly-colored body harness and (to the captain's mind) the decadent habit of dyeing his incisors pink. A million years ago he would have been a quick meal for an attacking tribe. Today, however, intelligence counted for more than fang and claw. He possessed a sharp mind, excellent recall, and was as devious as anyone else on board. Personally, Exalted Captain Laccota disliked him. Professionally, he held him in high esteem.

“I don't like it,” said the Observer-First finally.

“You are not paid to like or dislike anything,” offered Laccota patiently. “With the best will in the world, I remind you that you are paid only to estimate any potential profit in whatever we may turn up. We have definitely turned up something, here in this egg-forsaken system.”

“I reiterate; I don't like it! I don't understand this at all, and I don't like what I can't understand.”

“An attitude shared by many,” said Laccota. “Tell us what we have here, Observer-most-competent-and-overpaid, and I will like it or dislike it for you.”

“Very well, Exalted-flier-of-ships-by-the-tip-of-his-tail.” Carmot nibbled idly on a claw. “When Observer-Fifth Plowlok first brought it to my attention, as we proceeded with our standard survey orbit, my initial reaction was the mental composition of a severe reprimand. Being young, Observer-Fifth Plowlok SFDVJUTVB has the usual tendency of young explorers to draw fanciful rather than objective readings from strictly prosaic instrumentation. This time, however, he was full accurate.”

Carmot stopped chewing and waved in the direction of the glassalloy port. “We have out there, gentlesirs, ~~an organic impossibility. An area of total living blackness that follows the contours of the~~ land, every dip and rise, at a paper-thinness for several thousand square *cluvits*. Absurd, of course. There is nothing else like it anywhere on the planet. Nor, I venture to hypothesize, in this system. It is unique. It is utterly remarkable. It is impossible . . .

“Properties, gentlesirs, properties! It is not harmed or visibly affected by any kind of radiation we can generate. Possibly more sophisticated devices will be able to—I don’t know. Nor is the energy so directed reflected. It simply disappears, as measurements of the underlying basalt seem to indicate. Somehow, in the space of a mere *section* or two of itself, it absorbs all radiation or otherwise removes it from the understandable physical universe . . .

“Two days ago, First-Geologist Onidd CRCRS and I left the ship to perform what we innocently believed would be the simple task of removing a few samples of the thing for analytical purposes.”

“Didn’t have much luck, did you?” murmured Navigator Paayton, still chewing on his tail and staring out the port.

“Hardly,” said Carmot drily. “When I first attempted to touch it, it drew away from my fingers. I believe my sense of surprise was rather peremptorily expressed over the communit.”

“Your command of the invective was something of a surprise,” admitted Laccota.

“Um. Yes. After several similar attempts at different spots along its border failed, I walked off and took a long run at the thing. The lower gravity made such an idea seem feasible. It retreated completely, with incredible swiftness, just before my boots made contact with its surface . . .

“Geologist Onidd observed that it was noticeably thicker around its new edge. Therefore we established that it was folding back on itself and not performing some mystifying vanishing act. Onidd then removed his beamer and attempted to cut a piece from the main body. The results were enlightening . . .

“While it had retreated precipitately from physical contact, it made no effort to dodge the lethal beamer. Onidd concentrated his beam on one thin spot for several time-parts. No effect was observed. The thing did not cut, burn, smoke, or otherwise take notice of a sharp-focus beamer that can cut through most metals and heat armor-plate red-hot. I then joined the efforts of my own beamer to Onidd’s. We might as well have been beaming at the sun . . .

“Now, as to the problem of its aliveness, about which there has been some question. If it is alive, it is a totally alien sort of aliveness that permits itself to be energy-beamed at close range yet refuses to allow a mere touch from a living being.”

“Your conclusions,” prompted Laccota impatiently.

“Even so, I believe it lives. It may draw sustenance from the sun, although I find no evidence of a photosynthesis-type reaction, and certainly no sign of chlorophyll. I do not see how else it can draw food. The basalt revealed when it drew back from us has been minutely examined. It exhibits no abnormalities and is in no way different from untouched samples taken elsewhere. I still will not

attempt to say whether it is more animal than vegetable. It may, indeed, be neither.”

“And your recommendations?” Laccota asked.

Carmot stood quietly for a long moment. “Raise ship and traverse parsecs as fast as this antiquated tub will go.”

The captain’s transparent nictitating eye membranes flickered. Even Paayton was sufficiently stimulated to turn from his extended contemplation of the outside.

“Indeed,” murmured the captain. “And your reasoning?”

Carmot said simply, “I have a feeling.”

“Really! You have a feeling. My, my. Shell of females, an interesting entry to make in the log. Lord Ilogia will be most understanding and sympathetic. You ‘have a feeling.’ Rejected. First alternate proposal?”

Carmot sighed—a long, hissing sound, like a steam engine running down. “Tie into the nearest intersystem relay. Use long band. Break in if you have to. Contact the nearest planet where we have landing privileges—it will be humanx controlled, of course”

Laccota looked to the navigator. “Is there an appropriate place?”

Paayton’s computer-trap mind turned businesslike. “Umm. The humanx outpost colony world of Repler might be . . . yes, I foresee no problems. A sparsely populated world, much of it still in the wilderness state, with a largely urban population and a considerable tourist trade. The largest shuttle station is very modern, but not equipped to handle much in the way of a naval force. No orbiting naval station. We have a fair-sized diplomatic mission there, with plenty of privacy and room. The weather is miserable, but most of the station is underground, naturally. It should be adequate.”

“Contact them,” continued Carmot. “Tell them we want the biggest freighter in the sector, along with five or six of the largest shuttles, two of which must be max-class, and about twenty miles of flexible harmony plating, with plenty of tow cable. Operators for all, of course. Also, at least one large, high-intensity beamer—it needn’t be military; industrial strength should do fine. One that can provide a steady output without burning out every other time-length. Tell them to bring replacement parts, just in case.”

“You plan to transport the thing, then?”

“If we can induce it to assume manageable proportions, yes. From hindsight-clever Paayton’s description of the station we have at this Repler place, we should have facilities which can at least be expanded to provide a place where this thing can be properly handled and analyzed.”

“Won’t that be rather risky?” put in Paayton. “Attempting to work in secret right under the sensors of the humans and thranx?”

“Quite likely,” replied Carmot. “However, until we know a great deal more about it, I do not wish this thing trans-shipped to a nesting planet. It is an unknown quantity of awesome possibilities.”

“Another feeling?” said Laccota.

“That as well. I am suspicious of anything that can survive on several thousand *cluvits* of bare rock, on a planet on which nothing else lives, yet clearly could support other life. I’m suspicious of anything organic that’s thinner in places than my claw-tips, yet can take the continuous application of high-intensity beaming. Yes, another feeling.”

“Your imaginings begin to approach those you ascribe to your fifth-grade assistants, Observer. Still, I see no reason to deny any of your requests. I’ll leave that to higher authority.”

“I think that’s very just of you, Exalted Captain. And very wise.”

The Vom had restored facilities sufficient to assess the beings who had happened upon it. The minds were simple, yet far from primitive. In its weakened state the Vom doubted its ability to control even a single one of the species, let alone the shipful. Now was the time to move, oh, so very carefully!

P-a-t-i-e-n-c-e. It had waited half a million years now, give or take a few millennia. It was aware of itself, and that gave it strength.

It could wait a few days more.

Russ Kingsley was in the mood for it.

And when Russ Kingsley was in the mood for it, he usually made out quite well. First off, he was almost classically handsome. He knew he was. It said so on his guarantee from the cosmeticians. They’d done an excellent job. It was one that few folk could afford. Kingsley’s father, who was one of the five richest men on Repler, had given Russ the new face for his eighteenth birthday.

He was satisfied with his present 180 cms., although he wished the surgeons could have added another 10 or so. Still, no need to be greedy. The face was perfectly proportioned—inclined plane of a jaw, no nonsense nose, sensuous thin lips, red hair with just the right amount of casual wave. He cut an exotic figure in sea-green foxfire fur vest over matching turquoise silks. His appearance was as good as money could buy. As good, he reflected, as any tridee star.

Honed in Repler’s most exclusive gyms, the body was muscular without running to extremes. Though his appetite for gourmet meals kept the physiological techs at constant war with an incipient pot.

A pity they hadn’t been able to do anything with his personality.

At the moment he was lolling in the main debarkation lounge of Replerport, eyeing the recent off-planet arrivals. A ventilator pulled the smoke from the Jimson Kelp in his pipe roofward.

Kingsley was a chap who liked variety. He’d already gone through most of the country beauties in Repler City. Some willingly, when his looks and money served; some unwillingly, where his father’s name served.

The back-country types held little attraction for him. Too much trouble attendant to bouncing from small town to small town. And the food! Ghastly! Besides, the back-woodsmen were too remote to be impressed by the Kingsley name. They were apt to shoot despite thundering threats of retribution.

The passengers off the first ship had been disappointing. Thus far, the second hadn't provided anything better, with the possible exception of that blonde stew. Well, better than nothing. He felt in his jacket pocket to make sure the slip of paper with the number on it was still there.

A flash of color near the end of the first-class line caught his eye. He straightened, smiling. Well now this was more like it!

The girl had paused at the gate to talk to the debarkation officer. That's why he hadn't spotted her till now. An off-planet citizen, obviously. Even better.

She was dressed in a bright yellow jumpsuit that clung to her like lemon icing. A simple band of some silvery metal on one wrist was the only jewelry. Not that a ring would have made a difference to Kingsley, but he preferred things simple to complex. A dun-colored bag was fabricatched to her right thigh. Jet-black hair was gathered together by a yellow band. It fell in a single thick braid to just above her waist, where it was held in place by another band and knotted. Kingsley pursed his lips disapprovingly. Minoan had gone out months ago.

Eyes deep blue, complexion deep tan, little makeup. The eyes were sharply slanted, cheekbones high, and prominent. At least half chinee or mongolian ancestry, he thought. What he could see of the body was exquisitely proportioned, if not voluptuous. It deviated from the perpendicular in all the appropriate places.

The only thing that made him a little uncomfortable was that she appeared to stand a good five centimeters taller than he. He left the counter and moved to intercept her as she headed for the public transport park.

Subtlety was not Kingsley's forte. He grinned his best grin, every bicuspid and molar perfect (he had guarantees for that, too), and said, "Hello, stranger!"

The gaze she offered in return was faintly amused, otherwise noncommittal.

"Hello yourself, natives." The voice was a husky soprano, with just a trace of terran accent.

Better and better! Everyone knew about terran girls, didn't they?

"Russell Kingsley, but you can call me Russ. Can I give you a lift? My rates are reasonable."

"Kitten Kai-sung. Sure. Are you passing anywhere near the . . ." she paused, "the Green Island Hostelry?"

"Green Island." (Not filthy rich, but well-off—not that it mattered much.) "I am now. Got any luggage?"

"It's being delivered."

“Well, then. Come along!” He tried to put an arm across her shoulders. She shrugged it off.

Uppity bitch, he thought. He’d change that quickly enough, as soon as he got her back to the Tower.

His hovercraft was a Phaeton Mark IV, the latest. He was just a bit put off when she didn’t acknowledge the gleaming hunk of machinery. Not even a little ooh! or aaah! Let her play it cool, then. He’d change that, too.

As soon as he was sure all doors were secure, he gunned the powerful engine and blasted away from the station, scattering grit and sand over several pedestrians.

The cloud cover was still fairly heavy, the air typically warm and damp. Now and then a light mist would not so much fall as simply appear in the air. Wood was utilized to a great extent on Repler, not only because the planet was blessed with tremendous softwood jungles, but because wood had a natural advantage over many metals. It wouldn’t rust.

“You plan to be with us long?”

“Depends. My time is flexible.”

“Business?”

“Very little. Vacation, mostly.”

“Wise decision. Pleasure before business, I always say.” He made a hard left and swung out of the downtown section, heading towards the harbor.

She didn’t say anything for several minutes, but did take a long look out the back of the plastic bubble cabin. Getting a little worried, luv?

“The Tower’s only an hour off,” he said easily. “We’ve got our own island. Not so extraordinary when you consider that Repler is mostly islands, with very few open oceans; but Wetplace is unusual.”

“Tower? Wetplace? We’re supposed to be going to the Green Island Hostelry.”

“Only theoretically, luv. Take my word for it, you’ll prefer the Tower. It’s got some interesting extras that would startle the management of a common tourist trap like the Green Island. Magnificent view from the top, and the privacy can’t be beat. Can’t even be broken, in fact.” He giggled (that was one thing the cosmeticians hadn’t been able to correct). “Oh, *everyone* who visits the Tower enjoys it!”

“I’m sure,” she said drily.

“Especially some of the interesting devices I’ve had installed in my own quarters. Many of them custom-built, you know.”

“I can imagine.” There was a pause. “You don’t intend to turn around, I take it?” she said finally.

He sniggered. “Not while I’m still vertical, sister!” He kicked over the autopilot and reached out. Not voluptuous, no, but the breast that filled his left hand was more than satisfying. Expecting at least a

mild protest, he was surprised (and a bit disappointed) when she continued to allow him to fondle her

“All right. That little island coming up on our left . . . the one with the climax vegetation.”

“Clever, too,” he grinned. Inwardly he was upset. Sine needles and bugs! Oh well, if she wanted to start that way . . .

“Your wish is my command.” He drew away and swung the hovercraft in a tight arc, slowing.

“Your snappy repartee stuns me,” she said, but he chose to ignore the sarcasm. Plenty of time to wipe that out.

He pulled into a small cove, dodging one floating log, and cut the engine at the proper moment. The Phaeton sank gently into the sand. He released the doors, letting her exit first so he could watch the tight suit tauten over her perfect backside as she stepped out. He followed.

Passing her, he unlocked a side storage compartment in the lee of the ship, started to pull out a large package.

“I think you’ll find that for an inflatable setup this is rather exotic, including as it does a—”

“Don’t bother.”

He paused in his unwrapping, looked up at her. She was grinning right back.

“I hope you’ll understand, but while you’re not bad looking, something about obvious cosmetic jobs puts me off my tick. More importantly, initial psycho-emotional analysis indicates mental discrepancies confluent with your successive immature oeillades.”

“Huh?”

“To summarize, you don’t turn me on, buster. And besides,” she said as she turned to re-enter the cab of the raft, “it’s way past my check-in time.”

“Just a second, pretty bitch. You know what this is?” All pretense at politeness had been dropped. A small object sat in his palm. She glanced down at it.

“It appears to be a Secun vibraknife, battery powered. Very efficient. It will cut many metals, most plastics, but not ceramic alloy and a few other things. Do I pass?” She was facing him now, hands on hips.

“Oh you are funny. But we’ll change that. Since your face is not composed of ceramic alloy, or ‘a few other things,’ this toy is sufficient to make a very unpretty mess of it. I’d rather do this nicely, but if you’d rather be persuaded—”

“Okay, okay. I was only kidding, luv! I’m convinced.” She came towards him, biting her lower lip uncertainly, and put both hands around his neck. Trembling, her lips moved towards his.

Kingsley was puzzled. He couldn’t remember lying down. That blueness above him was

unquestionably the sky, so he knew he was lying down. Yes, it was very blue and had fluffy white clouds in it.

The back of his neck hurt.

He sat up and rubbed it. The Phaeton floated a few meters offshore. The tall girl was leaning out of the cabin, staring back at him.

“Sorry, Mr. Kingsley! The tag next to the ignition here lists several private comm numbers. I’ll see that someone comes out to pick you up before it gets too cold!”

Maybe he could make it to the craft before she could swing away. He got to his feet and started a mad dash for the beach. He got four steps before an excruciating twinge at the back of his neck crumpled him to the sand.

“Goddamn you!” he moaned. “What did you do to me?”

“Cooled your ardor!” she yelled back over the dull whine of the idling fans. “Nothing permanent. Ask me next time before you reach!” She closed the door and pivoted the ship expertly, flinging small wavelets onto the beach.

He sat staring after her long after the hovercraft had disappeared over the horizon. Curses did equal time with moans.

His sea-green foxfire vest was full of sand.

“Miss Kitten Kai-sung?” The clerk tried hard to keep from goggling at her. She nodded. The gangling adolescent was trying to shift his eyes from the computerized registry to her face without lingering on any of the intervening territory. He was failing miserably. Eighteen, maybe nineteen. Only a few years younger than she. But the way he was staring at her you’d think he’d never *seen* . . . !

She sighed. She ought to be used to this by now. The smile she gave him was seductive.

“And you say the room has a *nice* view?”

“Oh yes, ma’m! Best in the hotel! You can see most of the harbor. It’s nice here. You’re away from the noise of the shuttleport and docks.” He hesitated, stared statue-like at the register. “Uh, if there’s anything, uh, you need, Miss Kai-sung . . . ask for Roy. That’s I. Me.” He didn’t have enough room in the tiny clerk’s cubby for an honest swagger, but he tried.

She reached out and touched the tip of his nose with a finger, dropping her voice another octave.

“I *shall* keep that in mind . . . Roy.” She turned to leave.

“Oh, Miss Kai-sung!”

“Call me Kitten, Roy.”

The youth grew ten centimeters. Hate yourself, hussy, half of her thought! Love it, came the other half's reply!

"There's someone been waiting up for you in your room. He has diplomatic credentials, so I couldn't keep him out. Says he's an old friend. He's not human."

"That's all right. I'm expecting him. His name's Porsupah, isn't it?"

"Yes," the boy said in surprise. "You know him, then?"

"I've been his mistress for five years. Those Tolians . . ." She rolled her eyes as the door to the lift closed, leaving a fish-eyed clerk below. Somehow she contained her laughter. By eventide 90 percent of the hotel staff would know about the "stranger" in room 36.

Her apartments were at the end of the hallway. She inserted her right thumb into the small recess at the left of the room number. The door registered her with the central computer and it slid back with the slightest hiss from the pneumatic guiderail.

She had a small suite. It was tastefully decorated, just extravagant enough to be in keeping with her supposed income. A well-stuffed conversation round was at one end of the greeting room, facing a broad ocean-view window. The being perched on it was the only thing out of place in the room.

That worthy stared back at her evenly. It . . . he . . . was just over a meter and a third in height. He looked remarkably like an oversized, portly raccoon. The major differences from the tiny terran mammal consisted of six long, dexterous fingers, more massive forearms, and a high, intelligent brow. There was no mask, the ears were sharply pointed and proportionately larger than the terran look-alike, and the rear feet were webbed.

It also possessed a biting tenor voice. This it used at her entrance, with practiced effect.

"Where the conceptualized clam excrement have you *BEEN?*"

Kitten tossed her thighbag on a small table holding local magazines and a vase of dampish green flowers.

"Conceptualized clam excrement . . . I like that one, Pors. Your knowledge of arcane invective is always stimulating." She walked across the room to the bedroom portal and peeked in. "I see, wonder of wonders, that my luggage arrived reasonably intact and together. Did you overtip the bellhop again?"

"I was not here at the time they were deposited. Doubtless they were transported by a mechanism."

"On this planet, in this metropolis? Don't bet on it." She began undoing the long braid. "This place has all the feel of a world that could still make a profit on slave labor. Oh, stop trying to burn holes in me. I was late because one of the local playboys, convinced of his masculine irresistibility, attempted to abduct me. He had visions of performing odd things on my precious body." The last gold band slid off and she shook her head, generating an obsidian waterfall at her back.

Porsupah said nothing, continued to stare at her. She reached over suddenly and tickled his nose.

“Now, wouldn’t that have upset you?”

Porsupah sneezed, attempted to slap her hand, but she drew back too quickly. “I begin to think not.” She moved close again and tried to cuddle, stroking the fur on his spine.

Lieutenant Porsupah was tolerant, but being regarded as cuddlesome was one thing he couldn’t quite put up with.

“Have you no shame, woman! We’re not even of the same species!”

She ruffled his fur again. “You’d have a hard time, by now, convincing the hotel staff of that. Besides you’re as mammalian as I.”

He couldn’t help a slight smile. “Not by several points.”

“Anyhow,” she whispered huskily, “we could manage a little something, you know . . .”

Porsupah gave a loud screech and scrambled behind the circular couch. “Kai-sung, you are irrevocably, utterly, spiritually indecent!”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in four days.”

The Tolian recited several rapid and extremely potent native curses under his breath before he tried again.

“Major Orvenalix had to cancel a scheduled meeting between the three of us and Governor Washburn. At last word he was waiting in his office, steaming at the joints. I strongly suggest haste to arrange yourself properly so that we may be off before he sends the local constabulary to fetch us!”

“Oh, pooh!” She tumbled off the couch, thumbed a drink from the portabar. “I can handle the Major. Want something?”

“As you are well aware, none of the effects alcohol has on the Tolian system are in the least pleasurable. Fermented *Ropus* lymph, now—”

“Okay, have some of that, disgusting as it sounds.”

“I will not imbibe when late for assignment.”

“Foo. You’re worse than impossible. And stop worrying about Orvy-Dorvy. We’re old friends.”

“That may well be. The Major has an eye for a well-turned ovipositor. However, if I may so delicately point out, you are decidedly deficient in that area, however well compensated you may be in others. And I want to hear you call him ‘Orvy-Dorvy’.”

“Thanks . . . I think.” She sipped the pink and yellow liquid the machine had prepared. “Still, there’s way of caressing the soft spot where thorax and b-thorax meet that—”

“Aghhhh!” The Tolian covered his eyes. “Disgusting, obscene, profane! No morals. No morality at all!”

If it were possible you would consider intercourse with a rock!”

“All right, all right, calm down! Listen, Pors, I’ve seen you with a few under your pouch, you sly tail tickler, and you—”

“No more! Desist! Cease!”

“And stop throwing your fuzzy carcass all over the furniture or you’ll build up a charge that’ll shock the first diplomat you shake hands with two meters sunward! If you insist on throwing a fit, throw a stationary one.”

Porsupah tried a new tack. He ignored her while he rehearsed the explanation he would have to present to the Major. Ideas did not come rapidly to mind.

He was finally making some progress when his thoughts were scattered by a shrill, protesting voice from the nether depths of the bathroom.

“And I do so have morals!”

Outwardly a quiet, intense person, Major Orvenalix, the commander of Repler’s tiny military force, was capable of violent displays of emotion. These he kept private. It wouldn’t do for the members of Repler’s governing council to know to what extremes their stubbornness could push him. They also did not know that the peaceful commandant held an equal and much more impressive rank in the intelligence arm of the United Church.

Repler warranted an intelligence operative of Orvenalix’s stature because of the AAnn Imperial Enclave, several hundred kilometers to the south across open seas. The Enclave was the vestigial remnant of early altercations between the Commonwealth and the Empire over planetary claims. The AAnn hadn’t really wanted Repler, but it was a matter of self-respect that they dispute all territorial claims by other races.

Johann Repler’s claim eventually proved the strongest. The AAnn demanded, however, and were granted sovereignty over, a small area south of the eventual capital. This was done to speed colonization and to promote a harmonious settlement. Actually, the Commonwealth had argued against the idea, the Church had been noncommittal, and the humans and thranx already settled positively blasé. After all, the great majority of the planet was unexplored, and the AAnn could probably have established a secret station anyway. Why not be generous and give them one?

When the AAnn found out that they wouldn’t be allowed to use the interspace facilities at Repler City and that the largest island in their Enclave was insufficiently bedrocked to support a shuttle station of any size, they almost gave up the Enclave idea in disgust. But to refuse after having won the concession would have been twice as bad. It would have made the AAnn diplomats who had arranged the treaty look ridiculous. This would be fatal to certain parties. Those same parties made sure that an elaborate facility was constructed on the main land mass. At least the oceanologists, a group that most AAnn considered congenital idiots, were happy. The AAnn home world and most of its colonies were desert-type planets. Those assigned to the Repler station were, with the exception of the scientists,

very unhappy reptiles.

Major Orvenalix sat in his thimble-shaped chair and stared across at Kitten and Porsupah. At the moment the Major was employing his mid-pair of limbs as a second set of hands. In imitation of a human habit, the thranx was tapping all four sets of claws on the table in front of him. The twelve digits made a considerable racket.

The Major was about average height for a mature male thranx, standing about midway between Kitten's and Porsupah's. His thorax was unusually broad and powerful. The black and silver harness reflected his occupation rather than personal tastes, which were less conservative. Also the result of his occupation was a premature purpling of the chiton, although his antennae were straight and strong. And the great compound eyes sparkled as brightly as those of any youth.

The tapping stopped. The resultant silence was louder. Orvenalix spoke quietly.

"Well! The magnificent, munificent Lieutenant Kai-sung has deigned to grace Operations with her presence!" The Major bowed ironically. That is, he inclined his head and b-thorax. Encased in bodies of unyielding armor, no thranx could manage a really smooth bow.

"Burn it, Orvy!"

"You will address me as becomes my rank, Lieutenant!" he roared, smacking the table hard with one truhand.

"Yes sir," she replied in mock-military tones. "Major . . . Orvy."

"YOU WILL . . .!" Orvenalix sighed and relaxed in his seat. "Never mind. I can see you haven't changed one micron."

"You're the second person today who's said that. Seriously, sir, what exactly is the situation? I haven't seen you in over a year, but when you were lecturing at the Academy you were nowhere near this tense. You can't tell me a year's hitch, on a backwater planet has gotten to you that much!"

"You leave out many ramifications of which you remain uninformed, Kitten. However, before we go into *my* problems, consider this. You were ordered here for an assignment which required that you remain mildly active and controversial. *Mildly*. A moderately wealthy young lady, independent, spoiled, and apt to stick her nose into anything hinting of new thrills. Here to enjoy the delightful sun, fun, boating, fishing, and cheap souvenirs of exotic Repler."

"You sound like a travel brochure, Major."

"In my public capacity such banalities are occasionally called for. My nest-mother would be ashamed but fortunately Eurmet is many parsecs away . . .

"Instead of making a nice, smooth arrival, you forthwith take off, in full sight of a busy shuttleport crowd, with the most notorious, spoiled young human this backwater capital has to offer. He may not be in the same class with his counterparts on Armela, Trix, or Perth, but around here he is noticed. You next turn up at the family estate-lodge in the most exclusive section of the capital and turn over the keys of this young man's expensive hoveraft to the chap's valet—his talkative valet. You order a

public transule and take leave of this bemused servitor, off-handedly mentioning that his master may be found languishing by his lonesome on an island at such and such coordinates. Whereupon you return to the city and breeze into your hotel, blissfully certain, I suppose, that you have performed all this while leaving the general population in total ignorance.”

Kitten appeared genuinely contrite. “I apologize, sir. How would I know the valet would spread it all over town? I didn’t even realize who he was until the conversation had passed the point of no return. I’d planned to slip the keys under the door with a note explaining that . . .”

She broke off. Orvenalix shook his head in disgust. “It all would have been so much simpler—not to mention better for your cover—if you’d merely gone along with the gentleman, performed the simple act of non-reproductive copulation with him, and allowed him to escort you back to the hotel.”

“It is stated categorically,” said Kitten, “that the Egg which gorges itself too early will deny its offspring.”

“You are being impertinent, but if he was *that* bad . . . You always were up on your Saduriquil, soft-angles.”

“Why Orvy! You still remember my pet name! Now that you’ve gotten all that off your thorax, why not relax and tell us why we’ve been pulled off our post-graduate work and plunked down here in the midst of savage pisces and piscean savages?”

“The good Governor would not care-for-that-tone,” Orvenalix grinned.

“Say, how did you know I was doing post-grad work?” yelled Porsupah.

“I picked your pocket back at the hotel. Before I went in to change. Your school relief notice was in there, along with relevant material. Hardly consistent with *your* cover, Pors! Tch!”

“Not only morals!” said the seething Tolian. “No scruples, either!”

“That’s an insult! I put the wallet back, didn’t I?”

There was a long silence. Finally, unable to stand the suspense, Porsupah put a paw into the pouch under his belt to make sure

Orvenalix put a truhand over his mouth to cover the slight fluttering of mandibles that signified laughter among the thranx.

“All right,” the intelligence officer said. “Let us observe. Repler is backward in many ways, sure. It has a limited population, true. But its shuttle and spacecom facilities are modern and well-manned—very true. Major industries are tourism and exotic woods, but the main income is derived from Reple City’s use as a busy transfer point for interstellar shipping. It’s the only habitable planet between Fluva and Praxiteles as you drive down the Arm. And it’s still fairly close to the center-ward systems.”

“A good place to trade around,” agreed Porsupah.

~~“While also avoiding major tariffs on planets of destination. True. Nothing like the business Terra, Hivehom, or Drallar do, of course. But the merchants here make a good living, and business is—~~growing steadily if not spectacularly.”

“I’ve read the manual,” Kitten said drily.

“Fine! Good!” Orvenalix reached into a drawer and removed a small vial of glass . . . no, quartz . . . with a pressure lock twice as big as the container, and a small bit of black board. Kitten and Porsupah slid their chairs closer.

Orvenalix keyed the lock and sprinkled, very carefully, a few grains of white crystal onto the board.

“Since you’ve both, presumably, ‘read the manual,’ perhaps you can tell me what this is?” Both junior officers leaned forward.

The Tolian sniffed once, gently. “Odorless. Clear, rhombohedral crystals with a glassy luster.” The Tolian crushed one of the largest pieces to powder in a sharp, trimmed claw. He sniffed again, carefully not to inhale the dust. “Conchoidal fracture, no odor released on pulverizing . . . yes, I think I know what it is, Major.” He turned and looked at Kitten. “The lines of fracture turn blue, they turn blue.”

Her eyes widened; and she couldn’t help but whisper when she spoke to Orvenalix. “Bloodhype. Very high grade, too, if the fracture line turns that dark.”

The antennae dipped slightly. “Almost pure. Also known as jaster, brain-up, phinto, silly-salt, and many other names the mere mention of which are sufficient to inspire thoughts of regurgitation among intelligent, feeling beings.”

“I thought I read that the Hyperion forests on Annubis were sterilized and wiped out ten years ago,” Kitten said.

“As indeed they were,” the intelligence officer continued. “Naturally, that was the first place the Service checked. We found nothing to indicate that any of the plants had survived the holocaust. At that time it was believed that the Hyperion plant could grow only on Annubis. Transplanting was attempted for scientific purposes, but the seedlings and mature plants died rapidly as soon as they were removed from the planet. Fertilized seeds likewise transshipped did not sprout. In wiping out the supply it turned out that the species had been effectively exterminated for *all* purposes!”

“I wouldn’t imagine anyone raising a fuss over *that*,” said Porsupah.

“Other than a few masochistic botanists, no one did.”

“It seems, though, that someone, somewhere, has gotten hold of some seeds and found a way to make them sprout, and worse, reproduce.”

“What sort of . . . of creature, would want to restart the traffic in bloodhype?” said Kitten, shuddering.

“Soft-angles, I remember you to be a brilliant student. Someday I hope you will make an even better agent, but in many ways you are still an immature grub. The galaxy contains a high volume of pure loathsomeness. Of which I have seen far more than is good for one’s sleep. There are plenty of being

nominaly labeled 'intelligent' who would sell their own eggs, and worse, for a few credits. The thing here that makes me marvel is not the perpetrators, but their science.

"I don't have to tell you what bloodhype addiction does. These new users display the same symptoms and reactions as those of over a decade ago. Which means that this new strain is at least as powerful as the original. It affects any living creature with a complex neural system and circulating liquid in its body. This includes every known intelligence, with the exception of a few silicon-based primitives on restricted planets. Direct injection is the most common method of application, but inhaling the drug in sufficient quantities is also effective.

"Concentrating on the neurons, the drug produces an extremely pleasurable sensation. The thing about bloodhype is that most drugs work only on the mind, by distorting and affecting the images it creates and the information it receives. Bloodhype, on the other hand, is more in the nature of direct neural stimulation. In other words, instead of producing distortions in the information-interpreter (the brain) the original information is distorted right at the beginning, at the original nerve pickups in hands, feet, liver—everywhere the blood can carry it. The effect has been described many ways. One addict said it was like being the highest-pitched wire on a stringed instrument. It's many, many times more powerful than anything that works just on the mind, acting as it does directly on the nerve cells rather than the brain. A moderate dose produces a 'fire-fit', an intense burning sensation that seems to add to the overall pleasure.

"Withdrawal symptoms commence anywhere from 60hh or 72 t-standard hours after the last injection. Coordination begins to go, accompanied by a speed-up in involuntary muscular reactions. Breathing can speed up or slow, as can the heart and other self-regulating muscles. The senses are badly confused and feed false reports to the brain, which is itself undergoing severe emotional changes, from depression to exaltation and so forth. The body goes downhill like an unhatched egg with insufficient yolk. It's possible to be in excellent physical shape and be dying—until the final moment when everything seems to jump on you at once.

"You go slowly insane, aware of what's taking place all the time. 'Dying by inches,' I believe a terra author called something far less extreme. The only way an addict can survive, once hooked, is if the medics can get to him fast. A lot of very complicated and expensive equipment supports the being's nervous system until the drug has burned itself out. Very painful and not always successful. If the brain itself has been too badly damaged, nothing can be done. In such cases, mercy killings are not unknown.

"If 120hh or 144 t-standard hours have passed, there is a ninety-eight and something percent chance of an excruciatingly painful death occurring. In such cases even the best of medical treatment is useless. There is, of course, nothing like a simple antidote."

"And the shipments are coming through Repler?" said Kitten.

"It is thought to be so. We intercepted one, just one, by accident. No persons were taken. The best evidence we have is that every planet where new addicts have appeared was visited shortly before by a vessel that stopped to change or exchange cargo on Repler. There are a few suspects here, whom we're being very careful not to warn off. And this is not the only planet that's being carefully checked out. But at this stage it seems like Repler is the best of several thin possibilities—Everything about the operation suggests professional planning with plenty of brains behind it. There's a lot of experience

behind this setup.”

“I don’t wish to minimize our abilities, sir,” interrupted Kitten, “but if all this is true, why send for two fairly inexperienced agent-students instead of a hundred pros?”

“One, your very inexperience is your best asset. You will be equally unknown to the runners. The one thing we fear more than anything else is that they might become aware that we suspect their operations here. And with something of this magnitude running smoothly, it’s a likely bet that the pro handling things would stay quiet and shut down until they could shift their base elsewhere. We don’t want to start over again somewhere a hundred parsecs down the Arm. We might not be fortunate enough to intercept another shipment. And the traffic hasn’t assumed the proportions . . . yet . . . when an investment of that kind would justify the risk. A large sweep would be likely to catch up a lot of the small fry. The moguls usually manage to slip away and start raising hell somewhere else. You two stand a chance of cutting through a lot of opaque membrane and latching onto them before they have a chance to get suspicious. At least, that’s the theory. If you’re caught, the worst that can happen is we lose two agents.”

“You frame things so delicately,” murmured Porsupah.

“The covers we’ve prepared for you don’t require a lot of effort to maintain. Barring,” he said, staring hard at Kitten, “unforeseen complications! Lieutenant Porsupah is listed as a wealthy tree-farmer’s nephew from Tolus Prime. Your covers provide you with a number of common interests. A shared interest in mildly dangerous sports, for one thing. It means you have reasons for wanting to jet all over the place—and incidentally, for carrying sidearms. Sport pistols. Licenses will be issued to the both of you on your way out. Your ‘sporting weapons’ each pack a much greater wallop than their appearance will suggest. So for Hive’s sake, be circumspect with them—Look around, take your time, and honestly try to have fun. I don’t believe in miracles, but ‘erecting the proper superstructure facilitates acquiring interior trappings.’ ”

“Mathewson, twenty-third edict, section four,” said Kitten.

“ ‘Accidents and miracles will happen if you can find the proper place in space’; yes, you’re right, my dear,” replied Orvenalix. “I never knew theology interested you.”

“Only the juicy parts. For example . . .”

Porsupah elected to chew the upholstery.

Malcolm Hammurabi was counting his money. The awkward fact that he didn’t have it yet failed to interrupt the pleasure he took in the mathematics.

It had been the kind of trip that ship-masters drink over: no muss, no fuss, and plenty of profits. Even the drive had been trouble-free. Who’d have thought that those attenuated seals on Largess would be crazy for imported *alva*—let alone Replerian *alva*. Granted, though, the stuff was tasty enough. Even if Rodriguez wouldn’t program the stuff for the galley. Mal’s share of the profits would be, well, healthy. Might even be enough to refinish that verdammt upper right quarter of the *Umbra*’s KK drive

projector screen. Not that it was an essential job . . . not yet. But it would boost her favorable energy conversion ratio by a good thirty percent. That would convert to a savings of, oh, so and so much in ignition radioactives. Not to mention reducing wear and increasing efficiency in the engine systems.

He'd been told, often, that his habit of making a personal, solitary survey of ship's cargo the night after it had been shuttled down was just a little peculiar. The excuse he offered in return was that he wanted to be certain of the cargo's proper alignment for redistribution, etc., etc., right up to the moment of transfer.

In actuality, the fascination of standing alone with tons and tons of goods from the far reaches of the galaxy, piled high in rainbow-hued plastic and metal containers, was one he had carried from childhood. Then he used to wander through similar warehouses (which towered so much greater in his childhood memories) and dream of the days he might visit planets with magic names like Terra, Hivehom, Almaggee, Long Tunnel, Horseye and Entebbe.

He'd had little idea that one day he'd be transporting similar goods himself. Too often the planets had proven dull and unattractive. But there was enough spice in the life to make things interesting. (Besides, you crazy hypocrite, you hated pro ball. Being the best goalie who ever maintained parallax with a ball was hardly fit epitaph for a man.)

Anyhow, it was important that the luxury goods be easily accessible for tomorrow, in case that old pirate Chatham and the others wanted an early look.

A good percentage of the cases were emblazoned with the CK crest of arms, customs stamps, impression of destination and planet of origin. A few were consigned to small dealers on Repler, some to members of the crew, and a number were sealed in the crimson of the Commonwealth. There was even one small aquamarine case of holy goods for the Church. Mostly biochemical and oceanographic instrument parts, plus a few specimens of Largessian life.

Another section of the gigantic warehouse was filled with a massive shipment headed off-planet. Idly he wondered who'd pulled off that job.

Old Chatham's success had been due in large part to his policy of hiring free-lance cargo vessels or those of small companies to transport his goods, rather than acquiring his own fleet. It was a risky way to do business, since he was entirely dependent on the will of men who were not beholden to anyone. Cargos could disappear with sobering swiftness on short or nonexistent notice. And a merchant or trader who operated in such fashion built nothing in the way of transportation equity.

At the same time, the system offered unequalled flexibility without fear of loss in manpower or ships. Some few men could make a success of the arrangement, while those with a huge investment in ships and men might go broke in spectacularly short periods of time. Chatham was one who'd spent a lifetime mastering the first system.

The huge outgoing shipment sat there, its noble immobility staring back at him. Maybe Scottsdale had landed the job. Or crazy Alapka N'jema. He'd heard rumors that Al's ship, the *Simba*, had been operating this far out. Although the last he'd seen of her she'd been headed Centerward. There was always the possibility that the merchant or merchants involved hadn't contracted with anyone yet.

And the possibility that they had their own ship, idiot.

Still, it was an appealing thought. If the cargo were available and he could sign it, maybe they'd give him an advance on estimated profit. That, coupled with what he would make off the Largess expedition, ought to provide enough to refinish the entire screen. Plus getting an ultrawave booster for Ben, the *Umbr*a's comm operator. Ben would give his left arm and part of his soul for even a pre-war booster. For a new one from, say, GC, his shouts of pleasure would be heard all the way to Alpha C.

The silver plastic of an especially bright casing caught his eye. He saw himself reflected in the moulding and smiled, running the revised balance for the ship over again in his mind.

Reflected in the plastic, Mal Hammurabi was a big man. Not particularly tall, he was structured much like a number twelve symbo-speech printed dictionary—unabridged. Or a collection of children's blocks, tossed together in a haphazard rectangular shape and dipped in half-wet glue. Sandy-brown hair was cut square in back and receded slightly from the high forehead, which overshadowed deep-set amber eyes. The remainder of that face was an insane collection of rough angles, juts and points. The only honest curve in the whole assemblage was the thick walrus mustache which drooped from beneath the nose. Combined with a rather remarkable build, the ship-master looked like a surreal cross between a land-tank and a basset hound.

Equally incongruous was the group of peppermint sticks which protruded from the left pocket of his leather jacket. Hammurabi neither smoked nor flashed. His vices were confined to milder liquors such as ale, fine ones like brandy, and sweets . . . not all of them peppermint, nor in stick form.

There was a lot of cargo; the lanes of crates and casings were long, high, and shadowed. So he didn't notice the thieves until he was right on top of them.

There were two, totally absorbed in rifling the contents of a yellow-orange plastic case bound with metal strips. The container was the size and shape of a coffin, which it wasn't. Mal would remember loading a stiff. Melted plastic showed at one end where the seal had been burnt away.

Mal could have done several things. He might have taken another two steps forward and inquired in his most sepulchral ship-master's tones as to the object of the gentlemen's intrusion. He could have walked over and offered casual, even flippant commentary. He could have slipped quietly away and buzzed for the port police.

However, men who spend their lives riding the saddle of an artificial field with the mass of a sun (a) know when men will and when they will not react favorably to orders, (b) are aware that the derring-do of tri-dee heroes, when attempted in real life, seduces suicide, and (c) do not run for help.

So what Hammurabi did was put his hundred and twenty-five kilos under a crate not quite as big as himself and heave it in the direction of the two preoccupied paracreds. This by way of getting them off-balance.

Unfortunately, the ship-master once again misjudged his own strength. The crate was intercepted by the skull of the nearest man, who had chosen that moment to sense Hammurabi's presence and whirl, gun in hand. It was an unequal contest, which the man lost. Both crashed to the floor.

The other intruder made a dive for the dropped laser and reached it just as Mal landed on his back. The thief gained the weapon and lost his breath simultaneously. He squirmed.

Mal got the arm with the vicious-looking little gun in a modified arm-bar, one knee planted firmly at the shoulder joint. He raised the arm a little, up and back. The man screamed shrilly and dropped the pistol.

Leaning carefully forward, Mal reached down and gathered in the gun. The stock was still warm. Obviously it had been used recently. He hoped it had only been used on the crate.

The thief was fifteen cms shorter and a good sixty kilos lighter than the ship-master. He looked around wildly, as much as his awkward position permitted, and moaned. Apparently he'd caught sight of his companion. Mercifully, the box hid most of the other, but it didn't hide the large pool of red that stained the ferroconcrete to one side. Mal noticed the small man's glance.

"I didn't mean to be so messy with your friend. Nor fatal. But there were two of you and I like odds in my favor. Don't worry, I'll be much neater with you." He placed the muzzle of the pistol behind the man's right ear.

"Now, you've got just thirty seconds to come up with a real good reason why I shouldn't send you hustling after your partner . . . spiritually speaking, of course."

The man moaned again, his voice tight from the pain in his arm. "Go ahead! You're going to kill me anyway!"

"Nonsense! Don't be any dumber than you are. If I wanted you dead I'd have killed you, oh, minutes ago. I'd just as soon see you alive. I didn't mean to pass your friend on to the supervision of the Church, either, but I'm not fond of thieves. See, I was stolen myself once. No . . . tell you what. You cheerfully tell me what you were hunting for—and don't tell me this was a general expedition; you pulled that crate out of a hundred tons of similar ones—that, and who sent you for it, and maybe I'll let you depart rare instead of well-done." He pressed the pistol a little harder into the man's neck. "I suspect you'll have enough trouble avoiding the attentions of your employer, who will doubtless send you greetings when he finds out how sadly you've bungled."

The thief said nothing.

"Or," Mal continued conversationally, increasing his pressure on the spindly arm, "we could make this even more interesting and do it by pieces. I think this arm would be a good place to start. Then, if I lower the power on this toy and turn it in a little instead of down (he did so), I can start on one side of your head and fry you slowly to the other, maybe spiraling around. Sort of artistic like, you know?"

"All right!" the man screamed. "All right!" Mal let up slightly on the arm. "Rose."

"What? Stop whimpering, man, and speak up."

"Rose. He's the one sent me and Wladislaw."

"Dominic Rose? The druggie?"

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