

“Rhuum Service” by BRAD FERGUSON
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MARVELOUS,” SAID CHAYLAIFA, his breath finally coming back to him. He was on his back, smiling; his tail was comfortably wrapped around his left thigh, out of the way.

The *chosha* was not smiling at all, but she nodded agreement. “Excuse me for a moment, Chaylaifa,” she said.

“Of course,” he said. The *sha* watched her by the dim light as she left their bed and headed for the bathroom. *Nasu still cuts a fine figure*, he thought idly, *particularly for someone of her years. I chose well, so long ago. She is both good company and a good friend ... and she still provides this old warrior with a stout enough ride, willing as she is to try new things —*

“Chaylaifa?” came a small, high voice near the foot of the bed.

“Ah,” he said. “Still with us, eh, my dear? Ha! Come a little closer.”

She did. “I thought you’d forgotten all about me.”

“Not possible. Did you doze off?”

“Just for a moment. It has been a long day.” The *thaka’thott* rolled across the sweat-stained sheets of the strongly built bed and snuggled like a youngling into Chaylaifa’s pelt. Fehlorah ran a paw through the matted fur on the *sha*’s chest, her slightly extended claws barely grazing the sensitive skin beneath.

“I am glad the Bloxx was delayed,” she breathed.

“So am I,” Chaylaifa replied. “I had to appear angry for the benefit of our agents here, but I did not expect such a pleasant ... respite ... on the first day of the talks.”

“A most welcome respite. It’s such an exciting trip, isn’t it?”

“Are you glad I brought you, girl?”

“Of course, Chaylaifa! Ever so glad!”

The *sha* smiled. “Now just how glad might *that* be?”

Fehlorah smiled in a way far beyond her years. “Very glad, my *sha*. Has the *chosha* left anything for me?”

Chaylaifa laughed softly. “You know she has, little witch,” he said. He sighed in mock exasperation. “How can such a one, small as you, destroy me again and again, time after time, endlessly? You’ll kill me yet, girl.”

“I kill you?” Fehlorah’s paw began making its own, slow way down Chaylaifa’s ample body, in the way she had so recently learned that he liked the most. “More likely it will be the other way ‘round; I’ll be crushed under you — or between the both of you. A sad yet wonderful fate indeed.”

“You’re much too spry to be caught like that, Fehlorah.” He ran the tips of his powerful claws along the stripe of grey fur covering her spine, and the *thaka’thott* shivered as her immature tail began twitching.

“You like that,” he said in a low voice.

“Very much,” she breathed. “And you?”

“What you’re begun doing down there feels very good, my little love.”

“Now just how good might *that* be?” she asked him, laughing, as Chaylaifa’s breath began to hiss softly back and forth through his teeth.

A few moments later the bathroom door opened, throwing a bright golden light into the room. Nasu stood in it, a silhouette.

“Come back to bed, Nasu,” Chaylaifa called. “We’ve grown a bit impatient for you here — as you might be able to tell.”

“Yes,” Fehlorah said, reaching out a dainty paw. “Come to us, Nasu. Be with us.”

“I ... I think I might like to retire for the evening,” Nasu said, knowing what was to come; she had no wish to repeat the vileness of it. “It has been a tiring day. I will sleep in the room assigned to me — ”

“Nonsense,” said the *sha*, his tone suddenly

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harsh. “Come to bed, here and now. And turn out that damned light; the one in here is quite enough.”

“Chaylaifa, I — ”

He looked at her, his eyes holding her completely. After a moment, Nasu looked away and nodded.

“Excellent.” As Nasu seated herself at the foot of the bed, Chaylaifa reached behind him and retrieved a small box from the nightstand.

“What’s that?” asked Fehlorah.

“It is a Terran delicacy, love. They are called *ritzcrackas*, and I am assured that they are safe for us. Expensive, as is everything else aboard this hotel, but I thought we might try them. They are something ... different.” He grinned widely, showing his fangs. “After all, we have to fortify ourselves for the rigors ahead! *Ha!*”

Fehlorah giggled and, reaching over the *sha*, took a *ritzcracka* for herself and passed another to Nasu. The *chosha* ate it, chewing slowly. Fehlorah saw her reluctance and giggled again as she turned to embrace Chaylaifa.

After a short while Nasu joined with them, her unwillingness quickly evaporating as their shared scent rose, engulfing her, trapping her.

The tastefully small brass sign on the door of the suite read:

JACOBS & BURKE, LTD. FACILITATORS

The reception area had been furnished by a Centaurian designer known for her terribly trendy and effectively audacious approach to everything she did. Wallpaper and furnishings had been designed to intrigue a wide variety of senses, and fabrics had been chosen to appeal as broadly as possible to those to whom touch and

smell were as sound and light. To prove that price had been no object, there was an original Sunday-edition full-color Calvin and Hobbes hanging over the *faux* fireplace, which itself radiated in a variety of spectra. The look and feel of the room had instantly established the credibility of Jacobs & Burke aboard Hotel Andromeda, and that credibility had been the key to everything.

The other half of the suite was hidden behind a door concealed in the far wall of the reception area. Between them, the partners called it the Dark Side, and it looked as if it had been decorated by trolls. The Dark Side was the soundproofed and spyproofed office where Jacobs and Burke actually did their work, and no one else ever got in there. The partners allowed the hotel’s cleaning robots into the Dark Side only once every six months or so. Even at that, they never let the robots do very much, frantic that something important, some significant scrap of paper, might be snatched up and thrown away. The partners were also terrible packrats. For example, one of the Terran calendars on the wall was four years out of date, but the partners left it hanging there because it would be good again in only another seven.

Jonathan Lee Jacobs was sitting at his desk in the Dark Side, his head in his hands. “I guess what I don’t appreciate the *most*,” he complained, “is that this crap always gets sprung on us at the last possible goddamn *minute*.”

His partner had not really heard him. Trudy Burke was lying back in her reclining chair. Her eyes were closed. She was very busy.

Jacobs grabbed his most abused pencil of the day and began tapping a rapid tattoo on the glass surface of his desk. “*First* I get absolutely *no* notice that Bannister Investments is exercising its option with us, this after we don’t hear from those bloodsuckers for *years*, so we

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have to handle the Rhuum trade reps for them as long as they're aboard Andromeda. So, fine. We say hello and how are you, we get Ambassador Chaylaifa and his entourage settled, all twenty-three of the useless bastards, we make sure the hotel is treating everybody right, all that jazz. We even get a break on the logistics — no arrival ceremonies and no dinners, thank God; neither side wants 'em. Good enough. *Now* it turns out that the Bloxx rep is going to be late because, hot pilot he, he's blown a driver. Not a big deal, but somehow this idiot Chaylaifa thinks it's *our* fault! Before I can even *talk* to him about it, though, he stalks off to his room with his wife and kid in tow. This is supposed to be an *easy* contract? Isn't *that* what Bannister said?" He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Damn. These micro-contacts are killing me."

His partner still said nothing.

Jacobs cleared his throat and tried again. "I hear they can rot your corneas."

Trudy remained quiet.

"*Well?*" Jacobs demanded as his pencil finally broke. He brushed the two halves onto the floor.

"*Well* what?" Trudy answered. Her tone was lazy, distracted. "Do you want something, Jonny Lee? I'm trying —"

"I know, I know. I'm *bothering* you." Jacobs waved a hand. "Sorry. Find out anything yet?"

"Come on in, and I'll show you what I've isolated so far."

"All right, but let's not take too long. We've got *things* to do." Jacobs ordered his own chair to recline and, still tense but reasonably comfortable, he accessed the neural network.

The office was suddenly replaced by a garden. It was a different garden, though, smaller and prettier than Trudy's usual interface metaphor. There was a short picket fence around the plot, and from somewhere not far off came the sounds of children at play; Jacobs could also

hear birds. Turning around, he saw a small, neat, white house. His view of anything farther away was blocked by tall hedges ringing the property.

"This is very nice," Jacobs said, and he meant it. "Someone's backyard, right?"

"My grandmother's, as a matter of fact," Trudy said. "I've been working on it for a while. Do you really like it?"

Jacobs looked up at the clear blue sky.

"Very much. Where are we?"

"Pennsylvania — the nice part. I spent a lot of time here after Mother and Daddy split up." Trudy gestured around her. "Grandmother's garden was my favorite place of all, especially at this time of year, when I'd help her get it into shape after the winter; it's mid-April here now, in case you couldn't tell from the flowers. The other gardens I wrote were just practice; I wanted to get *this* one right."

Jacobs looked around. "I think you did. It's beautiful. I wish I'd met your grandma. Is she here?"

"Oh, God, no, Jonny Lee!" Trudy said, disconcerted. "I couldn't write *her!* No, we're the only ones here — and we ought to get down to business. You were in a mad rush, remember?"

"I guess I was. Hey, looky here." Jacobs bent and picked up an insect. He held it lightly between his fingers and grinned. "Hey, honey, your program's got a —"

"Don't you *dare* say it."

"Shoot. All right, I won't." He stooped to let the thing drop safely to the ground and watched as it skittered away. "What have you got for me?"

Trudy bent quickly and picked a daffodil. "First of all, here's the summary of the deal Bannister says Ambassador Chaylaifa wants to strike with the Bloxx," she said, handing him the flower. "The wish list has pharmaceuticals, minerals and other standard stuff on it;

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Bannister’s given us the quantities desired and what Chaylaifa intends to offer for them in goods and credits standard. Chaylaifa runs the biggest import trust in the Rhuum Organization, so this deal could mean billions of creds stan to him personally. Bannister Investments is brokering it, so they get the usual huge cut.”

“All right,” Jacobs said, sniffing at the flower. As he did, his mind filled with the details of what he needed to know. “Seems to pass the smell test. The Rhuum bids are low, but that’s why traders get together and haggle. Okay, no problem so far. Now, what have we got on the clients?”

Trudy picked another flower — a hyacinth, this time. “First of all, here’s what the neural net has on the Rhuum,” she said. “It’s a condensation of a Survey report done about fifty years back.”

“A little history, and that’s it,” Jacobs said, sniffing again. “Pretty damned condensed, if you ask me.”

“There’s not much in the extended Survey report, either,” Trudy said. She picked a perfect tomato from a nearby vine and handed it to Jacobs.

“This is out of season, isn’t it?” he asked.

“I needed an analogue you might be able to handle, O ye of common tastes. Anyway, the report is largely technical; you probably won’t want to eat all of it.”

“We’ll see about that.” Jacobs bit into the tomato, and juice dribbled down his chin. Suddenly, his eyes bulged. “Ugh muff mughh,” he said.

“Problem?” Trudy asked sweetly.

“Gluph fwu.” Working hard, Jacobs chewed slowly and then more slowly still before giving up. It was like chewing lead. Turning aside politely, he spit into a convenient bush.

“Warned you,” Trudy said. “I didn’t get much further into it than that myself.”

“We’ll hire an expert to come up with a summary,” Jacobs said. “Anything else?”

“That’s it. There’s considerably more material on the Bloxx, though.” Trudy handed Jacobs a big bowl of salad makings and a pair of wooden forks. “Here. You toss, I’ll serve.”

“I wish you’d find another metaphor,” Jacobs said. “I *hate* salad.” He began to mix the contents of the bowl.

Trudy suddenly looked distant.

Jacobs knew that look. “What is it?” he asked.

“You’re going to hate this, too,” Trudy replied. “The Bloxx fixed that busted driver of his. He’ll be here in about an hour.”

“Oh,” Jacobs said. “We’d better get out of here; I still have to shave. Damn, I *hate* being pushed on things like this.”

Jacobs and Trudy waited in the reception bay for the arrival of the Bloxx craft. It dropped out of hyperspace on schedule and achieved rendezvous without incident. Being relatively small, the ship made its own way into the parking bay as disappointed robot tugs scuttled out of the way. Robot valets, their headlights blinking on and off in a pattern of welcome, quickly came into position, bumping into each other in their programmed eagerness.

“I love watching this,” Trudy said. “The ‘bots are so *cute*.”

“Umph. My tie knotted okay?”

“For the twelfth time, yes. Oops — green light. *That* was fast.”

The airlock to the parking bay slid open, and there stood a tall, muscled man with the reddest hair Jacobs and Trudy had ever seen.

“Sir Kethrommon?” Jacobs asked, as if there could be any doubt. “Do you speak trader talk?”

“That I am and that I do,” he said, nodding.

“You the contacts Bannister was talking about?”

“Yes, m’lord, we are. I’m Jonathan Lee

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Jacobs, and this is my partner, Trudy Burke. As you’ve surmised, we represent Bannister Investments —”

“Bunch of crooks, them. Hope you’re not the same. If you’re Terrans, then let’s all speak English; I know it pretty good. Hi, Trudy.”

“Hello, M’lord Ambassador. Pleased to meet you.”

“M’lord?” Jacobs asked. “Is there really no one else in your party?”

“Nobody else, pal. I’m it.”

“Uh, you are? I mean to say, m’lord, that the Rhuum have sent a lead negotiator and twenty-three assistants.”

“Yep,” he rumbled. “So what? Don’t need others to deal with people from Rhuum or anywhere else. Been doing this kind of thing all my damn life. I captain my own craft and chart my own course; King Bolo understands that. Helps that he’s my uncle, natch.”

“But, m’lord, did I misunderstand? We were informed that your people have never before held talks with the Rhuum.”

“That’s right. So? We have stuff they want. They’ll do a deal without too much trouble. King Bolo understands that, too. Hey, Trudy Burke, you tied down?”

“Excuse me, m’lord?”

“You committed to some guy?”

Jacobs cleared his throat. “Sir, Miss Burke is also my wife.”

“That the same as mated, pal? I don’t know Terran ways much.”

“Yes. Yes, it is. Miss Burke is my wife.”

“Oh,” he said, shrugging. “Too damn bad. Would have liked to try you, Trudy Burke.”

“I’m flattered beyond the telling, m’lord,” Trudy said dryly. “Well, shall we settle Sir Kethrommon in his suite now, Mr. Jacobs? Perhaps you would like some dinner, m’lord?”

“Screw dinner,” Kethrommon said. “There any women for hire at this damn hotel? Bigger

ones than Trudy Burke here, I mean. Not so fragile-looking.” Kethrommon grinned. “Been a long trip for me, heh.”

“I’ll have the hotel’s concierge contact you to arrange things,” Trudy said, her expression carefully bland. “I’m sure they’ll have someone well worth your time. You might also try the neural net.”

“Heh,” Kethrommon said. “Maybe I will, both. You don’t like, eh, Trudy Burke?”

“It’s none of my concern, m’lord. Really.”

“But you don’t like. Know what, Trudy Burke? You got spunk. I *love* spunk!”

The opening round of talks between the trade representatives of the Kingdom of Bloxx and the Rhuum Industrial Organization got under way the following morning with as much appropriate pomp and ceremony as Jacobs & Burke could quickly arrange with Hotel Andromeda’s hospitality staff.

After the courtesy robots withdrew, Jacobs and Trudy took seats at opposite ends of the long, large mahogany conference table traditionally used in such negotiations, while Sir Kethrommon sat directly across from Chaylaifa. The table was bare of everything but writing implements and notepaper; in keeping with Rhuum ways, there was not even water. The size of the table seemed excessive for so few people, but Jacobs was betting that an old hand like Chaylaifa would appreciate the implied status it gave him, and he was right; Chaylaifa broke into an undiplomatic grin when he first saw it. The twenty-three members of the Rhuum negotiating staff sat in a gallery well behind their chief; their only job was to lend their presence to these proceedings. Chaylaifa’s wife and daughter sat with them in the front row.

The first five minutes of the meeting were spent in exchanging formal pleasantries. Chaylaifa was, predictably, good at it with the

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skill of long experience. Kethrommon, not so predictably, quickly proved himself capable of delivering a rough yet effective and endearing presentation capable of charming even his most formal listener.

Jacobs accessed the net. *You there, Trudy?*

She answered immediately. *Sure I am, hon. Hey, is this guy good, or what? Not only does he seem undamaged after last night’s antics — and I’ve seen the bill! — but he’s got the gift of gab like you wouldn’t believe.*

Jacobs winked at her. *You just gotta love the big lug, don’tcha? Maybe old King Bozo knew what he was doing. This is going to be okay, after all. A quick deal, nice and clean, and —*

That was exactly when Kethrommon bolted from his seat and attempted to leap across the table at Chaylaifa, his ceremonial dagger unsheathed. “You piss-sprayed son of a whore!” Kethrommon cried in a white heat. “I’ll kill you!”

Chaylaifa could move surprisingly quickly for such a big being; he kicked back his chair and drew *his* very unceremonial blaster. Fortunately, the conference room’s defensive systems had clicked on instantly, and both antagonists had been safely caught in a tanglefield. The tanglefield could do nothing to silence Kethrommon, however, and he continued to shout threats. Jacobs saw that Chaylaifa’s wife and child were shrieking but, since neither they nor anyone else in the gallery was offering any aggressive behavior, the tanglefield was ignoring them.

The tanglefield was also ignoring the two facilitators, who were frozen only by their own shock. Trudy’s eyes were bulging. *We must have missed something. What the hell was it?*

I don’t know, Trude. Let me access the transcript ... oh, no!

A Security squad arrived a moment later.

Several of its members escorted Kethrommon to his suite, and Trudy accompanied them. Others took Chaylaifa back to his rooms, and Jacobs went with him.

“Ambassador Chaylaifa,” Jacobs carefully began when they were at last alone, “didn’t you realize that your ... pleasant question ... represented the worst kind of insult to Sir Kethrommon?”

“It was not intended as such,” Chaylaifa said. He was genuinely puzzled. “I have frequently asked it of humanoids, but I have never gotten such a response.”

Jacobs licked his lips. “Mr. Ambassador, some humanoids resent the implication that their mothers were impregnated with them by males who are not their acknowledged fathers.”

Chaylaifa blinked. “But such things happen all the time, don’t they? Especially in noble houses? I’ve read many histories of humanoid cultures.”

“It’s true that such things do happen. But it is usually — not always, but usually — rude to suggest to an individual that he himself represents one of those cases. Some cultures put great store in being certain of whom one’s parents are and, moreover, having everyone else be certain of it, too. I hope you can understand that Sir Kethrommon would greatly resent your questioning his parentage.”

“But I *wasn’t* doubting his parentage, Mr. Jacobs,” Chaylaifa said. “I was simply asking who impregnated his mother.”

“Now, m’lord,” Trudy said soothingly, “you must know that the ambassador didn’t mean to offend you.”

They were sitting across from each other at a coffee table in the Bloxx’s sitting room. Kethrommon had grown calmer and was more in control of himself, but he was still hot with anger. “Indeed, woman?” he spat. “Then I

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would hate to be the victim of slurs he uttered with malicious intent.”

“He is an alien, m’lord. He is not like you. He simply doesn’t understand.”

Kethrommon nodded tightly. “I understand that. Barbarian, he is.”

Trudy’s lips grew narrow. “If you like. He is certainly different. Not better, not worse — just different.”

“I know ‘different,’ Trudy Burke,” Kethrommon said. “I’ve stood in the dirt of a hundred worlds. I’ve eaten that which has tried to eat me; I’ve even eaten *with* that which has tried to eat me.”

“So you know how deeply the differences between beings can run,” said Trudy.

Kethrommon shook his head. “There is always decency, and decency never changes. Never. Let me tell you something. I lost my father, he at my side against outsystem pirates terrorizing our good neighbors of the fourth planet in our system. He was blown apart by a fragmentation projectile. I had to wash him off me that night, after the battle.” Kethrommon’s teeth clenched. “I could overlook a slur upon myself, given a lack of intent, but I will not — cannot — countenance even an unintended insult against the memory of my father. My people desperately need the trade the Rhuum Organization can provide, but I am no longer the one to get it for them.”

Trudy blinked. “So what will you do?”

“There is only one way the Rhuum can answer for his insult — his death, by my hand.”

“I hope there is another way, m’lord.”

Suddenly Kethrommon sagged, the fight gone out of him. “In justice, I cannot take his life from him; I do indeed realize he meant no harm by what he said. Trudy Burke, I am not unable to see that my killing the Rhuum would be a terrible crime under these circumstances; I am not stupid. I will, however, leave Hotel

Andromeda in the morning. As you are still acting as facilitator for these talks, please have my ship made ready for departure at that time.” He carefully did not look at her.

Trudy took a deep breath, somehow sensing that this was a dangerous moment and that whatever she might say to him, angry as he was and hurt as he was, could be dreadfully important. “I will do exactly as you ask,” she finally said, and she saw Kethrommon relax just a touch.

“Thank you,” he said in a low voice. “Any other answer would not have done ... and I did not want to kill myself in front of you, Trudy Burke.” Trudy saw the dagger hidden in his hand for the first time as he placed it on the table, the point facing him. “I must not kill myself until I stand in front of the King. That is the only way I may properly apologize to my patron god for my failure.”

Trudy needed pills to get to sleep that night, and that was why the persistent beeping of the phone did not disturb her. Jacobs had to shake her awake.

“Trudy, there’s a problem,” he said in the darkness. “A big one.”

“Whazzit?” his wife mumbled.

“That was Security. Chaylaifa is dead. Better start getting dressed; I’ll dial a wake-up for you.”

Several minutes later Jacobs and Trudy caught a ‘lift to the VIP section. The door to Chaylaifa’s suite was ajar; they entered.

Several Security people were in the foyer, standing near their chief of detail. There was a briefing going on. The chief was hard to make out, surrounded as he was by the others; he was only a meter and a fraction tall, like most adults of his race. He was, generally speaking, a lizard.

“Ah,” he said, noticing Trudy and Jacobs. His mouth twitched into the semblance of a

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smile. “The partners of Jacobs & Burke, no? I am Lieutenant Hrock-Leff of Hotel Security. These are several of my associates.”

“Hello, Lieutenant, everyone,” Jacobs said. “What happened here?”

“I do not know quite yet,” Hrock-Leff said. “The ambassador is dead. Do you care to see?”

“Eh? Uh, I guess I have to,” Jacobs said. “Trudy?”

She seemed shaken. “I’ll, uh, I’ll wait here, I suppose. Call me if you need me.”

“Okay, Trude. Lieutenant? Lead on.”

“This way, please, Mr. Jacobs.” The two entered the main bedroom of the suite.

Chaylaifa’s body lay in the center of the bed. The blankets and sheets had been ripped by his claws and gathered around him, as if he had tried to provide himself with his own shroud even as he died. His eyes were open and glazed. There was an incredible amount of blood all over everything. *Ritzcrackas* and other tidbits were spilled here and there.

“It looks like he was stabbed,” Jacobs said.

“He was,” Hrock-Leff replied. “He was stabbed some forty times by someone with a small knife. From what I can see, at least eight of the wounds were severe enough to be fatal, in that Chaylaifa’s circulation system was irreparably damaged by each. He lost a great deal of blood very quickly. We have an identification, by the way.”

“An identification?” Jacobs asked, puzzled. “Of the body?”

“No,” the lieutenant replied. “Of the perpetrator. The *chosh*a Nasu has named Sir Kethrommon of Bloxx.”

“Jesus. Why am I not surprised?”

“I do not know. Let us go into the other bedroom, shall we?”

There was a connecting door to another bedroom in the suite. Inside, two Security officers were sitting with Nasu and Fehlorah.

The two females were dressed in bathrobes supplied by the hotel; Nasu’s barely fit her, while tiny Fehlorah seemed lost in hers. They were holding hands, and both seemed terribly upset.

“I’m sorry, Madame Chaylaifa,” Jacobs began, searching for something appropriate to say. “Your husband’s death is a great loss to us all.”

The Rhuum nodded her appreciation. “It is just Nasu now,” she said, “but I thank you, Mr. Jacobs. Fehlorah also appreciates your sympathy.”

“Certainly. Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes, there is. You can make sure that these police people here bring the murderer of Chaylaifa to justice.” She glared at Hrock-Leff. “I am not sure of their intent. They seem reluctant to take that devil-spawn of Bloxx into custody.”

Jacobs nodded. “I’ll do my best, Nasu. Fehlorah, will you be all right?”

“Yes, Mr. Jacobs,” the girl said. “I will be all right.”

“Very good. Lieutenant, may we talk?”

“Of course, Mr. Jacobs.” They left the bedroom through another door and went into the sitting room common to all three bedrooms in the suite.

“Have a seat, Mr. Jacobs,” Hrock-Leff invited, closing the door behind him. He himself squatted on a footstool, perfectly comfortable. “Would you like me to order something for you, now that we are alone? Coffee, perhaps?”

“No, nothing for me, thank you. Lieutenant? Have you arrested Kethrommon yet?”

“No. We have no need to bother him. We will not be arresting Sir Kethrommon.”

“Oh,” Jacobs said, frowning. “Diplomatic immunity, eh?”

“Hmmm?” the lieutenant said, almost distractedly. “Oh, no. We will not be arresting

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the Bloxx, because he did not kill Ambassador Chaylaifa. He has not left his room all evening.”

“Oh? How do you know?”

“We do not spy, Mr. Jacobs, but you probably know that the medical section keeps a passive watch on VIPs at the hotel, should someone experience a health problem or suffer an accident. Looking at the records for tonight, we see that Kethrommon was in his room all evening. The records also let us fix the time of Ambassador Chaylaifa’s death. Only two persons were with him at that moment: Nasu and Fehlora.”

“So one of them did it?”

“Almost certainly. If they did not — if the murderer was someone not being monitored by the medical section, say a hotel staff member or somesuch — then they were present at the time of the killing and saw who did it, and can identify the criminal. It was not one of Chaylaifa’s staff; all are VIPs and all are monitored, and we can account for the movements of every one of them. But that is neither here nor there. I suspect the former *chosha* did it, using a small knife as her weapon, in the vain hope that we would suspect Sir Kethrommon and his dagger. The only other suspect is Fehlora, and she is too small to have done such damage. I have not yet confronted Nasu with an accusation, but I will in good time.” Hrock-Leff yawned. “Pardon me; I was awakened for this. As I was saying, I am in no hurry to confront Nasu. She is not going anywhere.”

“Excuse me? The ‘choh-shah’? You keep talking about one. Who the hell is that?”

“You have been referring to Nasu as Chaylaifa’s wife. She was not that. She was his *chosha*.”

“Well, whatever. Why did she kill Chaylaifa?”

“I do not know yet. My initial inspection of

the scene suggests that Nasu was tired of being forced to indulge Chaylaifa in his sexual perversions.”

“What? Chaylaifa was a *pervert*?”

“It would seem so. I believe that the ambassador must have already thoroughly corrupted young Fehlora, the *thaka’thott* — ”

“The what?”

“The *thaka’thott*,” Hrock-Leff repeated, more slowly. “My good word, Mr. Jacobs. Did you really do so little research on the ways of the Rhuum before you took this assignment?”

“Uh, wait a minute, there. My own *chosha* usually does that sort of thing; I’m the idea man. Lieutenant, we got this job at the very last minute. I learned all there was to know about the trade deal and what both sides expected from it. Our job was to bring the Rhuum and the Bloxx together, take care of the niggling details so that both sides wouldn’t have to worry about them, lead them to strike the deal they both wanted, and send them home happy and satisfied. I didn’t think I needed a quickie degree in xenanthropology, too.”

“Perhaps you did, Mr. Jacobs,” the lieutenant said, the sarcasm lost on him. “Sorting these things out can sometimes become impossibly complicated. A degree might help.”

“You may have a point there, Lieutenant. Anyway, I *thought* there might be something weird going on between the old boy and the girl. Nasu knew all about it, I suppose.”

Hrock-Leff blinked in surprise. “Well, Mr. Jacobs, I mean, *really*. What else would you expect?”

Jacobs nodded wisely. “Of course. The wife — sorry, the *chosha* — is always the first to know, isn’t she? What a mess!”

Hrock-Leff blinked. “I’m afraid you’ve lost me, sir. May we leave now?”

“Sure. Let’s go.”

Jacobs and the lieutenant left the sitting

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room and entered the second bedroom. The two Security people had left, and no one but Nasu and Fehlorah were in the room. The two were standing next to the bed. They were locked in an embrace. Fehlorah was naked; her robe was puddled around her feet.

Nasu’s eyes were closed as Fehlorah’s small hand groped inside her opened robe, playing and stroking and touching, so she did not notice the presence of Jacobs and Hrock-Leff for several seconds. She squealed in surprise and fright when she did. Startled, Fehlorah whirled and, seeing them there, bolted for the bathroom. She slammed the door behind her.

“I thought — thought you were all gone except for the security persons posted outside,” Nasu stammered as she tied her robe closed. She was a little out of breath.

“We most humbly beg your pardon,” Hrock-Leff said, bowing his head slightly. “We were talking in the other room and quite lost track of time. Our fault entirely. Mr. Jacobs? Let us leave, please.”

“Uh, yes.” *Jesus!* thought Jacobs. *They’re all crazy!*

Honey? came Trudy’s worried thought. *I caught that. What’s going on?*

You won’t believe it, honey. Later. The lieutenant and Jacobs left the bedroom, passed through the room where Chaylaifa’s body still lay, and emerged into the foyer, where Trudy was waiting for them.

“Hello, Miss Burke,” Hrock-Leff said. “You appear to be agitated, if I read the signs correctly.”

“Hello, Lieutenant. Jonny Lee, we have to go to the office.”

“We do?”

“Now. Lieutenant? May I ask a favor?”

“Of course you may, Miss Burke.”

“Would you please delay notifying the relevant parties of Chaylaifa’s death until I

contact you? Including the rest of Chaylaifa’s entourage? I promise that it will not be a long delay.”

Hrock-Leff cocked his head to one side. “I am afraid I cannot at all delay briefing my superiors in Security ... but I can request that neither they nor the hotel contact anyone concerning this matter until I consent.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. That will do fine. We’re very grateful. We’ll talk to you again later — not much later.”

“I await the moment with pleasure. Good night, Mr. Jacobs, Miss Burke.”

Lieutenant Hrock-Leff watched as the two facilitators left, the determined female almost literally dragging the arguing male away. *How like Terrans*, he thought with amusement. *No doubt she has figured things out. And about time, too!*

Jacobs and Trudy were back in her grandmother’s garden.

“Nice and peaceful here,” Jacobs said. “Can’t we stay for, like, a year?”

“Don’t I wish,” Trudy said, seating herself on the ground. “Look, Jonny Lee, I’m the one who’s supposed to handle the niggling details, and I didn’t this time. What’s happened is mostly my fault — no, don’t stop me. This was a quickie contract, we thought, and so I treated it that way. I let myself be rushed into this. Well, I’ll never do *that* again.”

Jacobs dropped down beside her. “Why are you beating yourself up, Trude?”

“I’m not. Just listen to me for a minute. If we put our heads together, we can still fix it.”

“We can fix it?” Jacobs asked. “The Bloxx emissary is about to go home in disgrace, and he’s set to commit ritual suicide as soon as he gets within three feet of King Boppo. Our favorite couple from Rhuum turns out to be a pair of child molesters — *incestuous* child

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molesters! At least now there’s one fewer of ‘em than there used to be, thanks to the victim’s wife — sorry, I mean his *chosha*.”

“Get a grip, Jonny Lee.”

“Why should I? Everything’s gone to hell. Bannister will fire our butts for sure, and they’ll be real public about it because they’ll *have* to be in order to save their *own* butts. Our reputation is going to take a heavy hit. We have no hope of salvaging *anything* here — and you’re saying we can actually *fix* this mess?”

“I think we can,” Trudy said, offering her husband a small bowl. “By the way, stop assuming you know what you’re talking about. You don’t.”

“I don’t?” Jacobs said, taking the bowl and sniffing at it. “Hey, is this salsa?”

“Lightly spiced with relevant detail. This is the technical material neither of us could handle before Kethrommon got here. I’ve worked it over some. Here’s a spoon.”

Jacobs took it and began eating. “It’s good,” he said, chewing a little and swallowing.

“I whomped it up while you were in the other room of Chaylaifa’s suite, talking to the lieutenant,” Trudy said. “There was something about what was going on that just didn’t ring true. I didn’t have much else to do while I was waiting, so I accessed the net to do some of the background research I damn well should have done in the first place.”

“There’s some tough bits in this, but it’s fine.” Jacobs began to absorb tiny fragments of detail.

“No, don’t savor it,” Trudy said. “Just eat it up and think about it later. We’re in a hurry, you know.” She produced a bag of corn chips. “By the way, here’s what we didn’t already know about the Bloxx. Take it all in, love.”

“Yep.” He ate quickly and, in a few minutes, he finished.

“Well?” Trudy asked.

“Give me a second and let me start digesting all this — oh, *Jesus!*”

Trudy grinned. “You found the biggie, didn’t you? Wife and daughter, indeed! Never mind; I’m just as guilty. They *acted* like wife and daughter to Chaylaifa, but they were actually the second and third members of a male-dominated trisexual relationship.”

Jacobs wiped a hand over his face. “I must have looked like a fool in front of Lieutenant Hrock-Leff,” he said. It was almost a groan. “Chaylaifa — the *sha* — was the seed carrier. He plants it in Fehlorah, the *thaka’thott*; if he has sex with Nasu, it’s only for fun or to excite himself further, the old dog. Fehlorah is a natural hermaphrodite who’s just past puberty. All *thaka’thotts* are. Fehlorah contributes her egg and incubates the fertilized ovum for a day or two. When the time comes, she passes her egg through intercourse to Nasu, a true female — the *chosha* — who goes through pregnancy and bears the youngling. The way I just saw Fehlorah cozying up to Nasu, Fehlorah is probably carrying a fertilized egg right now. After two to five fertilizations, Fehlorah’s body will tell her whether she’s going to mature into a *sha* or *chosha*. Damn!”

“It’s an atypical case, Jonny Lee,” Trudy said. “Don’t blame yourself. The Rhuum are unique. We don’t know of any other viviparous trisexual races.”

“I know, I know — but there I was, calling them child molesters and perverts.”

“But you were half-right, hon. Chaylaifa, at least, *was* a pervert.”

“Huh? How so? The records say the Rhuum usually have threesomes.”

“Go on, Jonny Lee. Think about it some more.”

Jacobs did. Suddenly, he blinked. “What, for *that*? Shoot! With all that other stuff going on, who’d a thunk it? Who’d a paid *attention*?”

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“We should have,” Trudy replied. “We’re supposed to be good at this. Face it, love, we’re racial chauvinists.”

“I guess we must be.”

“This particular taboo is hardly unique — although, in its most severe form, it never lasts very long in the history of a particular civilization. Or so it says here.”

“I’m beginning to have an idea,” Jacobs said.

“I was hoping you would. Now think about the Bloxx.”

“I have been. That one’s harder. The insult to Kethrommon’s dignity was substantial.” Jacobs thought some more about it. “No. No apology is possible. I don’t see any way out of the situation — not directly, at any rate.”

“I don’t know what to do, either,” Trudy said.

“It’ll be okay, Trude,” Jacobs said, and there was a certain familiar light in his eyes. “For the first time since we fell into this pile of sawdust, I’m beginning to get the feeling that we’re gonna win. Let’s go talk to Lieutenant Hrock-Leff.”

Trudy, Jacobs and Hrock-Leff had returned to Chaylaifa’s suite. “I must talk to you now, Nasu,” the lieutenant said. “Do you want these others to leave us?”

“No,” Nasu said. “Mr. Jacobs is the nearest thing to a representative I — we — have aboard the hotel. I would like him to stay. I have a feeling we might need him.”

“I’ll do what I can for you, Nasu.”

“I know. Please go ahead, Lieutenant. I hope you need not involve Fehlorah in this. She’s still a youngling in so many ways.”

Hrock-Leff nodded. “I do not believe there is a need to involve her. Let us begin. You killed Ambassador Chaylaifa, did you not?”

“Yes,” Nasu said. She went to one of the

bedside tables, opened a drawer and retrieved a small knife. It was still stained with Chaylaifa’s blood. “I took this from the — cart — this evening and placed it under my pillow in the other bedroom,” Nasu said, handing it to the lieutenant. “When Chaylaifa began making his, his demands, I — I just could not acquiesce again.” She began shaking. “I did it. I killed him. I am not sorry. I could not suffer another night of Chaylaifa’s ... aberrations.”

“Tell me about them, Nasu,” the lieutenant said.

Nasu’s icy composure was slipping; she was beginning to weep. “I can barely bring myself to speak of them,” she whispered.

“You must.”

“He — he corrupted the poor *thaka’thott*. He ... he ... consumed nourishment *right in front of us*. He left *crumbs in bed!* He was *proud* of it!” She sobbed. “What *else* could I do?”

Jesus, Trudy, came Jacobs’ thought.

Shhh, Trudy returned. *Hrock-Leff’s* working up to the pitch.

“Nasu, what of Fehlorah?” asked the lieutenant. “What was her role in this killing?”

“She watched throughout.” Nasu paused to collect herself and, after a moment, she continued. “She thanked me afterward. We made quick love, right there at his side, in his blood. It was wonderful. Then we washed together, and it was just then that the medicos and the security people arrived, summoned automatically by the *sha’s* sudden death. I am ready to be arrested now.” She bowed her head.

“I am not going to arrest you, Nasu.”

“You are not?” She seemed puzzled.

“No. I have no authority to do so. You are — were — the mate of a diplomat; I cannot take you into custody, even for the killing of that selfsame diplomat. You are answerable to your own people for your actions here, but you are not answerable to us. I will provide a full report

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to your ministry of justice, and the hotel management will ask you to leave the premises as soon as possible.”

“I understand, Lieutenant,” Nasu said, “and I accept the necessity.” She sighed. “The scandal that arises from this will ruin our family — oh, not because of the actions I have taken tonight, no, but because of what the *sha* has done. Chaylaifa was a figure of respect, but he had grown very old, and in his great age he had also grown ... foul. The whispers concerning his aberrant conduct will become shouts, once this incident is made known.” She closed her eyes. “Certainly everything will be taken from us by those who ... protect ... our code of morality, but I care not. Fehlorah and I will manage.”

“I am certain you will,” Lieutenant Hrock-Leff agreed. “I can see that there is a great strength between you — and, if I am not mistaken,” he said, sniffing the air, “there is something even more important between you now.”

“I think so, too,” Nasu said, smiling for the first time. “Fehlorah will soon give me her egg. It will be our first.”

“All the more reason you should listen to Mr. Jacobs,” Hrock-Leff said. “He has a plan.”

A few hours later, there was a knock at the door of Kethrommon’s suite. “Package, Sir Kethrommon,” came a robot voice.

Kethrommon was sitting in the dark, utterly alone. “Just leave it there,” he said, “and go away.”

“Sorry, m’lord, but I need your thumbprint as proof of delivery.”

“No.”

“It is very important. I am told to say it concerns your mission.”

“What mission?” Kethrommon asked miserably. “I have none — oh, never mind. All right. I will take the delivery.” As he rose from

his chair, the lights went on. He crossed the room in three steps and opened the door to find a delivery robot standing there, a small package set atop its flat head.

“This is the thing?” Kethrommon asked.

“Yes, m’lord. Your thumbprint, please, on the glass plate next to the tray — thank you. Good night, m’lord.”

“Good night,” Kethrommon said as he closed the door. He looked at the package. It was a not very large box sealed in plastic, and the only thing written on it was his own name — in an ornate hand, to be sure. It was moderately heavy. He held the package up to his ear and rattled it, and something inside thumped.

“Well, I wonder,” Kethrommon muttered. He picked at the easy-open tab with a fingernail, and the plastic promptly fell apart along its pre-stressed seams. He opened the box and stopped for a moment, shocked and speechless. Then he smiled for the first time in many hours.

Things in Chaylaifa’s suite were getting busy.

“That was Sir Kethrommon, via the net,” Trudy said. “He sends his personal regards to us, and he says he will be pleased to attend an early morning meeting of the principals, as long as it is over before the time of his ship’s scheduled departure. He will not change that.”

“I didn’t expect him to,” Jacobs said, pleased. “I knew Kethrommon would give us some wiggle room if we gave him any excuse at all. Good boy!”

“You saw something in the files I didn’t notice,” Trudy said.

“Just a detail. Kethrommon could not *take* Chaylaifa’s life in payment for the insult to him — not in the context of negotiations with a foreign government, anyhow. However, Chaylaifa could *offer* his life — which he did by

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sending Kethrommon his very own blaster. It’s the same weapon he pulled on him at the meeting yesterday. Fraught with symbolism.”

“I see,” Lieutenant Hrock-Leff said. “So, at the meeting this morning, Kethrommon will fire into Chaylaifa’s already dead body, honor will be served, and that will be the end of it.”

“Oh, heaven forbid,” Jacobs said. “That would cause more problems later. I can’t have the Bloxx trade rep appear to kill the Rhuum ambassador — and I still want the two sides to strike a deal.”

“A deal? With one of the parties dead?”

“You bet, Lieutenant. C’mon. I want to see how they’re doing with Chaylaifa.” They walked into the main bedroom. “Hi, fellas.”

“Hello, Mr. Jacobs,” said the chief cosmetologist, his rodent teeth chattering. The others nodded to Jacobs and continued to scurry around Chaylaifa’s bulky form, combing and cleaning and straightening. “How d’you think he’s looking?”

“Pretty good, Osroqui, pretty good. I knew your team could do it if anybody could.”

“Thanks, Mr. Jacobs. Hey, this fur of his is a real problem, what with the blood and all. Kinks and gunk all over the place. Hell, he was still leaking when we got here. How covered up is the old kark going to be?”

“He’ll have a ceremonial robe on, like that one over on the chair. He can also wear a big hat, if you need him to. His face is going to be the important thing. How about his eyes?”

“I can’t do much about those, even if I replaced them with glass,” Osroqui said. “He can’t blink anymore, and that kind of thing always gives a stiff away. I don’t think we need a hat. Hey, does his kind wear veils?”

“No, they don’t.” Jacobs thought a moment. “Glass, you said. Hmmm. Glasses.”

“Glasses?” Osroqui asked.

“Something you see in old Terran movies.

Humans used to wear glass lenses in frames over their eyes to correct vision problems. We could make ones with really thick lenses; then you couldn’t see if Chaylaifa was blinking or not. We could tell Kethrommon it was some Rhuum thing. Measure his head for me, will you, Osroqui? I’ll make a call.”

The time for the meeting arrived. The rest of the Rhuum party was only slightly surprised to find Chaylaifa, Nasu and Fehlora already in place at the conference table, but they took their seats in the gallery without incident.

Kethrommon entered to find things much the same as the day before, except that Jacobs and Trudy were standing by Chaylaifa’s side, and that the Rhuum ambassador was wearing — something — over his eyes.

“Mr. Jacobs?” the Bloxx began, somewhat puzzled. “Why are you sitting over there today? Do you propose to speak for the Rhuum?”

“With your indulgence, m’lord,” Jacobs began, “I do, in a way. The ambassador has asked me to translate his native tongue into English for him in order to spare us further, ah, difficulties.”

“I see.” Kethrommon reached into his cloak and dropped Chaylaifa’s blaster onto the table. It clattered. There was something like a gasp from the gallery. “I received this last night,” he said. “Did the ambassador grasp the import?”

Jacobs put his head very near Chaylaifa’s lips, waited a moment, and then straightened. “He did, m’lord. He begs a moment while he very carefully phrases what he wishes to say next, realizing that you need not grant him this boon.”

Kethrommon paused, then nodded. “Very well. What is it?”

Jacobs bent, paused and straightened again. “He wishes to ask again the question which he so poorly and insultingly put to you yesterday

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because of his clumsiness with the language. He begs to know if he may ask this question again, here and now, or do you wish to kill him right away? He humbly awaits your answer.”

Kethrommon was silent for a long minute. “He may ask the question,” the Bloxx representative finally said, his jaw set.

Jacobs put his head next to Chaylaifa’s mouth. “The ambassador wishes to know, Sir Kethrommon, which of your warrior gods acted through your father to sire you. You exhibit the most honorable traits of many of them, and the ambassador would like to know so he, too, may honor him.”

Kethrommon blinked. “Is *that* what he — never mind. Please tell the ambassador that I have the honor to have as my patron the god Anox-Maleth, the warrior spirit of the northern provinces; my father’s family is of those lands. Please thank the ambassador for his interest.” The Bloxx picked up the blaster and rather casually put it into the pocket in his cloak. “I think we should begin the meeting now.”

“The ambassador is eager as ever to begin,” Jacobs said.

Jacobs and Trudy were standing at the viewport in the departure lounge, hand in hand. They watched as the Rhuum yacht sprang away from the side of the hotel and, on thrusters, maneuvered into proper position for its sprint for home.

“Ahem,” said Lieutenant Hrock-Leff. “I thought I might join you for the departure. All is well?”

Jacobs nodded to him. “All is very well, Lieutenant. And you?”

“A bit more prosperous than I was, as are certain members of my squad. We thank you.”

“You’re all entirely welcome.” Jacobs turned back to the viewport as the lieutenant came to stand with him and Trudy.

“They are satisfied?” Hrock-Leff asked. “I still cannot believe it has worked.”

“Everything’s fine,” Jacobs answered. “Chaylaifa went aboard on a medical stretcher. The poor *sha* is completely exhausted. He’ll have a fatal heart attack on the way home — a regrettable consequence of his strenuous efforts to bring about the first trade treaty with the Bloxx. The ship’s doctor is a family confidant; he’ll keep silent and no one else will know. Chaylaifa will be buried in space, according to tradition. Nasu and Fehlorah will inherit Chaylaifa’s import business. They’ll be well taken care of.”

Trudy nodded. “They ought to be. Rhuum has struck the first major agreement with a race that’s sure to be a major player in this part of the galaxy.”

“And *we* nailed it for them,” Jacobs said, with great satisfaction. “Despite everything.”

“I hope Nasu and Fehlorah will be all right,” Trudy said. “They’ve been through quite an ordeal.”

“They’re the widowed spouses of a hero of the Rhuum Industrial Organization,” said Jacobs. “They’ll be treated right, don’t worry. They won’t be single for long, either — not with *that* bankroll. They’ll find a new *sha*, or Nasu will take Fehlorah if she turns out to be *sha* herself.”

“I wonder how we managed to fool Sir Kethrommon, though?” Lieutenant Hrock-Leff wondered. “He is not stupid.”

“He isn’t,” Jacobs grinned, “and we didn’t. Kethrommon realized that Chaylaifa was dead the moment he saw him. However, he decided to trust me — or, more accurately, he decided to trust Trudy, who was standing right there, after all, and so had to be privy to what was going on. Kethrommon played along and quickly realized that we were showing a way — the *only* way — out of the jungle. He took it, bless his heart.”

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“You were sure of him?” Hrock-Leff asked.

“Reasonably sure. I figured Kethrommon wouldn’t expose us, as long as we didn’t implicate him in our coverup or deal unfairly with him in the talks — that is, as long as we didn’t put his personal honor into question, and we never did. No, the whole charade with Chaylaifa’s body was for the benefit of the Rhuum party. They’ll all go home now and tell everyone how wonderful the regrettably departed Chaylaifa was at the talks. His finest moment coming right at the end, and all that.”

The Rhuum yacht was nothing more than a

pinpoint of winking light in the far distance. Suddenly, it vanished.

“There they go,” Trudy said. “Safe home, Nasu and Fehlorah.”

“Indeed,” Hrock-Leff said, nodding. “Well, I feel a bit let down, to tell you the truth. This case provided more excitement than I usually see in my work. Actually, I found it rather exhilarating.”

“Really?” Jacobs asked, as the three turned and left the lounge. “Well, stick around, Lieutenant. This could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”•