

A !TANGLED WEB

Your spaceport bars fall into two distinct groups: the ones for the baggage and the ones for the crew. I was baggage, this trip, but didn't feel like paying the prices that people who space for fun can afford. The Facilities Directory listed under "Food and Drink" four establishments: the Hartford Club (inevitably), the Silver Slipper Lounge, Antoine's, and Slim Joan's Bar & Grill.

I went to a currency exchange booth first, assuming that Slim Joan was no better at arithmetic than most bartenders, and cashed in a hundredth share of Hartford stock. Then I took the drop lift down to the bottom level. That the bar's door was right at the drop-lift exit would be a dead giveaway even if its name had been the Bell, Book, and Candle. Baggage don't generally like to fall ten stories, no matter how slowly.

It smelled right, stir-fry and stale beer, and the low lighting suggested economy rather than atmosphere. Slim Joan turned out to be about a hundred thousand grams of transvestite. Well, I hadn't come for the scenery.

The clientele seemed evenly mixed between humans and others, most of the aliens being !tang, since this was Morocho III. I've got nothing against the company of aliens, but if I was going to spend all next week wrapping my jaws around !tangish, I preferred to mix my drinking with some human tongue.

"Speak English?" I asked Slim Joan.

"Some," he/she/it growled. "You would drink something?" I'd never heard a Russian-Brooklyn accent before. I ordered a double saki, cold, in Russian, and took it to an empty booth.

One of the advantages of being a Hartford interpreter is that you can order a drink in a hundred different languages and dialects. Saves money; they figure if you can speak the lingo you can count your change.

I was freelancing this trip, though, working for a real-estate cartel that wanted to screw the !tang out of a few thousand square kilometers of useless seashore property. It wouldn't stay useless, of course.

Morocho III is a real garden of a planet, but most people never see it. The tachyon nexus is down by Morocho I, which we in the trade refer to as "Armpit," and not many people take the local hop out to III (Armpit's the stopover on the Earth-Sammler run). Starlodge, Limited, was hoping to change that situation.

I couldn't help eavesdropping on the !tangs behind me. (I'm not a snoop; it's a side effect of the hypnotic-induction learning process.) One of them was leaving for Earth today, and the other was full of useful advice. "He"—they have seven singular pronoun classes, depending on the individual's age and estrous condition—was telling "her" never to make any reference to human body odor, no matter how vile it may be. He should also have told her not to breathe on anyone. One of the byproducts of their metabolism is butyl nitrite,

which smells like well-aged socks and makes humans get all faint and cross-eyed.

I've worked with !tangs a few times before, and they're some of my favorite people. Very serious, very honest, and their logic is closer to human logic than most. But they *are* strange-looking. Imagine a perambulating haystack with an elephant's trunk protruding. They have two arms under the pile of yellow hair, but it's impolite to take them out in public unless one is engaged in physical work. They do have sex in public, constantly, but it takes a zoologist with a magnifying glass to tell when.

He wanted her to bring back some Kentucky bourbon and Swiss chocolate. Their metabolism parts company with ours over proteins and fats, but they love our carbohydrates and alcohol. The alcohol has a psychedelic effect on them, and sugar leaves them plastered.

A human walked in and stood blinking in the half-light. I recognized him and shrank back into the booth. Too late. He strode over and stuck out his hand. "Dick Navarro!"

"Hello, Pete." I shook his hand once. "What brings you here? Hartford business?" Pete was also an interpreter.

—Oh, no, he said in Arabic. Only journeying.

—Knock it off, I said in Serbo-Croatian. —Isn't your native language English? I added in Greek.

"Sure it is. Yours?"

"English or Spanish. Have a seat."

I smacked my lips twice at Slim Joan, and she came over with a menu. "To be eating you want?"

"Nyet," he said. "Vodka." I told her I'd take another. "So what are you doing here?" Pete asked.

"Business."

"Hartford?"

"Nope."

"Secret."

"That's right." Actually, they hadn't said anything about its being secret. But I knew Peter Lafitte. He wasn't just passing through.

We both sat silently for a minute, listening to the !tangs. We had to smile when he explained to her how to decide which public bathroom to use when. This was important to humans, he said. Slim Joan came with the drinks and Pete paid for both, a bad sign.

"How did that Spica business finally turn out?" he asked.

"Badly." Lafitte and I had worked together on a partition-of-rights hearing on Spica IV, with the Confederación actually bucking Hartford over an alien-rights problem. "I couldn't get the humans to understand that the minerals had souls, and I couldn't get the natives to believe that refining the minerals didn't affect their spiritual status. It came to a show of force, and the natives backed down. I wouldn't like to be there in twenty years, though."

"Yeah. I was glad to be recalled. Arcturus all over.

"That's what I tried to tell them." Arcturus wasn't a regular stop any more, not since a ship

landed and found every human artistically dismembered. "You're just sightseeing?"

"This has always been one of my favorite planets." "Nothing to do."

"Not for you city boys. The fishing is great, though." Ah ha. "Ocean fishing?"

"Best in the Confederaci6n."

"I might give it a try. Where do you get a boat?"

He smiled and looked directly at me. "Little coastal village, Pa'an!al."

Smack in the middle of the tribal territory I'd be dickering for. I dutifully repeated the information into my ring.

I changed the subject and we talked about nothing for a while. Then I excused myself, saying I was time-lagging and had to get some sleep. Which was true enough, since the shuttle had stayed on Armpit time, and I was eight hours out of phase with III. But I bounced straight to the Hartford courier's office.

The courier on duty was Estelle Dorrington, whom I knew slightly. I cut short the pleasantries. "How long to get a message to Earth?"

She studied the clocks on the wall. "You're out of luck if you want it hand-carried. I'm not going to Armpit until tomorrow. Two days on the shuttle and I'll miss the Earth run by half a day.

"If broadcast is all right, you can beam to Armpit and the courier there can take it on the Twosday run. That leaves in seventy-two minutes. Call it nineteen minutes' beam time. You know what you want to say?"

"Yeah. Set it up." I sat down at the customers' console.

**STARLODGE LIMITED
642 EASTRIVER
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10092
ATTENTION: PATRICE DUVAL**

YOU MAY HAVE SOME COMPETITION HERE. NOTHING OPEN YET BUT A GUY WE CALL PETER RABBIT IS ON THE SCENE. CHECK INTERPRETERS GUILD AND SEE WHO'S PAYING PETER LAFITTE. CHANGE TERMS OF SALE? PLEASE REPLY NEXT SAMMLER RUNRICARDO NAVARRO/RM 2048/MOROCHO HILTON

I wasn't sure what good the information would do me, unless they also found out how much he was offering and authorized me to outbid him. At any rate, I wouldn't hear for three days, earliest. Sleep.

Morocho III—its real name is !ka'al—rides a slow sweeping orbit around Morocho A, the brighter of the two suns that make up the Morocho system (Morocho A is a close double star itself, but its white dwarf companion hugs so close that it's lost in the glare). At this time of

day, Morocho B was visible low in the sky, a hard blue diamond, too bright to stare at, and A was right overhead, a bloated golden ball. On the sandy beach below us the flyer cast two shadows, dark blue and faint yellow, which raced to come together as we landed.

Pa'an!al is a fishing village thousands of years old, on a natural harbor formed where a broad jungle river flows into the sea. Here on the beach were only a few pole huts with thatched roofs, where the fishers who worked the surf and shallow pools lived. Pa'an!al proper was behind a high stone wall, which protected it on one side from the occasional hurricane and on the other from the interesting fauna of the jungle.

I paid off my driver and told him to come back at second sundown. I took a deep breath and mounted the steps. There was an open-cage Otis elevator beside the stairs, but people didn't use it, only fish.

The !tang are compulsive about geometry. This wall was a precise 1:2 rectangle, and the stairs mounted from one corner to the opposite in a satisfyingly Euclidian 30 degrees. A guardrail would have spoiled the harmony. The stairs were just wide enough for two !tang to pass, and the rise of each step was a good half meter. By the time I got to the top I was both tired and slightly terrified.

A spacefaring man shouldn't be afraid of heights, and I'm not, so long as I'm in a vehicle. But when I attained the top of the wall and looked down the equally long and perilous flight of stairs to ground level, I almost swooned. Why couldn't they simply have left a door in the wall?

I sat there for a minute and looked down at the small city. The geometric regularity *was* pleasing. Each building was either a cube or a stack of cubes, and the rock from which the city was built had been carefully sorted, so that each building was a uniform shade. They went from white marble through sandy yellow and salmon to pearly gray and obsidian. The streets were a regular matrix of red brick. I walked down, hugging the wall.

At the bottom of the steps a !tang sat on a low bench, watching the nonexistent traffic. —Greetings, I clicked and snorted at him. —It certainly is a pleasant day.

—Not everywhere, he grunted and wheezed back. An unusually direct response.

—Are you waiting for me?

—Who can say? I am waiting. His trunk made a philosophical circle in the air. —If you had not come, who knows for what I would have been waiting?

—Well, that's true. He made a circle in the other direction, which I think meant What else? I stood there for a minute while he looked at me or the ground or the sky. You could never tell.

—I hope this isn't a rude question, he said. —Will you forgive me if this is a rude question?

—I certainly will try.

—Is your name !ica'o *va!o?

—That was admirably close. —It certainly is.

—You could follow me. He got up. —Or enjoy the pleasant day.

I followed him closely down the narrow street. If he got in a crowd I'd lose him for sure. I couldn't tell an estrus-four female from a neuter, not having sonar (they tell each other apart by sensing body cavities, very romantic).

We went through the center of town, where the well and the market square were. A few dozen !tang bargained over food, craft items, or abstractions. They were the most mercantile race on the planet, although they had sidestepped the idea of money in favor of labor equivalence: for those two ugly fish I will trade you an original sonnet about your daughter and three vile limericks for your next affinity-group meeting. Four limericks, tops.

We went into a large white building that might have been City Hall. It was evidently guarded, at least symbolically, since two !tang stood by the door with their arms exposed.

It was a single large room similar to a Terran mosque, with a regular pattern of square columns holding 'up the ceiling. The columns supported shelving in neat squares, up to about two meters; on the shelves were neat stacks of accordion-style books. Although the ceiling had inset squares of glass that gave adequate light, there was a strong smell of burnt fish oil, which meant the building was used at night. (We had introduced them to electricity, but they used it only for heavy machinery and toys.)

The !tang led me to the farthest corner, where a large hay-stack was bent over a book, scribbling. They had to read or write with their heads a few centimeters from the book, since their light-eyes were only good for close work.

—It has happened as you foretold, Uncle.

—Not too amazing a prophecy, as I'd sent a messenger over yesterday.

Uncle waved his nose in my direction. —Are you the same one who came four days ago?

—No, I have never been to this place. I am Ricardo Navarro, from the Starlodge tribe.

—I grovel in embarrassment. Truly it is difficult to tell one human from another. To my poor eyes you look exactly like Peter Lafitte.

(Peter Rabbit is bald and ugly, with terrible ears. I have long curly hair with only a trace of gray, and women have called me attractive.) —Please do not be embarrassed. This is often true when different peoples meet. Did my brother say what tribe he represented?

—I die. O my hair falls out and my flesh rots and my bones are cracked by the hungry ta!a'an. He drops me behind him all around the forest and nothing will grow where his excrement from my marrow falls. As the years pass the forest dies from the poison of my remains. The soil washes into the sea and poisons the fish, and all die. O the embarrassment.

—He didn't say?

—He did but said not to tell you.

That was that. —Did he by some chance say he was interested in the small morsel of land I mentioned to you by courier long ago?

—No, he was not interested in the land.

—Can you tell me what he was interested in?

—He was interested in *buying* the land.

Verbs. —May I ask a potentially embarrassing question?

He exposed his arms. —We are businessmen.

—What were the terms of his offer?

—I die. I breathe in and breathe in and cannot exhale. I explode all over my friends. They forget my name and pretend it is dung. They wash off in the square and the well becomes polluted. All die. O the embarrassment.

—He said not to tell me?

—That's right.

—Did you agree to sell him the land?

—That is a difficult question to answer.

—Let me rephrase the question: is it possible that you might sell the land to my tribe?

—It is possible, if you offer better terms. But only possible, in any case.

—This is embarrassing. I, uh, die and, um, the last breath from my lungs is a terrible acid. It melts the seaward wall of the city and a hurricane comes and washes it away. All die. O the embarrassment.

—You're much better at that than he was.

—Thank you. But may I ask you to amplify as to the possibility?

—Certainly. Land is not a fish or an elevator. Land is something that keeps you from falling all the way down. It gives the sea a shore and makes the air stop. Do you understand?

—So far. Please continue.

—Land is time, but not in a mercantile sense. I can say "In return for the time it takes me to decide which one of you is the guilty party, you must give me such-and-so." But how can I say "In return for the land I am standing on you must give me this-and-that"? Nobody can step off the time, you see, but I can step off the land, and then what is it? Does it even exist? In a mercantile sense? These questions and corollaries to them have been occupying some of our finest minds ever since your courier came long ago.

—May I make a suggestion?

—Please do. Anything might help.

—Why not just sell it to the tribe that offers the most?

—No, you don't see. Forgive me, you Terrans are very simpleminded people, for all your marvelous Otis elevators and starships (this does not embarrass me to say because it is meant to help you understand yourself; if you were !tang you would have to pay for it). You see, there are three mercantile classes. Things and services may be of no worth, of measurable worth, or of infinite worth. Land has never been classified before, and it may belong in any of the categories.

—But Uncle! The Lafitte and I have offered to buy the land. Surely that eliminates the first class.

—O you poor Terran. I would hate to see you try to buy a fish. You must think of all the implications.

—I die. I, uh, have a terrible fever in my head and it gets hotter and hotter until my head is a fire, a forge, a star. I set the world on fire and everybody dies. O the embarrassment. What

implications?

—Here is the simplest. If the land has finite value, when at best all it does is keep things from falling all the way down, how much is air worth? Air is necessary for life, and it makes fires burn. If you pay for land do you think we should let you have air for free?

—An interesting point, I said, thinking fast and !tangly. —But you have answered it yourself. Since air is necessary for life, it is of infinite value, and not even one breath can be paid for with all the riches of the universe.

—O poor one, how can you have gotten through life without losing your feet? Air would be of infinite worth thus only if *life* were of infinite worth, and even so little as I know of your rich and glorious history proves conclusively that you place very little value on life. Other people's lives, at any rate. Sad to say, our own history contains a similarly bonehungry period.

—Neither are we that way now, Uncle.

—I die. My brain turns to maggots... .

I talked with Uncle for an hour or so but got nothing out of it save a sore soft palate. When I got back to the hotel there was a message from Peter Lafitte, asking whether I would like to join him at Antoine's for dinner. No, I would not *like* to, but under the circumstances it seemed prudent. I had to rent a formal tunic from the bellbot.

Antoine's has all the *joie de vivre* of a frozen halibut, which puts it on a par with every other French restaurant off Earth. We started with an artichoke vinaigrette that should have been left to rot in the hydroponics tank. Then a filet of "beef" from some local animal that I doubt was even warm-blooded. All this served by a waiter who was a Canadian with a fake Parisian accent.

But we also had a bottle of phony Pouilly-Fuisse followed by a bottle of ersatz Burgundy followed by a bottle of synthetic Chateau-d'Yquem. Then they cleared the table and set a bottle of brandy between us, and the real duel began. Short duel, it turned out.

"So how long is your vacation going to last?" I made a gesture that was admirably economical. "Not long at these prices."

"Well, there's always Slim Joan's." He poured himself a little brandy and me a lot. "How about yourself?"

"Ran into a snag," I said. "Have to wait until I hear from Earth."

"They're not easy to work with, are they?"

"Terrans? I'm one myself."

"The !tang, I mean." He stared into his glass and swirled the liquor. "Terrans as well, though. Could I set to you a hypothetical proposition?"

"My favorite kind," I said. The brandy stung my throat. "Suppose you were a peaceable sort of fellow."

"I am." Slightly fuzzy, but peaceable.

"And you were on a planet to make some agreement with the natives."

I nodded seriously.

"Billions of bux involved. Trillions."

"That would really be something," I said.

"Yeah. Now further suppose that there's another Terran on this planet who, uh, is seeking to make the same sort of agreement."

"Must happen all the time."

"For trillions, Dick? Trillions?"

"Hyp'thetical trillions." Bad brandy, but strong.

"Now the people who are employing you are absolute-ly ruthless."

"*Ma!ryso'ta*," I said, the !tang word for "bonehungry." Close to it, anyhow.

"That's right." He was starting to blur. More wine than I'd thought. "Stop at nothing. Now how would you go about warning the other Terran?"

My fingers were icy cold and the sensation was crawling toward my elbows. My chin slipped off my hand and my head was so heavy I could hardly hold it up. I stared at the two fuzzy images across the table. "Peter." The words came out slowly, and then not at all: "You aren't drinking...."

"Terrible brandy, isn't it." My vision went away, although it felt as if my eyes were still open. I heard my chin hit the table.

"Waiter?" I heard the man come over and make sympathetic noises. "My friend has had a little too much to drink. Would you help me get him to the bellbot?" I couldn't even feel them pick me up. "I'll take this brandy. He might want some in the morning." Jolly.

I finally lapsed into unconsciousness while we were waiting for the elevator, the bellbot lecturing me about temperance.

I woke up the next afternoon on the cold tile floor of my suite's bathroom. I felt like I had been taken apart by an expert surgeon and reassembled by an amateur mechanic. I looked at the tile for a long time. Then I sat for a while and studied the interesting blotches of color floating between my eyes and my brain. When I thought I could survive it, I stood up and took four Hangaways.

I sat and started counting. Hangaways hit you like a pile driver. At eighty the adrenaline shock came. Tunnel vision and millions of tiny needles being pushed out through your skin. Rivers of sweat. Cathedral bells tolling, your head the clapper. Then the dry heaves and it was over.

I staggered to the phone and ordered some clear soup and a couple of cold beers. Then I stood in the shower and contemplated suicide. By the time the soup came I was contemplating homicide.

The soup stayed down and by the second beer I was feeling almost human. Neanderthal, anyhow. I made some inquiries. Lafitte had checked out. No shuttle had left, so he was either still on the planet or he had his own ship, which was possible if he was working for the outfit I suspected he was working for. I invoked the holy name of Hartford, trying to find out to whom his expenses had been billed. Cash.

I tried to order my thoughts. If I reported Lafitte's action to the Guild he would be disbarred. Either he didn't care, because They were paying him enough to retire in luxury—for which I knew he had a taste—or he actually thought I was not going to get off the planet alive. I discarded the dramatic second notion. Last night he could have more easily killed me than warned me. Or had he actually *tried* to kill me, the talk just being insurance in case I didn't ingest a fatal dose? I had no idea what the poison could have been. That sort of knowledge isn't relevant to my line of work.

I suppose the thoroughly rational thing would have been to sit tight and let him have the deal. The fortunes of Starlodge were infinitely less important to me than my skin. He could probably offer more than I, anyhow.

The phone chimed. I thumbed the vision button and a tiny haystack materialized over the end table.

—Greetings. How is the weather?

—Indoors, it's fine. Are you Uncle?

—Not now. Inside the Council Building I am Uncle.

—I see. Can I perform some worthless service for you?

—For yourself, perhaps.

—Pray continue.

—Our Council is meeting with the Lafitte this evening, with the hope of resolving this question about the mercantile nature of land. I would be embarrassed if you did not come too. The meeting will be at *ala'ang in the Council Building.

—I would not cause you embarrassment. But could it possibly be postponed?

He exposed his arms. —We are meeting.

He disappeared and I spent a few minutes translating *ala'ang into human time. The !tang divide their day into a complicated series of varying time intervals depending on the position of the suns and state of appetite and estrous condition. Came to a little before ten 'o'clock, plenty of time.

I could report Lafitte, and probably should, but decided I'd be safer not doing so, retaining the threat of exposure for use as a weapon. I wrote a brief description of the situation—and felt a twinge of fear on writing the word "Syndicate"—and sealed it in an envelope. I wrote the address of the Hartford Translators' Guild across the seal and bounced up to the courier's office.

Estelle Dorrington stared at me when I walked into the office. "Ricardo! You look like a corpse warmed over."

"Rough night," I said. "Touch of food poisoning."

"I never eat that Tang stuff."

"Good policy." I set the envelope in front of her. "I'm not sure whether to send this or not. If I don't come get it before the next shuttle, take it to Armpit and give it to the next Earth courier."

She nodded slowly and read the address. "Why so mysterious?"

"Just a matter of Guild ethics. I wanted to write it down while it was still fresh. Uh ..." I'd never seen a truly penetrating stare before. "But I might have more information tonight that would invalidate it."

"If you say so, Ricardo." She slipped the envelope into a drawer. I backed out, mumbling something inane.

Down to Slim Joan's for a sandwich of stir-fried vegetables in Syrian bread. Slightly rancid and too much curry, but I didn't dare go to the Council meeting on an empty stomach; !tang sonar would scan it and they would make a symbolic offer of bread, which couldn't be refused. Estelle was partly right about "Tang" food: one bite of the bread contained enough mescaline to make you see interesting things for hours. I'd had enough of that for a while.

I toyed with the idea of taking a weapon. There was a rental service in the pharmacy, to accommodate the occasional sporting type, and I could pick up a laser or a tranquilizer there. But there would be no way to conceal it from the !tang sonar. Besides, Lafitte wasn't the kind of person who would employ direct violence.

But if it actually were the Syndicate behind Lafitte, they might well have sent more than one person here; they certainly could afford it. A hitter. But then why would Lafitte set up the elaborate poisoning scene? Why not simply arrange an accident?

My feet were taking me toward the pharmacy. Wait. Be realistic. You haven't fired a gun in twenty years. Even then, you couldn't hit the ground with a rock. If it came to a burnout, you'd be the one who got crisped. Better to leave their options open.

I decided to compromise. There was a large clasp knife in my bag; that would at least help me psychologically. I went back up to my room.

I thumbed the lock and realized that the cube I'd heard playing was my own. The door slid open and there was Lafitte, lounging on my sofa, watching an old movie.

"Dick. You're looking well."

"How the hell did you get in here?"

He held up his thumb and stripped a piece of plastic off the fleshy part. "We have our resources." He sat up straight. "I hear you're taking a flyer out to Pa'an!al. Shall we divide the cost?"

There was a bottle of wine in a bucket of ice at his feet. I got a glass out of the bathroom and helped myself. "I suppose you charged this to my room." I turned off the cube.

He shrugged. "You poked me for dinner last night, *mon frere*. Passing out like that."

I raised the glass to my lips, flinched, and set it down untouched. "Speaking of resources, what was in that brandy? And who are these resourceful friends?"

"The wine's all right. You seemed agitated; I gave you a calmative."

"A *horse* calmative! Is it the Syndicate?"

He waved that away. "The Syndicate's a myth. You—"

"Don't take me for an idiot. I've been doing this for almost as long as you have." Every ten years or so there was a fresh debunking. But the money and bodies kept piling up.

"You have indeed." He concentrated on picking at a hangnail. "How much is Starlodge

willing to pay?"

I tried not to react. "How much is the Syndicate?"

"If the Syndicate existed," he said carefully, "and if it were they who had retained me, don't you think I would try to use that fact to frighten you away?"

"Maybe not directly . . . last night, you said 'desperate men.' "

"I was drunk." No, not Peter Rabbit, not on a couple of bottles of wine. I just looked at him. "All right," he said, "I was told to use any measures short of violence—"

"Poisoning isn't violence?"

"Tranquilizing, not poisoning. You couldn't have died." He poured himself some wine. "Top yours off?"

"I've become a solitary drinker."

He poured the contents of my glass into his. "I might be able to save you some trouble, if you'll only tell me what terms—"

"A case of Jack Daniels and all they can eat at Slim Joan's."

"That might do it," he said unsmilingly, "but I can offer fifteen hundred shares of Hartford."

That was \$150 million, half again what I'd been authorized. "Just paper to them."

"Or a million cases of booze, if that's the way they want it." He checked his watch. "Isn't our flyer waiting?"

I supposed it would be best to have him along, to keep an eye on him. "The one who closes the deal pays for the trip?" "All right."

On the hour-long flyer ride I considered various permutations of what I could offer. My memory had been jammed with the wholesale prices of various kinds of machinery, booze, candy, and so forth, along with their mass and volume, so I could add in the shipping costs from Earth to Armpit to Morocho III. Lafitte surely had similar knowledge; I could only hope that his figure of 1500 shares was a bluff.

(I had good incentive to bargain well. Starlodge would give me a bonus of up to 10 percent of the difference between a thousand shares and whatever the settlement came to. If I brought it in at 900, I'd be a millionaire.)

We were turning inland; the walls of the city made a pink rectangle against the towering jungle. I tapped the pilot on the shoulder. "Can you land inside the city?"

"Not unless you want to jump from the top of a building. I can set you on the wall, though." I nodded.

"Can't take the climb, Dick? Getting old?"

"No need to waste steps." The flyer was a little wider than the wall, and it teetered as we stepped out. I tried to look just at my feet.

"Beautiful from up here," Lafitte said. "Look at that sunset." Half the large sun's disk was visible on the jungle horizon, a deeper red than Earth's sun ever shone. The bloody light stained the surf behind us purple. It was already dark in the city below; the smell of rancid fish oil burning drifted up to us.

Lafitte managed to get the inside lane of the staircase. I tried to keep my eyes on him and the wall as we negotiated the high steps.

"Believe me," he said (a phrase guaranteed to inspire trust), "it would make both our jobs easier if I could tell you who I'm representing. But I really am sworn to secrecy."

An oblique threat deserves an oblique answer. "You know I can put you in deep trouble with the Standards Committee. Poisoning a Guild brother."

"Your word against mine. And the bellbot's, the headwaiter's, the wine steward's . . . you did have quite a bit to drink."

"A couple of bottles of wine won't knock me out."

"Your capacity is well known. I don't think you want a hearing investigating it, though, not at your age. Two years till retirement?"

"Twenty months."

"I was rounding off," he said. "Yes, I did check. I wondered whether you might be in the same position as I am. My retirement's less than two months away; this is my last big-money job. So you must understand my enthusiasm."

I didn't answer. He wasn't called Rabbit for lack of "enthusiasm."

As we neared the bottom, he said, "Suppose you weren't to oppose me too vigorously. Suppose I could bring in the contract at a good deal less than—"

"Don't be insulting."

In the dim light from the torches sputtering below, I couldn't read his expression. "Ten percent of my commission wouldn't be insulting."

I stopped short; he climbed down another step. "I can't believe even *you*—"

"*Verdad*. Just joking." He laughed unconvincingly. "Everyone knows how starchy you are, Dick. I know better than most." I'd fined him several times during the years I was head of the Standards Committee.

We walked automatically through the maze of streets, our guides evidently having taken identical routes. Both of us had eidetic memories, of course, that being a minimum prerequisite for the job of interpreter. I was thinking furiously. If I couldn't out-bargain the Rabbit I'd have to somehow finesse him. Was there anything I knew about the !tang value system that he didn't? Assuming that this council would decide that land was something that could be bought and sold.

I did have a couple of interesting proposals in my portfolio, that I'd written up during the two-week trip from Earth. I wondered whether Lafitte had seen them. The lock didn't appear to have been tampered with, and it was the old-fashioned magnetic key type. You can pick it but it won't close afterward.

We turned a corner and there was the Council Building at the end of the street, impressive in the flickering light, its upper reaches lost in darkness. Lafitte put his hand on my arm, stopping. "I've got a proposition."

"Not interested."

"Hear me out, now; this is straight. I'm empowered to take you on as a limited partner."

"How generous. I don't think Starlodge would like it." "What I *mean* is Starlodge. You hold their power of attorney, don't you?"

"Unlimited, on this planet. But don't waste your breath; we get an exclusive or nothing at all." Actually, the possibility had never been discussed. They couldn't have known I was going into a competitive bidding situation. If they had, they certainly wouldn't have sent me here slow freight. For an extra fifty shares I could have gone first class and been here a week before Peter Rabbit; could have sewn up the thing and been headed home before he got to Armpit.

Starlodge had a knack for picking places that were about to become popular—along with impressive media power, to make sure they did—and on dozens of worlds they did have literally exclusive rights to tourism. Hartford might own a spaceport hotel, but it wasn't really competition, and they were usually glad to hand it over to Starlodge anyhow. Hartford, with its ironclad lock on the tachyon drive, had no need to diversify.

There was no doubt in my mind that this was the pattern Starlodge had in mind for Morocho III. It was a perfect setup, the beach being a geologic anomaly: there wasn't another decent spot for a hotel within two thousand kilometers of the spaceport. Just bleak mountaintops sprouting occasionally out of jungles full of large and hungry animals. But maybe I could lead the Rabbit on. I leaned up against a post that supported a guttering torch. "At any rate, I certainly couldn't consider entering into an agreement without knowing who you represent."

He looked at me stone-faced for a second. "Outfit called A. W. Stoner Industries."

I laughed out loud. "Real name, I mean." I'd never heard of Stoner, and I do keep in touch.

"That's the name I know them by."

"No concern not listed in *Standard, Poor and Tueme* could come up with nine figures for extraterrestrial real-estate speculation. No legitimate concern, I mean."

"There you go again," he said mildly. "I believe they're a coalition of smaller firms."

"I don't. Let's go."

Back in my luggage I had a nasal spray that deadened the sense of smell. Before we even got inside, I knew I should have used it.

The air was gray with fish-oil smoke, and there were more than a hundred !tang sitting in neat rows. I once was treated to a "fish kill" in Texas, where a sudden ecological disaster had resulted in windrows of rotting fish piled up on the beach. This was like walking along that beach using an old sock for a muffler. By Lafitte's expression, he was also unprepared. We both walked forward with slightly greenish cheerfulness.

A !tang in the middle of the first row stood up and approached us. —Uncle? I ventured, and he waved his snout in affirmation.

—We have come to an interim decision, he said.

—Interim? Lafitte said. —Were my terms unacceptable?

—I die. My footprints are cursed. I walk around the village not knowing that all who cross

where I have been will stay in estrous zero, and bear no young. Eventually, all die. O the embarrassment. We want to hear the terms of Navarro's tribe. Then perhaps a final decision may be made.

That was frighteningly direct. I'd tried for an hour to tell him our terms before, but he'd kept changing the subject.

—May I hear the terms of Lafitte's tribe? I asked.

—Certainly. Would Lafitte care to state them, or should I?

Proceed, Uncle, Lafitte said, and then, in Spanish, —Remember the possibility of a partnership. If we get to haggling ...

I stopped listening to Rabbit as Uncle began a long litany of groans, creaks, pops, and whistles. I kept a running total of wholesale prices and shipping costs. Bourbon, rum, brandy, gin. Candy bars, raw sugar, honey, pastries. Nets, computers, garbage composters, water-purifying plant, hunting weapons. When he stopped, I had a total of only H620.

—Your offer, Navarro? Could it include these things as a subset?

I had to be careful. Lafitte was probably lying about the 1500, but I didn't want to push him so hard he'd be able to go over a thousand on the next round. And I didn't want to bring out my big guns until the very end.

—I can offer these things and three times the specified quantity of rum—(the largest rum distillery on Earth was a subsidiary of Starlodge) —and furthermore free you from the rigors of the winter harvest, with twenty-six fully programmed mechanical farm laborers. (The winters here were not even cool by Earth standards, but something about the season made the local animals restless enough occasionally to jump over the walls that normally protected farmland.)

—These mechanical workers would not be good to eat? For the animals?

—No, and they would be very hard for the animals even to damage.

There was a lot of whispered conversation. Uncle conferred with the !tang at the front of each row, then returned.

—I die. Before I die my body turns hair-side-in. People come from everywhere to see the insides of themselves. But the sight makes them lose the will, and all die. O the embarrassment. The rum is welcome, but we cannot accept the mechanical workers. When the beast eats someone he sleeps, and can be killed, and eaten in turn. If he does not eat he will search, and in searching destroy crops. This we know to be true.

—Then allow me to triple the quantities of gin, bourbon, and brandy. I will add two tonnes each of vermouth and hydrochloric acid, for flavoring. (That came to about H710.)

—This is gratefully accepted. Does your tribe, Lafitte, care to include these as a subset of your final offer?

—Final offer, Uncle?

—Two legs, two arms, two eyes, two mouths, two offers.

—I die, Lafitte said. —Where they bury me, the ground caves in. It swallows up the city and all die, O the embarrassment. Look, Uncle, that's the market law for material objects.

You can't move land around; its ownership is an abstraction.

Uncle exposed one arm—the Council tittered—and reached down and thumped the floor twice. —The land is solid, therefore material. You can move it around with your machines; I myself saw you do this in my youth, when the spaceport was built. The market law applies.

Lafitte smiled slowly. —Then the Navarro's tribe can no longer bid. He's had two.

Uncle turned to the Council and gestured toward Rabbit, and said, —Is he standing on feet? And they cracked and snuffled at the joke. To Lafitte, he said, —The Navarro's offer was rejected, and he made a substitution. Yours was not rejected. Do you care to make his amended offer a subset of yours?

—If mine is rejected, can I amend it?

This brought an even louder reaction. —Poor one, Uncle said. —No feet, no hands. That would be a third offer. You must see that.

—All right. Lafitte began pacing. He said he would start with my amended offer and add the following things. The list was very long. It started with a hydroelectric generator and proceeded with objects of less and less value until he got down to individual bottles of exotic liqueurs. By then I realized he was giving me a message: he was coming down as closely as he could to exactly a thousand shares of Hartford. So we both had the same limit. When he finished he looked right at me and raised his eyebrows.

Victory is sweet. If the Rabbit had bothered to spend a day or two in the marketplace, watching transactions, he wouldn't have tried to defeat me by arithmetic; he wouldn't have tried by accretion to force me into partnership.

Uncle looked at me and bared his arms for a split second. —Your tribe, Navarro? Would you include this offer as a subset of your final offer?

What Rabbit apparently didn't know was that this bargaining by pairs of offers was a formalism: if I did simply add to his last offer, the haggling would start over again, with each of us allowed another pair. And so on and on. I unlocked my briefcase and took out two documents.

—No. I merely wish to add two inducements to my own previous offer (sounds of approval and expectation).

Lafitte stared, his expression unreadable.

—These contracts are in Spanish. Can you read them, Uncle?

—No, but there are two of us who can.

—I know how you like to travel. (I handed him one of the documents.) —This allows each of five hundred !tang a week's vacation on the planet of its choice, any planet where Starlodge has facilities.

"What?" Lafitte said, in English. "How the hell can you do that?"

"Deadheading," I said.

One of the Council abruptly rose. "Pardon me," he said in a weird parody of English. "We have to be dead to take this vacation? That seems of little value."

I was somewhat startled at that, in view of the other inducement I was going to offer. I

told him it was an English term that had nothing to do with heads or death. —Most of the Hartford vessels that leave this planet are nearly empty. It is no great material loss to Hartford to take along nonpaying guests, so long as they do not displace regular passengers. And Hartford will ultimately benefit from an increase in tourism to !ka'al, so they were quite willing to make this agreement with my tribe.

—The market value of this could be quite high, Uncle said.

As much as five or six hundred shares, I said, —depending on how distant each trip is.

—Very well. And what is your other inducement?

—I won't say. (I had to grin.) —It is a gift.

The Council chattered and tweeted in approval. Some even exposed their arms momentarily in a semi-obscene gesture of fellowship. "What kind of game are you playing?" Peter Rabbit said.

"They like surprises and riddles." I made a polite sound requesting attention and said, —There is one thing I will tell you about this gift: It Belongs to all three mercantile classes. It is of no value, of finite value, and infinite value, all at once, and to all people.

—When considered as being of finite value, Uncle said, —how much is it worth in terms of Hartford stock?

—Exactly one hundred shares.

He rustled pleasantly at that and went to confer with the others.

"You're pretty clever, Dick," Rabbit said. "What, they don't get to find out what the last thing is unless they accept?"

"That's right. It's done all the time; I was rather surprised that you didn't do it."

He shook his head. "I've only negotiated with !tang off-planet. They've always been pretty conventional."

I didn't ask him about all the fishing he had supposedly done here. Uncle came back and stood in front of us.

—There is unanimity. The land will go to the Navarro's tribe. Now what is the secret inducement, please? How can it be every class at once, to all people?

I paused to parse out the description in !tangish. —Uncle, do you know of the Earth corporation, or tribe, Immortality Unlimited?

—No.

Lafitte made a strange noise. I went on. —This Immortality Unlimited provides a useful service to humans who are apprehensive about death. They offer the possibility of revival. A person who avails himself of this service is frozen solid as soon as possible after death. The tribe promises to keep the body frozen until such time as science discovers a way to revive it.

—The service is expensive. You pay the tribe one full share of Hartford stock. They invest it, and take for themselves one tenth of the income, which is their profit. A small amount is used to keep the body frozen. If and when revival is possible, the person is thawed, and cured of whatever was killing him, and he will be comparatively wealthy.

—This has never been done with nonhumans before, but there is nothing forbidding it. Therefore I purchased a hundred "spaces" for !tang; I leave it to you to decide which hundred will benefit.

—You see, this is of no material value to any living person, because you must die to take advantage of it. However, it is also of finite worth, since each space costs one share of Hartford. It is also of infinite worth, because it offers life beyond death.

The entire Council applauded, a sound like a horde of locusts descending. Peter Rabbit made the noise for attention, and then he made it again, impolitely loud.

—This is all very interesting, and I do congratulate the Navarro for his cleverness. However, the bidding is not over.

There was a low, nervous whirring. "Better apologize first, Rabbit," I whispered.

He bulled ahead. —Let me introduce a new mercantile class: negative value.

"Rabbit, don't—"

This is an object or service that one does *not* want to have. I will offer not to give it to you if you accept my terms rather than the Navarro's.

—Many kilometers up the river there is a drum full of a very powerful poison. If I touch the button that opens it, all of the fish in the river, and for a great distance out into the sea, will die. You will have to move or. . . . He trailed off.

One by one, single arms snaked out, each holding a long sharp knife.

"Poison again, Rabbit? You're getting predictable in your old age."

"Dick," he said hoarsely, "they're completely nonviolent. Aren't they?"

"Except in matters of trade." Uncle was the last one to produce a knife. They moved toward us very slowly. "Unless you do something fast, I think you're about to lose your feet."

"My God! I thought that was just an expression."

"I think you better start apologizing. Tell them it was a joke."

—I die! he shouted, and they stopped advancing. —I, um . . .

—You play a joke on your friends and it backfires, I said in Greek.

Rapidly: —I play a joke on my good friends and it backfires. I, uh . . . "Christ, Dick, help me."

"Just tell the truth and embroider it a little. They know about negative value, but it's an obscenity."

—I was employed by ... a tribe that did not understand mercantilism. They asked me, of all things, to introduce terms of negative value into a trivial transaction. My friends know I must be joking and they laugh. They laugh so much they forget to eat. All die. O the embarrassment.

Uncle made a complicated pass with his knife and it disappeared into his haybale fur. All the other knives remained in evidence, and the !tang moved into a circle around us.

—This machine in your pocket, Uncle said, —it is part of the joke?

Lafitte pulled out a small gray box. —It is. Do you want it?

—Put it on the floor. The fun would be complete if you stayed here while the Navarro took one of your marvelous floaters up the river. How far would he have to go to find the rest of the joke?

—About twelve kilometers. On an island in midstream. Uncle turned to me and exposed his arms briefly. —Would you help us with our fun?

The air outside was sweet and pure. I decided to wait a few hours, for light.

That was some years ago, but I still remember vividly going into the Council Building the next day. Uncle had divined that Peter Rabbit was getting hungry, and they'd filled him up with !tang bread. When I came in, he was amusing them with impersonations of various Earth vegetables. The effect on his metabolism was not permanent, but when he left Morocho III he was still having mild attacks of cabbageness.

By the time I retired from Hartford, Starlodge had finished its hotel and sports facility on the beach. I was the natural choice to manage it, of course, and though I was wealthy enough not to need employment, I took the job with enthusiasm.

I even tried to hire Lafitte as an assistant—people who can handle !tangish are rare—but he had dropped out of sight. Instead, I found a young husband-and-wife team who have so much energy that I hardly have to work at all.

I'm not crazy enough to go out in the woods, hunting. But I do spend a bit of time fishing off the dock, usually with Uncle, who has also retired. Together we're doing a book that I think will help our two cultures understand one another. The human version is called *Hard Bargain*.