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Thorby, speaking through Krausa, regretted that he had nothing to offer save his own services the rest of his life. They backed out of the predicament with courteous insults.

Thorby felt relieved when they reached the spaceport and he saw the homely, familiar lines of old Sisu.

When Thorby reached his bunkie, Jeri was there, feet up and hands back of his head. He looked up and did not smile.

"Hi, Jeri!"

"Hello, Thorby."

"Hit dirt?"

"No."

"I did. Look what I bought!" Thorby showed him the magic cube. "You shake it and every picture is different"

Jeri looked at one picture and handed it back. "Very nice."

"Jeri, what are you glum about? Something you ate?"

"No."

"Spill it."

Jeri dropped his feet to the deck, looked at Thorby. "I'm back in the computer room."

"Huh?"

"Oh, I don't lose status. It's just while I train somebody else."

Thorby felt a cold wind. "You mean I've been busted?"

"No."

"Then what do you mean?"

"Mata has been swapped."

## Chapter 11

Mata swapped? Gone forever? Little Mattie with the grave eyes and merry giggle? Thorby felt a burst of sorrow and realized to his surprise that it mattered.

"I don't believe it!"

"Don't be a fool."

"When? Where has she gone? Why didn't you tell me?"

"To El Nido, obviously; it's the only ship of the People in port. About an hour ago. I didn't tell you because I had no idea it was coming . . . until I was summoned to Grandmother's cabin to say good-by." Jeri frowned. "It had to come someday . . . but I thought Grandmother would let her stay as long as she kept her skill as a tracker."

"Then why, Jeri? Why?"







your trading are fantastic. Nor has it been with cost to health or sanity. I've never seen a community with less illness. Nor have you paid in happiness or self-respect. You're a smugly happy lot, and your pride is something sinful -- of course you do have a lot to be proud of. But what you have paid for your unparalleled freedom . . . is freedom itself. No, I'm not talking riddles. The People are free . . . at the cost of loss of individual freedom for each of you -- and I don't except the Chief Officer or Captain; they are the least free of any."

Her words sounded outrageous. "How can we be both free and not free?" he protested.

"Ask Mata. Thorby, you live in a steel prison; you are allowed out perhaps a few hours every few months. You live by rules more stringent than any prison. That those rules are intended to make you all happy -- and do -- is beside the point; they are orders you have to obey. You sleep where you are told, you eat when you are told and what you are offered -- it's unimportant that it is lavish and tasty; the point is you have no choice. You are told what to do ninety percent of the time. You are so bound by rules that much of what you say is not free speech but required ritual; you could go through a day and not utter a phrase not found in the Laws of Sisu. Right?"

"Yes, but --"

"Yes, with no 'buts.' Thorby, what sort of people have so little freedom? Slaves? Can you think of a better word?"

"But we can't be sold!"

"Slavery has often existed where slaves were never bought and sold, but simply inherited. As in Sisu. Thorby, being a slave means having someone as your master, with no hope of changing it. You slaves who call yourselves the 'People' can't even hope for manumission."

Thorby scowled. "You figure that's what's wrong with me?"

"I think your slave's collar is chafing you, in a fashion that does not trouble your shipmates -- because they were born with theirs and you were once free." She looked at her belongings. "I've got to get this stuff into El Nido. Will you help me?"

"I'd be glad to."

"Don't expect to see Mata."

"I wasn't," Thorby fibbed. "I want to help you. I hate to see you leave."

"Truthfully, I don't hate to leave . . . but I hate to say good-by to you." She hesitated. "I want to help you, too. Thorby, an anthropologist should never interfere. But I'm leaving and you aren't really part of the culture I was studying. Could you use a hint from an old woman?"

"Why, you aren't old!"

"That's two gallant speeches. I'm a grandmother, though the Chief Officer might be startled to hear me claim that status. Thorby, I thought you would become adjusted to this jail. Now I'm not sure. Freedom is a hard habit to break. Dear, if you decide that you can't stand it, wait until the ship calls at a planet that is democratic and free and human -- then hit dirt and run! But, Thorby, do this before Grandmother decides to marry you to someone, because if you wait that long -- you're lost!"

## Chapter 12

Losian to Finster, Finster to Thoth IV, Thoth IV to Woolamurra, Sisu went skipping around a globe of space nine hundred light-years in diameter, the center of which was legendary Terra, cradle of mankind. Sisu had never been to Terra; the People operate out where pickings are rich, police protection non-

existent, and a man can dicker without being hampered by finicky regulations.

Ship's history alleged that the original Sisu had been built on Terra and that the first Captain Krausa had been born there, a (whisper it) fraki. But that was six ships ago and ship's history was true in essence, rather than fiddlin' fact. The Sisu whose steel now protected the blood was registered out of New Finlandia, Shiva III . . . another port she had never visited but whose fees were worth paying in order to have legal right to go about her occasions whenever, in pursuit of profit, Sisu went inside the globe of civilization. Shiva III was very understanding of the needs of Free Traders, not fussy about inspections, reports, and the like as long as omissions were repaired by paying penalties; many ships found her registration convenient.

On Finster Thorby learned another method of trading. The native fraki, known to science by a pseudo-Latin name and called "Those confounded slugs!" by the People, live in telepathic symbiosis with lemur-like creatures possessed of delicate, many-boned hands -- "telepathy" is a conclusion; it is believed that the slow, monstrous, dominant creatures supply the brains and the lemuroids the manipulation.

The planet offers beautifully carved gem stones, raw copper, and a weed from which is derived an alkaloid used in psychotherapy. What else it could supply is a matter of conjecture; the natives have neither speech nor writing, communication is difficult.

This occasions the method of trading new to Thorby -- the silent auction invented by the trading Phoenicians when the shores of Africa ran beyond the known world.

Around Sisu in piles were placed what the traders had to offer: heavy metals the natives needed, everlasting clocks they had learned to need, and trade goods the Family hoped to teach them to need. Then the humans went inside.

Thorby said to Senior Clerk Arly Krausa-Drotar, "We just leave that stuff lying around? If you did that on Jubbul, it would disappear as you turned your back."

"Didn't you see them rig the top gun this morning?"

"I was down in the lower hold."

"It's rigged and manned. These creatures have no morals but they're smart. They'll be as honest as a cashier with the boss watching."

"What happens now?"

"We wait. They look over the goods. After a while . . . a day, maybe two . . . they pile stuff by our piles. We wait. Maybe they make their piles higher. Maybe they shift things around and offer us something else -- and possibly we have outsmarted ourselves and missed something we would like through holding out. Or maybe we take one of our piles and split it into two, meaning we like the stuff but not the price.

"Or maybe we don't want it at any price. So we move our piles close to something they have offered that we do like. But we still don't touch their stuff; we wait.

"Eventually nobody has moved anything in quite a while. So, where the price suits us, we take in what they offer and leave our stuff. They come and take our offering away. We take in any of our own stuff where the price isn't right; they take away the stuff we turn down.

"But that doesn't end it. Now both sides know what the other one wants and what he will pay. They start making the offers; we start bidding with what we know they will accept. More deals are made. When we are through this second time, we have unloaded anything they want for stuff of theirs that we want at prices satisfactory to both. No trouble. I wonder if we do better on planets where we can talk."

"Yes, but doesn't this waste a lot of time?"





Jeri put a hand on him. "The run is over, Thorby."

"Huh?"

"You got him. A sweet run. Mata would be proud of you."

Sisu was blind for a day, while repairs were made in her n-space eyes. The Captain continued to boost; there was nothing else to do. But presently she could see again and two days later she plunged into the comforting darkness of multi-space. The dinner in Thorby's honor was that night.

Grandmother made the usual speech, giving thanks that the Family was again spared, and noting that the son of Sisu beside her was the instrument of that happy but eminently deserved outcome. Then she lay back and gobbled her food, with her daughter-in-law hovering over her.

Thorby did not enjoy the honor. He had no clear recollection of the run; it felt as if he were being honored by mistake. He had been in semi-shock afterwards, then his imagination started working.

They were only pirates, he knew that. Pirates and slavers, they had tried to steal Sisu, had meant to enslave the Family. Thorby had hated slavers before he could remember -- nothing so impersonal as the institution of slavery, he hated slavers in his baby bones before he knew the word.

He was sure that Pop approved of him; he knew that Pop, gentle as he was, would have shortened every slaver in the Galaxy without a tear.

Nevertheless Thorby did not feel happy. He kept thinking about a live ship -- suddenly all dead, gone forever in a burst of radiance. Then he would look at his forefinger and wonder. He was caught in the old dilemma of the man with unintegrated values, who eats meat but would rather somebody else did the butchering.

When the dinner in his honor arrived he was three nights short on sleep and looked it. He pecked at his food.

Midway in the meal he became aware that Grandmother was glaring; he promptly spilled food on his dress jacket. "Well!" she snarled. "Have a nice nap?"

"Uh, I'm sorry, Grandmother. Did you speak to me?"

He caught his Mother's warning look but it was too late; Grandmother was off. "I was waiting for you to say something to me!"

"Uh . . . it's a nice day."

"I had not noticed that it was unusual. It rarely rains in space."

"I mean it's a nice party. Yes, a real nice party. Thank you for giving it, Grandmother."

"That's better. Young man, it is customary, when a gentleman dines with a lady, to offer her polite conversation. This may not be the custom among fraki, but it is invariable among People."

"Yes, Grandmother. Thank you. Grandmother."

"Let's start again. It's a nice party, yes. We try to make everyone feel equal, while recognizing the merits of each. It is gratifying to have a chance -- at last -- to join with our Family in noting a virtue in you . . . one commendable if not exceptional. Congratulations. Now it's your turn."

Thorby slowly turned purple.

She sniffed and said, "What are you doing to get ready for the Gathering?"

"Uh, I don't know, Grandmother. You see, I don't sing, or play, or dance -- and the only games I know are chess and spat ball and . . . well, I've never seen a Gathering. I don't know what they're like."

"Hmmp! So you haven't."

Thorby felt guilty. He said, "Grandmother . . . you mast have been to lots of Gatherings. Would you tell me about them?"

















A family in need of space had two choices: either buy another ship, split and become two families, or a ship could join with another in purchasing a third, to be staffed from each. Twinning gave much status. It was proof that the family, which managed it, were master traders, able to give their kids a start in the world without help. But in practice the choice usually dwindled to one: join with another ship and split the expense, and even then it was often necessary to pledge all three ships against a mortgage on the new one.

It had been thirty years since Sisu had split up. She had had three decades of prosperity; she should have been able to twin. But ten years ago at the last Great Gathering Grandmother had caused Sisu to guarantee along with parent ships the mortgage against a ship newly born. The new ship gave a banquet honoring Sisu, then jumped off into dark and never came back. Space is vast. Remember her name at Gathering.

The result was that Sisu paid off one-third of forty percent of the cost of the lost ship; the blow hurt. The parent ships would reimburse Sisu -- debts are always paid -- but they had left the last Gathering lean from having spawned; coughing up each its own liability had left them skin and bones. You don't dun a sick man; you wait

Grandmother had not been stupid. The parent ships, Caesar Augustus and Dupont, were related to Sisu; one takes care of one's own. Besides, it was good business; a trader unwilling to lend credit will discover that he has none. As it was, Sisu could write a draft on any Free Trader anywhere and be certain that it would be honored.

But it left Sisu with less cash than otherwise at a time when the Family should split.

Captain Krausa hit dirt the first day and went to the Commodore's Flag, Norbert Wiener. His wife stayed aboard but was not idle; since her succession to Chief Officer, she hardly slept. Today she worked at her desk, stopping for face-to-face talks with other chief officers via the phone exchange set up by city services for the Gathering. When her lunch was fetched, she motioned to put it down; it was still untouched when her husband returned. He came in and sat down wearily. She was reading a slide rule and checked her answer on a calculator before she spoke. "Based on a Hascomb F-two ship, the mortgage would run just over fifty percent"

"Rhoda, you know Sisu can't finance a ship unassisted."

"Don't be hasty, dear. Both Gas and Dupont would cosign . . . in their case, it's the same as cash."

"If their credit will stretch."

"And New Hansea would jump at it -- under the circumstances -- and --"

"Rhoda! You were young, two Gatherings ago, but you are aware that the debt lies equally on all . . . not just Hansea. That was unanimous."

"I was old enough to be your wife, Fjalar. Don't read the Laws to me. But New Hansea would jump at the chance . . . under a secrecy taboo binding till the end of time. Nevertheless the carrying charges would eat too much. Did you get to see a Galactic Lambda?"

"I don't need to; I've seen the specs. No legs."

"You men! I wouldn't call eighty gravities 'no legs.' "

"You would if you had to sit in the worry seat. Lambda class were designed for slow freight inside the Hegemonic sphere; that's all they're good for."

"You're too conservative, Fjalar."

"And I'll continue to be where safety of a ship is concerned."





the pure blood of the People produced better brains. In dickering with fraki he never lost his temper. But Mother -- and now Rhoda -- could always put him in the wrong.

At least Mother, hard as she had been, had never asked the impossible. But Rhoda . . . well, Wife was new to the job. He said tensely, "Chief Officer, this injunction was laid on me personally, not on Sisu. I have no choice."

"So? Very well, Captain -- well speak of it later. And now, with all respect to you, sir, I have work to do."

Thorby had a wonderful time at the Gathering but not as much fun as he expected; repeatedly Mother required him to help entertain chief officers of other ships. Often a visitor brought a daughter or granddaughter along and Thorby had to keep the girl busy while the elders talked. He did his best and even acquired facility in the half-insulting small talk of his age group. He learned something that he called dancing which would have done credit to any man with two left feet and knees that bent backwards. He could now put his arm around a girl when music called for it without chills and fever.

Mother's visitors quizzed him about Pop. He tried to be polite but it annoyed him that everyone knew more about Pop than he did -- except the things that were important.

But it did seem that duty could be shared. Thorby realized that he was junior son, but Fritz was unmarried, too. He suggested that if Fritz were to volunteer, the favor could be returned later.

Fritz gave a raucous laugh. "What can you offer that can repay me for dirtside time at Gathering?"

"Well . . ."

"Precisely. Seriously, old knucklehead, Mother wouldn't listen, even if I were insane enough to offer. She says you, she means you." Fritz yawned. "Man, am I dead! Little red-head off the Saint Louis wanted to dance all night. Get out and let me sleep before the banquet."

"Can you spare a dress jacket?"

"Do your own laundry. And cut the noise."

But on this morning one month after grounding Thorby was hitting dirt with Father, with no chance that Mother would change their minds; she was out of the ship. It was the Day of Remembrance. Services did not start until noon but Mother left early for something to do with the election tomorrow.

Thorby's mind was filled with other matters. The services would end with a memorial to Pop. Father had told him that he would coach him in what to do, but it worried him, and his nerves were not soothed by the fact that Spirit of Sisu would be staged that evening.

His nerves over the play had increased when he discovered that Fritz had a copy and was studying it. Fritz had said gruffly, "Sure, I'm learning your part! Father thought it would be a good idea in case you fainted or broke your leg. I'm not trying to steal your glory; it's intended to let you relax -- if you can relax with thousands staring while you smooch Loen."

"Well, could you?"

Fritz looked thoughtful. "I could try. Loen looks cuddly. Maybe I should break your leg myself."

"Bare hands?"

"Don't tempt me. Thorby, this is just precaution, like having two trackers. But nothing less than a broken leg can excuse you from strutting your stuff."

Thorby and his Father left Sisu two hours before the services. Captain Krausa said, "We might as well enjoy ourselves. Remembrance is a happy occasion if you think of it the right way -- but those seats are hard and it's going to be a long day."























BuPersonnel to ensure this. Thorby's shipmates were tail and short, bird-boned and rugged, smooth and hairy, mutated and superficially unmutated. Thorby hit close to norm and his Free Trader background was merely an acceptable eccentricity; it made him a spaceman of sorts even though a recruit.

In fact, the only hurdle was that he was a raw recruit "Guardsman 3/c" he might be but a boot he would remain until he proved himself, most especially since he had not had boot training.

But he was no more handicapped than any recruit in a military outfit having proud esprit de corps. He was assigned a bunk, a mess, a working station, and a petty officer to tell him what to do. His work was compartment cleaning, his battle station was runner for the Weapons Officer in case phones should fail -- it meant that he was available to fetch coffee.

Otherwise he was left in peace. He was free to join a bull session as long as he let his seniors sound off, he was invited into card games when a player was needed, he was not shut out of gossip, and he was privileged to lend jumpers and socks to seniors who happened to be short. Thorby had had experience at being junior; it was not difficult.

The Hydra was heading out for patrol duty; the mess talk centered around "hunting" prospects. The Hydra had fast "legs," three hundred gravities; she sought action with outlaws where a merchantman such as the Sisu would avoid it if possible. Despite her large complement and heavy weapons, the Hydra was mostly power plant and fuel tanks.

Thorby's table was headed by his petty officer. Ordnance-man 2/c Peebie, down as "Decibel." Thorby was eating one day with his ears tuned down, while he debated visiting the library after dinner or attending the stereo show in the messroom, when he heard his nickname: "Isn't that right. Trader?"

Thorby was proud of the nickname. He did not like it in Peebie's mouth but Peebie was a self-appointed wit -- he would greet Thorby with the nickname, inquire solicitously, "How's business?" and make gestures of counting money. So far, Thorby had ignored it.

"Isn't what right?"

"Why'n't y'keep y'r ears open? Can't you hear anything but rustle and clink? I was telling 'em what I told the Weapons Officer: the way to rack up more kills is to go after 'em, not pretend to be a trader, too scared to fight and too fat to run."

Thorby felt a simmer. "Who," he said, "told you that traders were scared to fight?"

"Quit pushin' that stuff! Whoever heard of a trader burning a bandit?"

Peebie may have been sincere; kills made by traders received no publicity. But Thorby's burn increased. "I have."

Thorby meant that he had heard of traders' burning raiders; Peebie took it as a boast "Oh, you did, did you? Listen to that, men -- our peddler is a hero. He's burned a bandit all by his own little self! Tell us about it. Did you set tire to his hair? Or drop potassium in his beer?"

"I used," Thorby stated, "a Mark XIX one-stage target-seeker, made by Bethlehem-Antares and armed with a 20 megaton plutonium warhead. I launched a timed shot on closing to beaming range on a collision-curve prediction."

There was silence. Finally Peebie said coldly, "Where did you read that?"

"It's what the tape showed after the engagement I was senior starboard firecontrolman. The portside computer was out -- so I know it was my shot that burned him."

"Now he's a weapons officer! Peddler, don't peddle it here."

Thorby shrugged. "I used to be. A weapons control officer, rather. I never learned much about ordnance."































"I think so."

"Good. Let's get it done." Weemsby started to open the folder.

Grandmother always said to read before signing -- then think it over. "Uncle Jack, I want to read them."

"You wouldn't understand them."

"Probably not." Thorby picked up the folder. "But I've got to learn."

Weemsby reached for the folder. "It isn't necessary."

Thorby felt a surge of obstinacy. "Didn't you say Judge Bruder prepared these for me?"

"Yes."

"Then I want to take them to my apartment and try to understand them. If I'm 'Rudbek of Rudbek' I ought to know what I'm doing."

Weemsby hesitated, then shrugged. "Go ahead. You'll find that I'm simply trying to do for you what I have always been doing."

"But I still ought to understand what I'm doing."

"Very well! Good night."

Thorby read till he fell asleep. The language was baffling but the papers did seem to be what Uncle Jack said they were -- instructions to John Weemsby to continue the routine business of a complex setup. He fell asleep full of terms like "full power of attorney," "all manner of business," "receive and pay monies," "revocable only by mutual consent," "waiver of personal appearance," "full faith and credence," and "voting proxy in all stockholding and/or directorial meetings, special or annual."

As he dozed off it occurred to him that he had not asked to see the authorizations given by his parents.

Sometime during the night he seemed to hear Grandmother's impatient voice: "-- then think it over! If you don't understand it, and the laws under which it will be executed, then don't sign it! -- no matter how much profit may appear to be in store. Too lazy and too eager can ruin a trader"

He stirred restlessly.

## Chapter 18

Hardly anyone came down for breakfast in Rudbek. But breakfast in bed was not in Thorby's training; he ate alone in the garden, luxuriating in hot mountain sunshine and lush tropical flowers while enjoying the snowy wonderland around him. Snow fascinated him -- he had never dreamed that anything could be so beautiful.

But the following morning Weemsby came into the garden only moments after Thorby sat down. A chair was placed under Weemsby; a servant quickly laid a place. He said, "Just coffee. Good morning, Thor."

"Good morning, Uncle Jack."

"Well, did you get your studying done?"

"Sir? Oh, yes. That is, I fell asleep reading."

Weemsby smiled. "Lawyerese is soporific. Did you satisfy yourself that I had told you correctly what they contained?"

"Uh, I think so."

"Good." Weemsby put down his coffee and said to a servant, "Hand me a house phone. Thor, you irritated me last night."







but paid one hundred and forty times as much.

It began to dawn on him that control and ownership were only slightly related; he had always thought of "ownership" and "control" as being the same thing; you owned a thing, a begging bowl, or a uniform jacket -- of course you controlled it!

The converging, diverging, and crossing of corporations and companies confused and disgusted him. It was as complex as a firecontrol computer without a computer's cool logic. He tried to draw a chart and could not make it work. The ownership of each entity was tangled in common stocks, preferred stocks, bonds, senior and junior issues, securities with odd names and unknown functions; sometimes one company owned a piece of another directly and another piece through a third, or two companies might each own a little of the other, or sometimes a company owned part of itself in a tail-swallowing fashion. It didn't make sense.

This wasn't "business" -- what the People did was business . . . buy, sell, make a profit But this was a silly game with wild rules.

Something else fretted him. He had not known that Rudbek built spaceships. Galactic Enterprises controlled Galactic Transport, which built ships in one of its many divisions. When he realized it he felt a glow of pride, then discovered gnawing uneasiness -- something Colonel Brisby had said . . . something Pop had proved: that the "largest" or it might have been "one of the largest" builders of starships was mixed up in the slave trade.

He told himself he was being silly -- this beautiful office was about as far from the dirty business of slave traffic as anything could be. But as he was dropping to sleep one night he came wide awake with the black, ironic thought that one of those slave ships in whose stinking holds he had ridden might have been, at that very time, the property of the scabby, frightened slave he was then.

It was a nightmare notion; he pushed it away. But it took the fun out of what he was doing.

One afternoon he sat studying a long memorandum from the legal department -- a summary, so it said, of Rudbek & Assocs.' interests -- and found that he had dragged to a halt. It seemed as if the writer had gone out of his way to confuse things. It would have been as intelligible in ancient Chinese -- more so; Sargonese included many Mandarin words.

He sent Dolores out and sat with his head in his hands. Why, oh, why hadn't he been left in the Guard? He had been happy there; he had understood the world he was in.

Then he straightened up and did something he had been putting off; he returned a vucall from his grandparents. He had been expected to visit them long since, but he had felt compelled to try to learn his job first.

Indeed he was welcome! "Hurry, son -- we'll be waiting." It was a wonderful hop across prairie and the mighty Mississippi (small from that height) and over city-pocked farmland to the sleepy college town of Valley View, where sidewalks were stationary and time itself seemed slowed. His grandparents' home, imposing for Valley View, was homey after the awesome halls of Rudbek.

But the visit was not relaxing. There were guests at dinner, the president of the college and department heads, and many more after dinner -- some called him "Rudbek of Rudbek," others addressed him uncertainly as "Mr. Rudbek," and still others, smug with misinformation as to how the nabob was addressed by familiars, simply as "Rudbek." His grandmother twittered around, happy as only a proud hostess can be, and his grandfather stood straight and addressed him loudly as "Son."

Thorby did his best to be a credit to them. He soon realized that it was not what he said but the fact of







"Mmm . . . well, no. A court authorizes matters to proceed. But you are here and we must take that into consideration. Now see here, I'm at the very end of my patience. You seem to think, simply because you've read a few balance sheets, that you understand business. You don't. For example your belief that you can order instruments turned over to you that were given to John Weemsby personally and are not even company property. If you were to attempt to take charge of the firm at this time -- if we proceeded with your notion to have your parents declared dead -- I can see that we would have all sorts of confusion while you were finding your balance. We can't afford it. The company can't afford it. Rudbek can't afford it. So I want those papers signed today and no more shilly-shallying. You understand?"

Thorby lowered his head. "I won't."

"What do you mean, 'You won't'?"

"I won't sign anything until I know what I'm doing. If I can't even see the papers my parents signed, then I certainly won't."

"We'll see about that!"

"I'm going to sit tight until I find out what's going on around here!"

## Chapter 19

Thorby discovered that finding out was difficult. Things went on much as before but were not the same. He had vaguely suspected that the help he was being given in learning the business had sometimes been too much not well enough organized; he felt smothered in unrelated figures, verbose and obscure "summaries," "analyses" that did not analyze. But he had known so little that it took time to become even a suspicion.

The suspicion became certainty from the day he defied Judge Bruder. Dolores seemed eager as ever and people still hopped when he spoke but the lavish flow of information trickled toward a stop. He was stalled with convincing excuses but could never quite find out what he wanted to know. A "survey is being prepared" or the man who "has charge of that is out of the city" or "those are vault files and none of the delegated officers are in today." Neither Judge Bruder nor Uncle Jack was ever available and their assistants were politely unhelpful. Nor was he able to corner Uncle Jack at the estate. Leda told him that "Daddy often has to go away on trips."

Things began to be confused in his own office. Despite the library Dolores had set up she could not seem to find, or even recall, papers that he had marked for retention. Finally he lost his temper and bawled her out.

She took it quietly. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm trying very hard."

Thorby apologized. He knew a slow-down when he saw one; he had checked enough stevedores to know. But this poor creature could not help herself; he was lashing out at the wrong person. He added placatingly, "I really am sorry. Take the day off."

"Oh, I couldn't, sir."

"Who says so? Go home."

"I'd rather not, sir."

"Well . . . suit yourself. But go lie down in the ladies' lounge or something. That's an order. I'll see you tomorrow."

She looked worried and left. Thorby sat at his chaste, bare, unpowered executive desk and thought.

It was what he needed: to be left alone without a flood of facts and figures. He started digesting what









"Thanks, Leda."

" 'Thanks' he says! Thor, this is for Rudbek. Now to business. You can't grab your hat and go to New Washington to retain a lawyer. If I know Judge Bruder, he has planned what to do if you try. But you can go look at some of your estate . . . starting with your house in New Washington."

"That's smart, Leda."

"I'm so smart I dazzle myself. If you want it to look good, you'll invite me along -- Daddy has told me that I ought to show you around."

"Why, sure, Leda. If it won't be too much trouble."

"I'll simply force myself. We'll actually do some sightseeing, in the Department of North America, at least. The only thing that bothers me is how to get away from the guards."

"Guards?"

"Nobody high up in Rudbek ever travels without bodyguards. Why, you'd be run ragged by reporters and crackpots."

"I think," Thorby said slowly, "that you must be mistaken in my case. I went to see my grandparents. There weren't any guards."

"They specialize in being unobtrusive. I'll bet there were always at least two in your grandmother's house while you were there. See that solitary skier? Long odds he's not skiing for fun. So we have to find a way to get them off your neck while you look up Counselor Garsch. Don't worry, I'll think of something."

Thorby was immensely interested in the great capital but still more interested in getting on with his purpose. Leda did not let him hurry. "First we sightsee. We naturally would."

The house, simple compared with Rudbek -- twenty rooms, only two of them large -- was as ready as if he had stepped out the day before. Two of the servants he recognized as having been at Rudbek. A ground car, with driver and footman in Rudbek livery, was waiting. The driver seemed to know where to take them; they rode around in the semi-tropic winter sunshine and Leda pointed out planetary embassies and consulates. When they passed the immense pile, which is headquarters of the Hegemonic Guard, Thorby had the driver slow down while he rubbernecked. Leda said, "That's your alma mater, isn't it?" Then she whispered, "Take a good look. The building opposite its main door is where you are going."

They got out at the Replica Lincoln Memorial, walked up the steps and felt the same hushed awe that millions have felt when looking at that brooding giant figure. Thorby had a sudden feeling that the statue looked like Pop -- not that it did, but still it did. His eyes filled with tears.

Leda whispered, "This place always gets me -- it's like a haunted church. You know who he was? He founded America. Ancient history is awesome."

"He did something else."

"What?"

"He freed slaves."

"Oh." She looked up with sober eyes. "That means something special to you . . . doesn't it?"

"Very special." He considered telling Leda his strongest reason for pushing the fight, since they were alone and this was a place that wouldn't be bugged. But he couldn't. He felt that Pop would not mind -- but he had promised Colonel Brisby.

He puzzled over inscriptions on the walls, in letters and spelling used before English became System





started feeling ill, I'd pick my own doctor. I'd be cautious about going through doors and standing close to open windows." He thought. "Rudbek is not a good place for you now; don't tempt them. Matter of fact, you ought not to be here. Belong to the Diplomatic Club?"

"No, sir."

"You do now. People 'ud be surprised if you didn't. I'm often there, around six. Got a room there, sort of private. Twenty eleven."

" 'Twenty eleven.' "

"I still haven't said I'd take it. Got any idea what I'd have to do if I lose this case?"

"Eh? No, sir."

"What was the place you mentioned? Jubulpore? That's where I'd have to move." Suddenly he grinned. "But I've been spoiling for a fight Rudbek, eh? Bruder. You mentioned a megabuck?"

Thorby got out his book of checking certificates, passed them over. Garsch riffled through it, shoved it into a drawer. "We won't convert this now; they're almost certainly noting your withdrawals. Anyhow, it's going to cost you more. G'bye. Say in a couple of days."

Thorby left, feeling bucked up. He had never met a more mercenary, predatory old man -- he reminded Thorby of the old, scarred freedmen professionals who swaggered around the New Amphitheater.

As he came outdoors he saw Guard Headquarters. He looked again -- then ducked through murderous traffic and ran up its steps.

## Chapter 21

Thorby found a circle of receptionist booths around the great foyer. He pushed through crowds pouring out and went into one. A contralto voice said, "Punch your name. State department and office into the microphone. Wait until the light appears, then state your business. You are reminded that working hours are over and only emergencies are now handled."

Thorby punched, "Thorby Baslim," into the machine, then said, "Exotic Corps."

He waited. The tape repeated, "Punch your name. State the department and office into --" It suddenly cut off. A man's voice said, "Repeat that."

"Exotic Corps."

"Business?"

"Better check my name in your files."

At last another female voice chanted, "Follow the light immediately over your head. Do not lose it"

He followed it up escalators, down slideways, and into an unmarked door, where a man not in uniform led him through two more. He faced another man in civilian clothes who stood up and said, "Rudbek of Rudbek. I am Wing Marshal Smith."

"Thorby Baslim, please, sir. Not 'Rudbek.' "

"Names aren't important but identities are. Mine Isn't 'Smith,' but it will do. I suppose you have identification?"

Thorby produced his ID again. "You probably have my fingerprints."

"They'll be here in a moment Do you mind supplying them again?"

While Thorby had his prints taken, a print file card popped out onto the Marshal's desk. He put both sets into a comparator, seemed to pay no attention but until it flashed green he spoke only politenesses.





"What?"

"Before I join, if you let me . . . or maybe after; I don't know how you do such things . . . I could go out as Rudbek of Rudbek, in my own ship, and check those places -- the red ones, ours. Maybe the boss can dig out things that a secret agent would have trouble getting close to."

"Maybe. But you know that your father started to make an inspection trip once. He wasn't lucky in it." Smith scratched his chin. "We've never quite accounted for that one. Until you showed up alive, we assumed that it was natural disaster. A yacht with three passengers, a crew of eight and no cargo doesn't look like worthwhile pickings for bandits in business for profit -- and they generally know what they're doing."

Thorby was shocked. "Are you suggesting that --"

"I'm not suggesting anything. But bosses prying into employees' sidelines have, in other times and places, burned their fingers. And your father was certainly checking."

"About the slave trade?"

"I couldn't guess. Inspecting. In that area. I've got to excuse myself. But do come see me again . . . or phone and someone will come to you."

"Marshal Smith . . . what parts of this, if any, can be talked over with other people?"

"Eh? Any of it. As long as you don't attribute it to this corps, or to the Guard. But facts as you know them --" He shrugged, "-- who will believe you? Although if you talk to your business associates about your suspicions, you may arouse strong feelings against you personally . . . some of those feelings sincere and honest. The others? I wish I knew."

Thorby was so late that Leda was both vexed and bursting with curiosity. But she had to contain it not only because of possible monitoring but because of an elderly aunt who had called to pay her respects to Rudbek of Rudbek, and was staying the night. It was not until next day, while examining Aztec relics in the Fifth of May Museum, that they were able to talk.

Thorby recounted what Garsch had said, then decided to tell more. "I looked into rejoining the Guard yesterday."

"Thor!"

"Oh, I'm not walking out. But I have a reason. The Guard is the only organization trying to put a stop to slave traffic. But that is all the more reason why I can't enlist now." He outlined his suspicions about Rudbek and the traffic.

Her face grew pale. "Thor, that's the most horrible idea I ever heard. I can't believe it."

"I'd like to prove it isn't true. But somebody builds their ships, somebody maintains them. Slavers are not engineers; they're parasites."

"I still have trouble believing that there is such a thing as slavery."

He shrugged. "Ten lashes will convince anybody."

"Thor! You don't mean they whipped you?"

"I don't remember clearly. But the scars are on my back."

She was very quiet on the way home.

Thorby saw Garsch once more, then they headed for the Yukon, in company with the elderly aunt, who had somehow attached herself. Garsch had papers for Thorby to sign and two pieces of information. "The first action has to be at Rudbek, because that was the legal residence of your parents. The other thing is, I did some digging in newspaper files."

"Yes?"

"Your grandfather did give you a healthy block of stock. It was in stories about the whoop-te-do when you were born. The Bourse Journal listed the shares by serial numbers. So we'll hit 'em with that, too -- on the same day. Don't want one to tip off the other."

"You're the doctor."

"But I don't want you in Rudbek until the clerk shouts 'Oyez!' Here's a mail drop you can use to reach me . . . even phone through, if you have to. And right smartly you set up a way for me to reach you."

Thorby puzzled over that requirement, being hemmed in as he was by bodyguards. "Why don't you, or somebody -- a young man, maybe -- phone my cousin with a code message? People are always phoning her and most of them are young men. She'll tell me and I'll find a place to phone back."

"Good idea. He'll ask if she knows how many shopping days left till Christmas. All right -- see you in court." Garsch grinned. "This is going to be fun. And very, very expensive for you. G'bye."

## Chapter 22

"Have a nice vacation?" Uncle Jack smiled at him. "You've led us quite a chase. You shouldn't do that, boy."

Thorby wanted to hit him but, although the guards let go his arms when they shoved him into the room, his wrists were tied. Uncle Jack stopped smiling and glanced at Judge Bruder. "Thor, you've never appreciated that Judge Bruder and I worked for your father, and for your grandfather. Naturally we know what's best. But you've given us trouble and now we'll show you how we handle little boys who don't appreciate decent treatment. We teach them. Ready, Judge?"

Judge Bruder smiled savagely and took the whip from behind him. "Bend him over the desk!"

Thorby woke up gasping. Whew, a bad one! He looked around the small hotel room he was in and tried to remember where he was. For days he had moved daily, sometimes half around the planet. He had become sophisticated in the folkways of this planet, enough not to attract attention, and even had a new ID card, quite as good as a real one. It had not been difficult, once he realized that underworlds were much the same everywhere.

He remembered now -- this was America de Sud.

The bed alarm sounded -- just midnight, time to leave. He dressed and glanced at his baggage, decided to abandon it. He walked down the backstairs, out the back way.

Aunt Lizzie had not liked the Yukon cold but she put up with it. Eventually someone called and reminded Leda that there were few shopping days to Christmas, so they left. At Uranium City Thorby managed to return the call. Garsch grinned. "I'll see you in the district court in-and-for the county of Rudbek, division four, at nine-fifty-nine the morning of January fourth. Now get lost completely."

So at San Francisco Thorby and Leda had a tiff in the presence of Aunt Lizzie; Leda wanted to go to Nice, Thorby insisted on Australia. Thorby said angrily, "Keep the car! I'll go by myself." He flounced out and bought a ticket for Great Sydney.

He pulled a rather old washroom trick, tubed under the Bay, and, convinced that his bodyguard had been evaded, counted the cash Leda had slipped him as privately as they had quarreled publicly. It came to a little under two hundred thousand credits. There was a note saying that she was sorry it wasn't more

but she had not anticipated needing money.

While waiting at the South American field Thorby counted what was left of Leda's money and reflected that he had cut it fine, both time and money. Where did it all go?

Photographers and reporters gave him a bad time at Rudbek City; the place swarmed with them. But he pushed through and met Garsch inside the bar at nine-fifty-eight. The old man nodded. "Siddown. Hizzoner will be out soon."

The judge came out and a clerk intoned the ancient promise of justice: "-- draw nigh and ye shall be heard!" Garsch remarked, "Bruder has this judge on a leash."

"Huh? Then why are we here?"

"You're paying me to worry. Any judge is a good judge when he knows he's being watched. Look behind you."

Thorby did so. The place was so loaded with press that a common citizen stood no chance. "I did a good job, if I do say so." Garsch hooked a thumb at the front row. "The galoot with the big nose is the ambassador from Proxima. The old thief next to him is chairman of the judiciary committee. And --" He broke off.

Thorby could not spot Uncle Jack but Bruder presided over the other table -- he did not look at Thorby. Nor could Thorby find Leda. It made him feel very much alone. But Garsch finished opening formalities, sat down and whispered. "Message for you. Young lady says to say 'Good luck.' "

Thorby was active only in giving testimony and that after many objections, counter objections, and warnings from the bench. While he was being sworn, he recognized in the front row a retired chief justice of the Hegemonic Ultimate Court who had once dined at Rudbek. Then Thorby did not notice anything, for he gave his testimony in deep trance surrounded by hypnotherapists.

Although every point was chewed endlessly, only once did the hearing approach drama. The court sustained an objection by Bruder in such fashion that a titter of unbelief ran around the room and someone stamped his feet. The judge turned red. "Order! The bailiff will clear the room!"

The move to comply started, over protests of reporters. But the front two rows sat tight and stared at the judge. The High Ambassador from the Vegan League leaned toward his secretary and whispered; the secretary started slapping a Silent-Steno.

The judge cleared his throat "-- unless this unseemly behavior ceases at once! This court will not tolerate disrespect."

Thorby was almost surprised when it ended: "-- must therefore be conclusively presumed that Creighton Bradley Rudbek and Martha Bradley Rudbek did each die, are now dead, and furthermore did meet their ends in common disaster. May their souls rest in peace. Let it be so recorded." The court banged his gavel. "If custodians of wills of the decedents, if wills there be, are present in this court, let them now come forward."

There was no hearing about Thorby's own shares; Thorby signed a receipt for certificates thereto in the judge's chambers. Neither Weemsby nor Bruder was present.

Thorby took a deep breath as Garsch and he came out of chambers. "I can hardly believe that we've won."

Garsch grinned. "Don't kid yourself. We won the first round on points. Now it begins to get expensive."

Thorby's mouth sagged. Rudbek guards moved in and started taking them through the crowd.

Garsch had not overstated it. Bruder and Weemsby sat tight, still running Rudbek & Assocs. and continued to fight. Thorby never did see his parents' proxies -- his only interest in them now was to see whether, as he suspected, the differences between the papers Bruder had prepared and those of his parents lay in the difference between "revocable" and "revocable only by mutual agreement."

But when the court got around to ordering them produced, Bruder claimed that they had been destroyed in routine clearing from files of expired instruments. He received a ten-day sentence for contempt, suspended, and that ended it.

But, while Weemsby was no longer voting the shares of Martha and Creighton Rudbek, neither was Thorby; the shares were tied up while the wills were being proved. In the meantime, Bruder and Weemsby remained officers of Rudbek & Assocs. with a majority of directors backing them. Thorby was not even allowed in Rudbek Building, much less in his old office.

Weemsby never went back to Rudbek estate; his belongings were sent to him. Thorby moved Garsch into Weemsby's apartment. The old man slept there often; they were very busy.

At one point Garsch told him that there were ninety-seven actions, for or against, moving or pending, relating to the settlement of his estate. The wills were simple in essence; Thorby was the only major heir. But there were dozens of minor bequests; there were relatives who might get something if the wills were set aside; the question of "legally dead" was again raised, the presumption of "common disaster" versus deaths at different times was hashed again; and Thorby's very identity was questioned. Neither Bruder nor Weemsby appeared in these actions; some relative or stockholder was always named as petitioner -- Thorby was forced to conclude that Uncle Jack had kept everyone happy.

But the only action that grieved him was brought by his grandparents Bradley, asking that he be made their ward because of incompetence. The evidence, other than the admitted fact that he was new to the complexities of Terran life, was his Guardsman medical record -- a Dr. Krishnamurti had endorsed that he was "potentially emotionally unstable and should not be held fully answerable for actions under stress."

Garsch had him examined in blatant publicity by the physician to the Secretary General of the Hegemonic Assembly. Thorby was found legally sane. It was followed by a stockholders suit asking that Thorby be found professionally unequipped to manage the affairs of Rudbek & Assocs. in private and public interest.

Thorby was badly squeezed by these maneuvers; he was finding it ruinously expensive to be rich. He was heavily in debt from legal costs and running Rudbek estate and had not been able to draw his own accumulated royalties as Bruder and Weemsby continued to contend, despite repeated adverse decisions, that his identity was uncertain.

But a weary time later a court three levels above the Rudbek district court awarded to Thorby (subject to admonitions as to behavior and unless revoked by court) the power to vote his parents' stock until such time as their estates were settled.

Thorby called a general meeting of stockholders, on stockholders' initiative as permitted by the bylaws, to elect officers.

The meeting was in the auditorium of Rudbek Building; most stockholders on Terra showed up even if represented by proxy. Even Leda popped in at the last minute, called out merrily, "Hello, everybody!" then turned to her stepfather. "Daddy, I got the notice and decided to see the fun -- so I jumped into the bus and hopped over. I haven't missed anything, have I?"



Bruder was shouting, "Illegal! The vote has been recorded. It's too --"

"Oh, nonsense!" shouted Leda. "I'm here and I'm voting. Anyhow, I cancelled that proxy -- I registered it in the post office in this very building and saw it delivered and signed for at the 'principal offices of this corporation' -- that's the right phrase, isn't it, Judge? -- ten minutes before the meeting was called to order. If you don't believe me, send down for it. But what of it? -- I'm here. Touch me." Then she turned and smiled at Thorby.

Thorby tried to smile back, and whispered savagely to Garsch, "Why did you keep this a secret?"

"And let 'Honest John' find out that he had to beg, borrow, or buy some more votes? He might have won. She kept him happy, just as I told her to. That's quite a girl, Thorby. Better option her."

Five minutes later Thorby, shaking and white, got up and took the gavel that Weemsby had dropped. He faced the crowd. "We will now elect the rest of the board," he announced, his voice barely under control. The slate that Garsch and Thorby had worked out was passed by acclamation -- with one addition: Leda.

Again she stood up. "Oh, no! You can't do this to me."

"Out of order. You've assumed responsibility, now accept it."

She opened her mouth, closed it, sat down.

When the Secretary declared the result, Thorby turned to Weemsby. "You are General Manager also, are you not?"

"Yes."

"You're fired. Your one share reverts. Don't try to go back to your former office; just get your hat and go."

Bruder jumped up. Thorby turned to him. "You, too. Sergeant-at-Arms, escort them out of the building."

## Chapter 23

Thorby looked glumly at a high stack of papers, each item flagged "URGENT." He picked up one, started to read -- put it down and said, "Dolores, switch control of my screen to me. Then go home."

"I can stay, sir."

"I said, 'Go home.' How are you going to catch a husband with circles under your eyes?"

"Yes, sir." She changed connections. "Good night, sir."

"Good night."

Good girl, there. Loyal, he thought. Well, he hoped. He hadn't dared use a new broom all the way; the administration had to have continuity. He signaled a number.

A voice without a face said, "Scramble Seven."

" 'Prometheus Bound,' " Thorby answered, "and nine makes sixteen."

"Scramble set up."

"Sealed," Thorby agreed.

The face of Wing Marshal "Smith" appeared. "Hi, Thor."

"Jake, I've got to postpone this month's conference again. I hate to -- but you should see my desk."

"Nobody expects you to devote all your time to corps matters."

"Doggone it, that's exactly what I planned to do -- clean this place up fast, put good people in charge, grab my hat and enlist for the corps! But it's not that simple."

"Thor, no conscientious officer lets himself be relieved until his board is all green. We both knew that you had lots of lights blinking red."

"Well . . . all right, I can't make the conference. Got a few minutes?"

"Shoot," agreed "Smith."

"I think I've got a boy to hunt porcupines. Remember?"

" 'Nobody eats a porcupine.' "

"Right! Though I had to see a picture of one to understand what you meant. To put it in trader terms, the way to kill a business is to make it unprofitable. Slave raiding is a business, the way to kill it is to put it in the red. Porcupine spines on the victims will do it"

"If we had the spines," the "X" Corps director agreed dryly. "You have an idea for a weapon?"

"Me? What do you think I am? A genius? But I think I've found one. Name is Joel de la Croix. He's supposed to be about the hottest thing MIT ever turned out. I've gossiped with him about what I used to do as a firecontrolman in Sisu. He came up with some brilliant ideas without being prodded. Then he said, 'Thor, it's ridiculous for a ship to be put out of action by a silly little paralysis beam when it has enough power in its guts to make a small star.' "

"A very small star. But I agree."

"Okay. I've got him stashed in our Havermeyer Labs in Toronto. As soon as your boys okay him, I want to hand him a truckload of money and give him a free hand. I'll feed him all I know about raider tactics and so forth -- trance tapes, maybe, as I won't have time to work with him much. I'm being run ragged here."

"He'll need a team. This isn't a home-workshop project."

"I know. I'll funnel names to you as fast as I have them. Project Porcupine will have all the men and money it can use. But, Jake, how many of these gadgets can I sell to the Guard?"

"Eh?"

"I'm supposed to be running a business. If I run it into the ground, the courts will boost me out I'm going to let Project Porcupine spend megabucks like water -- but I've got to justify it to directors and stockholders. If we come up with something, I can sell several hundred units to Free Traders, I can sell some to ourselves -- but I need to show a potential large market to justify the expenditure. How many can the Guard use?"

"Thor, you're worrying unnecessarily. Even if you don't come up with a superweapon -- and your chances aren't good -- all research pays off. Your stockholders won't lose."

"I am not worrying unnecessarily! I've got this job by a handful of votes; a special stockholders meeting could kick me out tomorrow. Sure research pays off, but not necessarily quickly. You can count on it that every credit I spend is reported to people who would love to see me bumped -- so I've got to have reasonable justification."

"How about a research contract?"

"With a vice colonel staring down my boy's neck and telling him what to do? We want to give him a free hand."

"Mmm . . . yes. Suppose I get you a letter-of-intent? Well make the figure as high as possible. I'll have to see the Marshal-in-Chief. He's on Luna at the moment and I can't squeeze time to go to Luna this week. You'll have to wait a few days."

"I'm not going to wait; I'm going to assume that you can do it. Jake, I'm going to get things rolling and get out of this crazy job -- if you won't have me in the corps I can always be an ordnanceman."



than Project Porcupine because this matter was certain to cripple, or at least hamper, the slave trade, while Porcupine was a long chance. But his progress had been slow -- too much else to do.

Always too much. Grandmother used to say never to buy too many eggs for your basket Wonder where she got that? -- the People never bought eggs. He had both too many baskets and too many eggs for each. And another basket every day.

Of course, in a tough spot he could always ask himself; "What would Pop do?" Colonel Brisby had phrased that -- "I just ask myself, 'What would Colonel Baslim do?' " It helped, especially when he had to remember also what the presiding judge had warned him about the day his parents' shares had been turned over to him; "No man can own a thing to himself alone, and the bigger it is, the less he owns it. You are not free to deal with this property arbitrarily nor foolishly. Your interest does not override that of other stockholders, nor of employees, nor of the public."

Thorby had talked that warning over with Pop before deciding to go ahead with Porcupine.

The Judge was right. His first impulse on taking over the business had been to shut down every Rudbek activity in that infected sector, cripple the slave trade that way. But you could not do that. You could not injure thousands, millions, of honest men to put the squeeze on criminals. It required more judicious surgery.

Which was what he was trying to do now. He started studying the unmarked folder.

Garsch stuck his head in. "Still running under the whip? What's the rush, boy?"

"Jim, where can I find ten honest men?"

"Huh? Diogenes was satisfied to hunt for one. Gave him more than he could handle."

"You know what I mean -- ten honest men each qualified to take over as a planetary manager for Rudbek." Thorby added to himself, "-- and acceptable to 'X' Corps."

"Now I'll tell one."

"Know any other solution? I'll have each one relieve a manager in the smelly sector and send the man he relieves back -- we can't fire them; we'll have to absorb them. Because we don't know. But the new men we can trust and each one will be taught how the slave trade operates and what to look for."

Garsch shrugged. "It's the best we can do. But forget the notion of doing it in one bite; we won't find that many qualified men at one time. Now look, boy, you ain't going to solve it tonight no matter how long you stare at those names. When you are as old as I am, you'll know you can't do everything at once -- provided you don't kill yourself first. Either way, someday you die and somebody else has to do the work. You remind me of the man who set out to count stars. Faster he counted, the more new stars kept turning up. So he went fishing. Which you should, early and often."

"Jim, why did you agree to come here? I don't see you quitting work when the others do."

"Because I'm an old idiot. Somebody had to give you a hand. Maybe I relished a chance to take a crack at anything as dirty as the slave trade and this was my way -- I'm too old and fat to do it any other way."

Thorby nodded. "I thought so. I've got another way -- only, confound it, I'm so busy doing what I must do that I don't have time for what I ought to do . . . and I never get a chance to do what I want to do!"

"Son, that's universal. The way to keep that recipe from killing you is occasionally to do what you want to do anyhow. Which is right now. There's all day tomorrow ain't touched yet . . . and you are going out with me and have a sandwich and look at pretty girls."

"I'm going to have dinner sent up."

"No, you aren't. Even a steel ship has to have time for maintenance. So come along."

Thorby looked at the stack of papers. "Okay."

The old man munched his sandwich, drank his lager, and watched pretty girls, with a smile of innocent pleasure. They were indeed pretty girls; Rudbek City attracted the highest-paid talent in show business.

But Thorby did not see them. He was thinking.

A person can't run out on responsibility. A captain can't, a chief officer can't. But he did not see how, if he went on this way, he would ever be able to join Pop's corps. But Jim was right; here was a place where the filthy business had to be fought, too.

Even if he didn't like this way to fight it? Yes. Colonel Brisby had once said, about Pop: "It means being so devoted to freedom that you are willing to give up your own . . . be a beggar . . . or a slave . . . or die -- that freedom may live."

Yes, Pop, but I don't know how to do this job. I'd do it . . . I'm trying to do it. But I'm just fumbling. I don't have any talent for it

Pop answered, "Nonsense! You can learn to do anything if you apply yourself. You're going to learn if I have to beat your silly head in!"

Somewhere behind Pop Grandmother was nodding agreement and looking stern. Thorby nodded back at her. "Yes, Grandmother. Okay, Pop. I'll try."

"You'll do more than try!"

"I'll do it, Pop."

"Now eat your dinner."

Obediently Thorby reached for his spoon, then noticed that it was a sandwich instead of a bowl of stew. Garsch said, "What are you muttering about?"

"Nothing. I just made up my mind."

"Give your mind a rest and use your eyes instead. There's a time and place for everything."

"You're right, Jim."

"Goodnight, son," the old beggar whispered. "Good dreams . . . and good luck!"