

Loaves and Fishes

Analog

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Her name was Tolly Mune, but they called her all sorts of things.

Those entering her domain for the first time used her title with a certain amount of deference. She had been Portmaster for more than forty standard years, and Deputy Portmaster before that, a colorful fixture in the great orbital community that was officially known as the Port of S'uthlam. Downstairs, planetside, the office was only another box on the bureaucratic flowcharts, but up in orbit the Portmaster was foreman, chief executive, judge, mayor, arbiter, legislator, mastermech, and head cop all in one. So they called her the P.M.

The Port had started small and grown over the centuries, as S'uthlam's swelling population made the world an increasingly important market and a key link in the network of interstellar trade for the sector. At port center was the station itself, a hollow asteroid some sixteen kilometers in diameter, with its parks and shops and dormitories and warehouses and labs. Six predecessor stations, each larger than the last and each now outdated, the oldest built three centuries back and no bigger than a good-sized starship, clung to the Spiderhome like fat metal buds on a stone potato.

Spiderhome was what they called it now, because it sat at the center of the web, an intricate silver-metal net cast across the dark of space. Radiating from the station in all directions were sixteen great spurs. The newest was four kilometers long, and building; seven of the originals (the eighth had been destroyed in an explosion) stabbed twelve kays out into space. Inside the great tubes were the port's industrial zones—warehouses, factories, shipyards, customs gates, and embarkation centers, plus docking facilities and repair bays for every class of starship known in the sector. Long pneumatic tubetrains ran through the center of the spurs, moving cargo and passengers from gate to gate and to the crowded, noisy, bustling nexus in Spiderhome, and the elevator downstairs.

Other, lesser tubes branched from the spurs, and still lesser passages from them, crossing and recrossing the void, binding everything together in a pattern that grew in intricacy each year, as more and more additions were made.

And between the web strands were the flies—shuttles going up and down from the surface of S'uthlam with consignments too big or too volatile for the elevator, mining ships coming in with ore and ice from the Frags, food freighters from the terraformed farming asteroids inward they called the Larder, and all manner of interstellar traffic: luxurious Transcorp liners, traders from worlds as close as Vandeen or as distant as Caissa and Newholme, merchant fleets from Kimdiss, warships from Bastion and Citadel, even alien starcraft, Free Hruun and Raheemai and gethsoids and other, stranger species. They all came to the Port of S'uthlam and were welcome.

The ones who lived in Spiderhome, who worked in the bars and mess halls, moved the cargos, bought and sold, repaired and fueled the ships, they called themselves spinnerets as a badge of honor. To them, and to the flies who came calling often enough to be regulars, Tolly Mune was Ma Spider—irascible, foul-mouthed, rough-humored, frighteningly competent, omnipresent, indestructible, as big as a force of nature and twice as mean. Some of them, those who had crossed her or earned her displeasure, had no love for the Portmaster; to them she was the Steel Widow.

She was a big-boned, well-muscled, homely woman, as gaunt as any honest S'uthlamese but so tall (almost two meters) and so broad (those shoulders) that she had been considered something of a freak downstairs. Her face was as creased and comfortable as old leather. Her age was forty-three local, nearing ninety standard, but she didn't look an hour over sixty; she attributed that to a life in orbit.

“Gravity’s the thing that ages you,” she would say. Except for a few starclass spas and hospitals and tourist hotels in the Spiderhome, and the big liners with their gravity grids, the Port turned in endless weightlessness, and free fall was Tolly Mune’s natural element.

Her hair was silver and iron, bound up tightly when she worked, but off-duty it flowed behind her like a comet’s tail, following her every motion. And she did move. That big, gaunt, raw-boned body of hers was firm and graceful; she swam through the spokes of the web and the corridors, halls, and parks of Spiderhome as fluidly as a fish through water, her long arms and thin, muscular legs pushing, touching, propelling her along. She never wore shoes; her feet were almost as clever as her hands.

Even out in naked space, where veteran spinnerets wore cumbersome suits and moved awkwardly along tether lines, Tolly Mune chose mobility and form-fitting skinthins. Skinthins gave only minimal protection against the hard radiation of S’ulstar, but Tolly took a perverse pride in the deep blue-black cast of her skin, and swallowed anti-carcinoma pills by the handful each morning rather than opt for slow, clumsy safety. Out in the bright hard black between the web strands, she was the master. She wore airjets at wrist and ankle, and no one was more expert in their use. She zipped freely from fly to fly, checking here, visiting there, attending all the meetings, supervising the work, welcoming important flies, hiring, firing, solving any problem that might arise.

Up in her web, Portmaster Tolly Mune, Ma Spider, the Steel Widow, was everything she had ever wanted to be, equal to every task, and more than satisfied with the cards she’d drawn.

Then came a night-cycle when she was buzzed from a sound sleep by her Deputy Portmaster. “It better be goddamned important,” she said when she stared at him over her vidscreen.

“You better access Control,” he said.

“Why?”

“Fly coming in,” he said. “Big fly.”

Tolly Mune scowled. “You wouldn’t dare wake me up for nothing. Let’s have it.”

“A *real* big fly,” he stressed. “You have to see this. It’s the biggest damn fly I’ve ever laid eyes on. Ma, no fooling, this thing is thirty kays long.”

“Puling hell,” she said, in the last uncomplicated moment of her life, before she made the acquaintance of Haviland Tuf.

She swallowed a handful of bright blue anti-carcinogens, washed them down with a healthy squeeze from a bulb of beer, and studied the holo apparition that stood before her. “Large ship you’ve got there,” she said casually. “What the hell is it?”

“The *Ark* is a biowar seedship of the Ecological Engineering Corps,” replied Haviland Tuf.

“The EEC?” she said. “You don’t say.”

“Must I repeat myself, Portmaster Mune?”

“This is the Ecological Engineering Corps of the old Federal Empire, now?” she asked. “Based on Prometheus? Specialists in cloning, biowar—the ones who custom-tailored all kinds of ecological catastrophe?” She watched Tuf’s face as she spoke. He dominated the center of her small, cramped, disorderly, and too-seldom-visited office in Spiderhome, his holographic projection standing among the drifting, weightless clutter like some huge white ghost. From time to time a balled up sheet of paper floated through him.

Tuf was big. Tolly Mune had met flies who liked to magnify themselves in holo, so they came across as bigger than they were. Maybe that was what this Haviland Tuf was doing. Somehow she thought not, though; he didn’t seem the sort. Which meant he really did stand some two-and-a-half meters tall, a good

half-meter above the tallest spinneret she'd ever met. And that one had been as much a freak as Tolly herself; S'uthlamese were a small people—a matter of nutrition and genetics.

Tuf's face gave absolutely nothing away. He interlocked his long fingers calmly on top of the swollen bulge of his stomach. "The very same," he replied. "Your historical erudition is to be commended."

"Why, thank you," she said amiably. "Correct me if I'm wrong, though, but being historically erudite and all, I seem to recall that the Federal Empire collapsed, oh, a thousand years ago. And the EEC vanished too—disbanded, recalled to Prometheus or Old Earth, destroyed in combat, gone from human space, whatever. Of course, the Prometheans still have a lot of the old biotech, it's said. We don't get many Prometheans way out here, so I couldn't say for sure. But they're a bit jealous about sharing any of their knowledge, I've heard. So, let me see if I've got this straight. You've got a thousand-year-old EEC seedship there, still functional, which you just happened to find one day, and you're the only person on board and the ship is yours?"

"Correct," said Haviland Tuf.

She grinned. "And I'm the Empress of the Crab Nebula."

Tuf's face remained expressionless. "I fear I have been connected to the wrong person then. I wished to speak to the Portmaster of S'uthlam."

She took another squeeze of beer. "I'm the puling Portmaster," she snapped. "Enough of this goddamned nonsense, Tuf. You're sitting out there in a thing that looks suspiciously like a warship and happens to be about thirty times the size of the largest so-called dreadnaught in our so-called Planetary Defense Flotilla, and you're making one hell of a lot of people extremely nervous. Half of the groundworms in the big hotels think you're an alien come to steal our air and eat our children, and the other half are certain that you're a special effect we've thoughtfully provided for their amusement. Hundreds of them are renting suits and vacuum sleds right now, and in a couple of hours they'll be crawling all over your hull. And my people don't know what the hell to make of you either. So come to the goddamned point, Tuf. What do you want?"

"I am disappointed," said Tuf. "I have led myself here at great difficulty to consult the spinnerets and cybertechs of Port S'uthlam, whose expertise is far famed and whose reputation for honest, ethical dealing is second to none. I did not think to encounter unexpected truculence and unfounded suspicions. I require certain alterations and repairs, nothing more."

Tolly Mune was only half listening. She stared at the feet of the holographic projection, where a small, hairy, black-and-white thing had suddenly appeared. "Tuf," she said, her throat a little dry, "excuse me, but some kind of goddamned vermin is rubbing up against your leg." She sucked at her beer.

Haviland Tuf bent and scooped up the animal. "Cats may not properly be referred to as vermin, Portmaster Mune," he said. "Indeed, the feline is an implacable foe of most pests and parasites, and this is but one of the many fascinating and beneficial attributes of this admirable species. Are you aware that humanity once worshipped cats as gods? This is Havoc."

The cat began to make a deep rumbly noise as Tuf cradled it in the crook of one massive arm and began to apply long, regular strokes to its black-and-white hair.

"Oh," she said. "A...pet, is that the term? The only animals on S'uthlam are food stock, but we do get visitors who keep pets. Don't let your...cat, was it?"

"Indeed," said Tuf.

"Well, don't let it out of your ship. I remember once when I was Deputy P.M., we had the damndest mess...some brain-damaged fly lost his puling pet at the same time this alien envoy was visiting, and our security crews mistook one for the other. You wouldn't believe how upset everyone got."

"People are often overexcitable," said Haviland Tuf.

“What kind of alterations and repairs were you talking about?”

Tuf responded with a ponderous shrug. “Some small things, no doubt most easily accomplished by experts as proficient as your own. As you have pointed out, the *Ark* is indeed a most ancient vessel, and the vicissitudes of war and centuries of neglect have left their marks. Entire decks and sectors are dark and dysfunctional, damaged beyond the ship’s admittedly admirable capacities for self-repair. I wish to have these portions of the craft repaired and restored to full function.

“Additionally, the *Ark*, as you might know from your study of history, once carried a crew of two hundred. It is sufficiently automated so that I have been able to operate it by myself, but not without certain inconveniences, it must be admitted. The central command center, located on the tower bridge, is a wearisome daily commute from my living quarters, and I have found the bridge itself to be inefficiently designed for my purposes, requiring me to walk constantly from one work station to the next in order to perform the multitude of complex duties required to run the ship. Certain other functions require me to leave the bridge entirely and journey hither and yon about the immensity of the vessel. Still other tasks I have found impossible to accomplish, since they would seem to require my simultaneous presence in two or more locations kilometers apart on different decks. Near to my living quarters is a small, yet comfortable auxiliary communications room that appears to be fully functional. I would like your cybertechs to reprogram and redesign the command systems so that in future I will be able to accomplish anything that might need accomplishing from there, without the need of making the exhausting daily trek to the bridge—indeed, without the need of leaving my seat.

“Beyond these major tasks, I have in mind only a few further alterations. Some minor modernizations, perhaps. The addition of a kitchen with a full array of spices and flavorings, and a large recipe library, in order that I might dine on food somewhat more varied and interesting to the palate than the grimly nutritious military fare the *Ark* is now programmed to provide. A large stock of beers and wines and the mechanisms necessary to ferment my own in future, during lengthy deep-space voyagings. The augmentation of my existing entertainment facilities through the acquisition of some books, holoplays, and music chips dating from this last millennium. A few new security programs. Other trifling minor changes. I will provide you with a list.”

Tolly Mune listened to him with astonishment. “Goddamn,” she said when he had finished. “You really do have a derelict EEC seedship, don’t you?”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. A little stiffly, she thought.

She grinned. “My apologies. I’ll scramble a crew of spinnerets and cybertechs, scream ’em right over to have a look, and we’ll get you an estimate. Don’t hold your goddamned breath, though. That big a ship, it’ll take quite a while before they begin to sort things out. I’d better post some security, too, or you’ll have all kinds of curiosity seekers tramping through your halls and stealing souvenirs.” She looked his hologram up and down thoughtfully. “I’ll need you to give my crew a briefing and point them in the right direction. After that, it’d be better if you got out from underfoot and let them run amuck. You can’t bring that damned monstrosity into the web, it’s too puling big. You got any way of getting out of there?”

“The *Ark* is equipped with a full complement of shuttlecraft, all operational,” said Haviland Tuf, “but I have scant desire to leave the comforts of my quarters. Certainly my ship is large enough so that my presence will not seriously inconvenience your crews.”

“Hell, you know that and I know that, but they work better if they don’t think someone’s looking over their shoulders,” said Tolly Mune. “Besides, I’d think you’d want to get out of that can a bit. You’ve been shut up alone for how long?”

“Several standard months,” Tuf admitted, “although I am not strictly alone. I have enjoyed the company of my cats, and have pleasantly occupied myself learning the capabilities of the *Ark* and expanding my knowledge of ecological engineering. Still, I will concede your point that perhaps a bit of recreation is in order. The opportunity to sample a new cuisine is always to be relished.”

“Wait’ll you try S’uthlamese beer! And the port has other diversions as well—exercise facilities, hotels, sports, drug dens, sensoria, sex parlors, live theater, gaming halls.”

“I have some small skill at certain games,” Tuf said.

“And then there’s tourism,” Tolly Mune said. “You can just take the tubetrain down the elevator to the surface, and all the districts of S’uthlam are yours to explore.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “You have intrigued me, Portmaster Mune. I fear I am of a curious temperament. It is my great weakness. Unfortunately, my funds preclude a lengthy stay.”

“Don’t worry about that,” she replied, smiling. “We’ll just put it on your repair bill, settle up afterwards. Now, just hop in your goddamned shuttle and bring yourself to, let’s see...dock nine-eleven is vacant. See the Spiderhome first, then take the train downstairs. You ought to be a goddamned sensation. You’re on the newsfeeds already, you know. The groundworms and flies will be crawling all over you.”

“A decaying piece of meat might find this prospect appealing,” said Haviland Tuf. “I do not.”

“Well then,” the Portmaster said, “go incognito!”

The steward on the tubetrain wheeled out a tray of beverages shortly after Haviland Tuf had strapped himself in for the trip downstairs. Tuf had sampled S’uthlamese beer in the restaurants of Spiderhome, and found it thin, watery, and notably devoid of taste. “Perhaps your offerings include some malt products brewed offworld,” he said. “If so, I would gladly purchase one.”

“Certainly,” the steward said. He reached into the cart and produced a squeeze bulb full of dark brown liquid, bearing a cursive logo Tuf recognized as Shan-Dellor script. A card plate was offered, and Tuf punched in his code number. The S’uthlamese currency was the calorie; the charge for the bulb amounted to almost four-and-a-half times the actual caloric content of the beer, however. “Import costs,” the steward explained.

Tuf sucked his bulb with ponderous dignity as the tubetrain fell down the elevator toward the surface of the planet below. It was not a comfortable ride. Haviland Tuf had found the cost of starclass accommodations prohibitively high, and had therefore settled for premiere class, the next best available, only to discover himself crammed into a seat seemingly designed for a S’uthlamese child, and a small S’uthlamese child at that, in a row of eight similar seats divided by a narrow central aisle.

Sheer chance had given him the aisle seat, fortunately; without such placement, Tuf entertained grave doubts about whether he could have made the voyage at all. But even here, it was impossible to move without brushing against the bare thin arm of the woman to his left, a contact that Tuf found distasteful in the extreme. When he sat in his accustomed manner, the crown of his head bumped against the ceiling, so he was forced to hunker down, and tolerate a most annoying tightness in his neck as a result. Farther back on the tubetrain, Tuf understood, were the first-, second-, and third-class accommodations. He resolved to avoid experiencing their dubious comforts at all costs.

When the descent commenced, the majority of the passengers pulled privacy hoods down over their heads, and punched up the personal diversion of their choice. The offerings, Haviland Tuf noted, included three different musical programs, a historical drama, two erotic fantasy loops, a business interface, something listed as a “geometric pavane,” and direct stimulation to the pleasure center of the brain. Tuf considered investigating the geometric pavane, until discovering that the privacy hood was too small for his head, his skull being unduly large and long by S’uthlamese standards.

“You the big fly?” asked a voice from across the aisle.

Tuf looked over. The S’uthlamese were sitting in silent isolation, their heads enveloped by their dark eyeless helmets. Aside from the cluster of stewards far at the rear of the car, the only passenger still in the world of reality was the man in the aisle seat across from him one row back. Long, braided hair,

copper-colored skin, and plump, fleshy cheeks branded the man as much an offworlder as Tuf himself. “The big fly, right?”

“I am Haviland Tuf, an ecological engineer.”

“I knew you were a fly,” the man said. “Me, too. I’m Ratch Norren, from Vandeen.” He held out a hand. Haviland Tuf looked at it. “I am familiar with the ancient ritual of shaking hands, sir. I have noted that you are carrying no weapons. It is my understanding that the custom was originally intended to establish this fact. I am unarmed as well. You may now withdraw your hand, if you please.”

Ratch Norren grinned and pulled back his arm. “You’re a funny duck,” he said.

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I am neither a funny duck nor a large fly. I would think this much obvious to any person of normal human intelligence. Perhaps standards are different on Vandeen.”

Ratch Norren reached up and pinched his own cheek. It was a round, full, fleshy cheek, covered with red powder, and he gave it a good strong pinch. Tuf decided this was either a particularly perverse tic or a Vandeen gesture the significance of which escaped him. “The fly stuff,” the man said, “that’s just spinneret talk. An idiom. They call all us offworlders flies.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“You are the one who arrived in that giant warship, right? The one who was on all the newsfeeds?” Norren did not wait for an answer. “Why are you wearing the wig?”

“I am traveling incognito,” said Haviland Tuf, “though it appears that you have penetrated my disguise, sir.”

Norren pinched his cheek again. “Call me Ratch,” he said. He looked Tuf up and down. “Pretty feeb disguise, though. Wig or no wig, you’re still a big fat giant with a complexion like a mushroom.”

“In future, I shall employ makeup,” said Tuf. “Fortunately, none of the native S’uthlamese have displayed your perspicacity.”

“They’re just too polite to mention it. That’s how it is on S’uthlam. There’s so many of them, you know? Most of them can’t afford any kind of real privacy, so they go in for a lot of pretend privacy. They won’t take any notice of you in public unless you want to be noticed.”

Haviland Tuf said, “The inhabitants of Port S’uthlam that I encountered did not seem unduly reticent, nor overburdened with elaborate etiquette.”

“The spinnerets are different,” Ratch Norren replied offhandedly. “Things are looser up there. Say, let me give you a little advice. Don’t sell that ship of yours here, Tuf. Take it to Vandeen. We’ll give you a lot better price for it.”

“It is not my intention to sell the *Ark*,” Tuf replied.

“No need to dickerdaddle with me,” Norren said. “I don’t have the authority to buy it anyhow. Or the standards. Wish I did.” He laughed. “You just go to Vandeen and get in touch with our Board of Coordinators. You won’t regret it.” He glanced about, as if he were checking to see that the stewards were far away and the other passengers still dreaming behind their privacy helmets, and then dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Besides, even if the price wasn’t a factor, I hear that warship of yours has got nightmare-class power, right? You don’t want to give the S’uthlamese power like that. No lying, I love ’em, I really do, come here regularly on business, and they’re good people, when you get one or two of them alone, but there are so *many* of them, Tuffer, and they just breed and breed and breed, like goddamned rodents. You’ll see. A couple centuries back, there was a big local war just on account of that. The suthies were planting colonies all over the damned place, grabbing every piece of real estate they could, and if anybody else happened to be living there, the suthies would just outbreed ’em. We finally put an end to it.”

“We?” said Haviland Tuf.

“Vandeen, Skrymir, Henry’s World, and Jazbo, officially, but we had help from a lot of neutrals, right? The peace treaty restricted the S’uthlamese to their own solar system. But you give them that hellship of yours, Tuf, and maybe they break free again.”

“I had understood the S’uthlamese to be a singularly honorable and ethical people.”

Ratch Norren pinched his cheek again. “Honorable, ethical, sure, sure. Great folks to cut deals with, and the swirls—know some blistery erotic tricks. I tell you, I got a hundred suthie friends, and I love every one of ’em. But between them, my hundred friends must have maybe a thousand children. These people breed, that’s the problem, Tuf, you listen to Ratch. They’re all liferoos, right?”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “And what, might I inquire, is a liferoo?”

“Liferoos,” Norren repeated impatiently. “Anti-entropists, kiddie-culterers, helix-humpers, genepool puddlers. Religious fanatics, Tuffer, religious crazies.” He might have said more, but the steward was wheeling the beverage cart back down the aisle just then. Norren sat back in his seat.

Haviland Tuf raised a long pale finger to check the steward’s progress. “I will have another bulb, if you please,” he said. He hunched over in silence for the remainder of the trip, sucking thoughtfully on his beer.

Tolly Mune floated in her cluttered apartment, drinking and thinking. One wall of the room was a huge vidscreen, six meters long and three meters high. Customarily, Tolly keyed it to display scenic panoramas; she liked the effect of having a window overlooking the high, cool mountains of Skrymir, or the dry canyons of Vandeen with their swift Whitewater rivers, or the endless city lights of S’uthlam itself spreading across the night, with the shining silver tower that was the base of the elevator ascending up and up and up into the dark, moonless sky, soaring high above even starclass tower-homes four kays tall.

But tonight she had a starscape spread across her wall, and against it was outlined the grim metallic majesty of the immense starship called *Ark*. Even a screen as large as hers—one of the perks of her status as Portmaster—could not really convey the ship’s sheer size.

And the things it represented—the hope, the threat—were immeasurably bigger than the *Ark* itself, Tolly Mune knew.

Off to her side, she heard the buzzing of her comm unit. The computer would not have disturbed her unless it was the call she had been waiting for. “I’ll take it,” she said. The stars blurred, the *Ark* dissolved, and the vidscreen ran with liquid colors for an instant before resolving itself into the face of First Councillor Josen Rael, majority leader of the Planetary High Council.

“Portmaster Mune,” he said. At this merciless magnification, she could see all the tension in his long neck, the tightness around the thin lips, the hard glitter in his dark brown eyes. The top of his head, domed and balding, had been powdered, but was beginning to sweat nonetheless.

“Councillor Rael,” she replied. “Good of you to call. You’ve gone over the reports?”

“Yes. Is this call shielded?”

“Certainly,” she said. “Speak freely.”

He sighed. Josen Rael had been a fixture in planetary politics for a decade now. He had first made the newsfeeds as councillor for war, later had climbed to councillor for agriculture, and for four standard years he had been the leader of the council’s majority faction, the technocrats, and therefore the single most powerful man on S’uthlam. The power had made him look old and hard and tired, and this was the worst Tolly Mune had ever seen him. “You’re certain of the data, then?” he said. “If our crews have made no mistake? This is too crucial for error, I don’t have to tell you that. This is truly an EEC seedship?”

“Damn right,” said Tolly Mune. “Damaged and in disrepair, yes, but the puling thing is still functional, more or less, and the cell library is intact. We’ve verified it.”

Rael ran long, blunt fingers through his thinning white hair. “I should be jubilant, I suppose. When this is over, I will have to pretend to be jubilant for the newsfeeds. But right now, all I can think of are the dangers. We’ve had a council meeting. Closed. We can’t risk too much getting out until the affair is settled. The council was largely in accord—technocrats, expansionists, zeros, the church party, the fringe factions.” He laughed. “I’ve never seen such unanimity in all the years I’ve served. Portmaster Mune, we must have that ship.”

Tolly Mune had known it was coming. She had not been Portmaster this long without understanding the politics of the society downstairs. S’uthlam had been locked into endless crisis all her life. “I’ll try to buy it for you,” she said. “This Haviland Tuf was a freelance trader originally, before he stumbled on the *Ark*. My crews found his old ship on the landing deck, in terrible shape. Traders are greedy abortions, every one of them. That should work for us.”

“Offer him whatever it takes,” said Josen Rael. “Do you understand, Portmaster? You have unlimited budgetary authority.”

“Understood,” said Tolly Mune. But there was another question to be asked. “And if he won’t sell?”

Josen Rael hesitated. “Difficult,” he muttered. “He must sell. A refusal would be tragic. Not for the man himself, but for us, perhaps.”

“If he won’t sell?” Tolly Mune repeated. “I need to know the alternatives.”

“We must have the ship,” Rael told her. “If this Tuf proves unreasonable, he gives us no choice. The High Council will exercise its right of eminent domain and confiscate. The man will be compensated, of course.”

“Damn. You’re talking about seizing the ship by force.”

“No,” said Josen Rael. “Everything would be proper—I’ve checked. In an emergency, for the good of the greatest number, the rights of private property must be set aside.”

“Oh, hell and damn, that’s puling rationalization, Josen,” said Mune. “You had more common sense when you were up here. What have they done to you downstairs?”

He grimaced, and for an instant, he looked a little like the young man who had worked at her side for a year, when she had been Deputy Portmaster and he third assistant administrator for interstellar trade. Then he shook his head, and the old, tired politician was back. “I don’t feel good about this, Ma,” he said, “but what choice do we have? I’ve seen projections. Mass famine within twenty-seven years unless we have a breakthrough, and there’s no breakthrough in sight. Before it comes to that, the expansionists will regain power and we’ll have another war, perhaps. Either way, millions will die—billions, perhaps. Against that, what are the rights of this one man?”

“I won’t argue that point, Josen, though there are those who would, you know that. But never mind. You want to be practical, I’ll give you some goddamned practical things to think over. Even if we *buy* this ship from Tuf legally, there’s going to be hell to pay with Vandeen and Skrymir and the rest of the allies, but I doubt that they’d try anything. If we grab it by force, though, that’s a set of coordinates to a whole different place—a hard place, too. They can say piracy, maybe. They can define the *Ark* as a military craft—which it was, by the way, and a puling world-buster, too—and say we’re in violation of the treaty and come after us again.”

“I’ll speak to their envoys personally,” said Josen Rael wearily. “Assure them that as long as the technocrats are in power, the colonization program will not be resumed.”

“And they’ll take your puling word? Like goddamned horny hell they will. And will you assure them that the technocrats are *never* going to lose power, that they’ll never have the expansionists to deal with

again? How will you do that? Are you planning to use the *Ark* to establish a benevolent dictatorship?”

The councillor pressed his lips together tightly, and a flush crept up the back of his long, dark neck. “You know me better than that. Agreed, there are dangers. The ship is a formidable military resource, however. Let us not forget that. If the allies mobilize against us, we will hold the trump card.”

“Nonsense,” said Tolly Mune. “It has to be repaired and we have to master it. The technology involved has been lost for a thousand years. We’ll be studying it for months, maybe years, before we can really use the goddamned thing. Only we won’t get the chance. The Vandeeni armada will arrive within weeks to take it away from us, and the others won’t be far behind them.”

“None of this is your concern, Portmaster,” said Josen Rael coldly. “The High Council has discussed the issue thoroughly.”

“Don’t try and pull rank on *me*, Josen. Remember the time you got drunk on narco-blasters and decided you’d go outside and see how fast urine crystallized in space? I was the one who talked you out of freezing off your hose, esteemed First Councillor. Clean out your puling ears and listen to me. Maybe war isn’t my concern, but trade *is*. The port is our lifeline. We import thirty percent of our raw calories now—”

“Thirty-four percent,” Rael corrected.

“Thirty-four percent,” Tolly Mune agreed. “And that is going to go nowhere but up, we both know it. We pay for that food with our technological expertise—both manufactured goods and port profits. We service, repair, and build more starships than any other four worlds in the sector, and you know why? Because I’ve busted my puling buns to make sure we’re the *best*. Tuf himself said it. He came here for repairs because we had a reputation—a reputation for being ethical, honest, and fair, as well as technically competent. What’s going to happen to that reputation if we confiscate his puling ship? How many other traders are going to bring in *their* ships for repairs if we feel free to help ourselves to any we like? *What’s going to happen to my goddamned port?*”

“It would certainly have an adverse effect,” Josen Rael admitted.

Tolly Mune made a loud crude noise at him. “Our economy will be destroyed,” she said bluntly.

Rael was sweating heavily now, trickles of moisture running down the broad, domed forehead. He mopped at the moisture with a pocket cloth. “Then you must see that it doesn’t happen, Portmaster Mune. You must see that it doesn’t come to that.”

“How?”

“Buy the *Ark*,” he said. “I delegate full authority to you, since you seem to understand the situation so well. Make this Tuf person see reason. The responsibility is yours.” He nodded, and the screen went black.

On S’uthlam, Haviland Tuf played the tourist.

It could not be denied that the world was impressive, in its way. During his years as a trader, hopping from star to star in the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, Haviland Tuf had visited more worlds than he could easily remember, but he would be unlikely to forget S’uthlam any time soon.

He had seen a goodly number of breathtaking sights: the crystal towers of Avalon, the skywebs of Arachne, the churning seas of Old Poseidon and the black basalt mountains of Clegg. The city that was S’uthlam—the old names were only districts and neighborhoods now, the ancient cities having grown into one swollen megalopolis centuries ago—rivaled any of them.

Tuf had a certain fondness for tall buildings, and he gazed out upon the cityscape by both day and night—on observation platforms at one kilometer, two, five, nine. No matter how high he ascended, the

lights went on and on, sprawling across the land endlessly in all directions, with nowhere a break to be seen. Square and featureless forty- and fifty-story buildings stood cheek-to-jowl in endless rows, crowding each other, living in the perpetual shadow of mirrored towers that rose around them to drink the sun. Levels were built upon other levels that had been built upon still others. The moving sidewalks crossed and crisscrossed in patterns of labyrinthine intricacy. Beneath the surface ran a network of vast subterranean roads where tubetrains and delivery capsules hurtled through the darkness at hundreds of kays per hour, and beneath the roads were basements and sub-basements and tunnels and underways and malls and sub-housing, a whole second city that burrowed as far below the ground as its mirrored sibling ascended above it.

Tuf had seen the lights of the metropolis from the *Ark*; from orbit, the city swallowed half a continent. From the surface, it seemed large enough to swallow galaxies. There were other continents; they, too, blazed by night with the lights of civilization. The sea of light had no islands of darkness within it; the S'uthlamese had no room to spare for luxuries like parks. Tuf did not disapprove; he had always thought parks to be a perverse institution, designed principally to remind civilized humanity how raw and crude and uncomfortable life had been when they had been forced to live it in nature.

Haviland Tuf had sampled a great variety of cultures in his wanderings, and he judged the culture of the S'uthlamese to be inferior to none. It was a world of variety, of dizzying possibilities, of a richness that partook both of vitality and decadence. It was a cosmopolitan world, plugged into the network that linked the stars, freely plundering the music, drama, and sensoria imported from other worlds, and using those unceasing stimuli to endlessly transform and mutate its own cultural matrix. The city offered more modes of recreation and more entertainment of more varied sorts than Tuf had ever seen in any one place before—sufficient choices to occupy a tourist for several standard years, if one desired to taste it all.

During his years of travel, Haviland Tuf had seen the advanced science and technological wizardry of Avalon and Newholme, Tober-in-the-Veil, Old Poseidon, Baldur, Arachne, and a dozen other worlds out on the sharpened leading edge of human progress. The technology demonstrated on S'uthlam was equal to the most advanced of them. The orbital elevator itself was an impressive feat—Old Earth was supposed to have built such constructs in the ancient days before the Collapse, and Newholme had raised one once, only to have it fall during the war, but nowhere else had Tuf ever observed such a colossal artifact, not even on Avalon itself, where such elevators had been studied and rejected on the grounds of economy. And the slidewalks, the tubetrains, the manufactories, all were advanced, and efficient. Even the government seemed to work.

S'uthlam was a wonder world.

Haviland Tuf observed it, traveled through it, and sampled its marvels for three days before he returned to his small, cramped, premiere-class sleeping quarters on the seventy-ninth floor of a tower hotel, and summoned the host. “I wish to make arrangements for an immediate return to my ship,” he said, seated on the edge of the narrow bed he had summoned from a wall, the chairs being uncomfortably small. He folded large white hands neatly atop his stomach.

The host, a tiny man barely half Tuf's height, seemed nonplussed. “It was my understanding that you were to stay for another ten days,” he said.

“That is correct,” said Tuf. “Nonetheless, it is the nature of plans to be changed. I wish to return to orbit as soon as is conveniently possible. I would be most grateful if you would see to the arrangements, sir.”

“There's so much you haven't seen yet!”

“Indeed. Yet I find that what I have seen, however small a sample of the whole it may be, has been more than sufficient.”

“You don't like S'uthlam?”

“It suffers from an excess of S'uthlamese,” Haviland Tuf replied. “Several other flaws might also be

mentioned.” He held up a single long finger. “The food is abysmal, for the most part chemically reformulated, largely without taste, of a distinctly unpleasant texture, full of unusual and disquieting colors. Moreover, the portions are inadequate. I might also be so bold as to mention the constant intrusive presence of a large number of newsfeed reporters. I have learned to recognize them by the multifocus cameras they wear in the center of their foreheads as a third eye. Perhaps you have observed them lurking about your lobby, sensorium, and restaurant. By my rough estimate, there seem to be about twenty of them.”

“You’re a celebrity,” the host said, “a public figure. All of S’uthlam is interested in learning about you. Surely, if you don’t wish to grant interviews, the peeps haven’t dared intrude on your privacy? The ethics of the profession…”

“Have no doubt been observed to the letter,” Haviland Tuf finished, “as I must concede that they have kept their distance. Nonetheless, each night when I have returned to this insufficiently large room and accessed the newsfeeds, I have been welcomed by scenes of myself looking over the city, eating tasteless rubbery food, visiting various scenic tourist attractions, and entering sanitary facilities. Vanity is one of my great faults, I must confess, but nonetheless, the charm of this notoriety has quickly palled. Moreover, most of their camera angles have been unflattering in the extreme, and the humor of the newsfeed commentators has bordered on being offensive.”

“Easily solved,” the host said. “You might have come to me earlier. We can rent you a privacy shield. It clips on the belt, and if any peep approaches within twenty meters, it will jam his third eye and give him a splitting headache.”

“Less easily solved,” said Tuf impassively, “is the total lack of animal life I have observed.”

“Vermin?” the host said, with a horrified look. “You’re upset because we have no *vermin*?”

“Not all animals are vermin,” said Haviland Tuf. “On many worlds, birds, canines, and other species are kept and cherished. I myself am fond of cats. A truly civilized world preserves a place for felines, but on S’uthlam it appears the populace would find them indistinguishable from lice and bloodworms. When I made the arrangements for my visit here, Portmaster Tolly Mune assured me that her crew would take care of my cats, and I accepted said assurances, but if indeed no S’uthlamese has ever before encountered an animal of a species other than human, I believe I have just cause to wonder as to the quality of the care they are presently receiving.”

“We have animals,” the host protested. “Out in the agrifactory zones. Plenty of animals—I’ve seen tapes.”

“No doubt you have,” said Tuf. “A tape of a cat and a cat, however, are somewhat different things, and require different treatment. Tapes can be stored on a shelf. Cats cannot.” He pointed at the host. “These are in the nature of quibbles, however. The crux of the matter, as I have previously mentioned, lies more in the number of S’uthlamese than in their manner. There are too many people, sir. I have been jostled repeatedly on every occasion. In eating establishments, the tables are too close to other tables, the chairs are insufficient to my size, and strangers sometimes seat themselves beside me and pummel me with rude elbows. The seats in theaters and sensoriums are cramped and narrow. The sidewalks are crowded, the lobbies are crowded, the tubes are crowded—there are people everywhere who touch me without my leave or consent.”

The host slipped into a polished professional smile. “Ah, humanity!” he said, waxing eloquent. “The glory of S’uthlam! The teeming masses, the sea of faces, the endless pageant, the drama of life! Is there anything quite as invigorating as rubbing shoulders with our fellow man?”

“Perhaps not,” said Haviland Tuf flatly. “Yet I find I am now sufficiently invigorated. Furthermore, permit me to point out that the average S’uthlamese is too short to rub against my shoulders, and has therefore been forced to content him- or herself with rubbing up against my arms, legs, and stomach.”

The host's smile faded. "You are taking the wrong attitude, sir. To fully appreciate our world, you must learn to see it through S'uthlamese eyes."

"I am unwilling to go about on my knees," said Haviland Tuf.

"You're not anti-life, are you?"

"Indeed not," said Haviland Tuf. "Life is infinitely preferable to its alternative. However, in my experience, all good things can be carried to extremes. This would seem to be the case on S'uthlam." He raised a hand for silence before the host could respond. "More particularly," Tuf continued, "I have developed something of an antipathy, no doubt overhasty and unjustified, to some of the individual specimens of life I have come upon during chance encounters in my travels. A few have even expressed open hostility to me, directing at me epithets clearly derogatory of my size and mass."

"Well," said the host, flushing, "I'm sorry, but you are, uh, ample, and on S'uthlam it is, uh, socially unacceptable to be, uh, overweight."

"Weight, sir, is entirely a function of gravity, and is therefore most malleable. Moreover, I am unwilling to concede you the authority to judge my weight over, under, or just right, these being subjective criteria. Aesthetics vary from world to world, as do genotypes and hereditary predisposition. I am quite satisfied with my present mass, sir. To return to the matter at hand, I wish to terminate my stay immediately."

"Very well," said the host. "I will book passage for you on the first tubetrain tomorrow morning."

"This is unsatisfactory. I would prefer to leave at once. I have examined the schedules and discovered a listing for a train in three standard hours."

"Full," snapped the host. "Nothing left on that one but second- and third-class seating."

"I shall endure as best I can," said Haviland Tuf. "No doubt the close press of so much humanity will leave me much invigorated and improved when I depart my train."

Tolly Mune floated in the middle of her office in a lotus position, looking down on Haviland Tuf.

She kept a special chair for flies and groundworms who were unaccustomed to weightlessness. It was a rather uncomfortable chair, all things considered, but it was bolted securely to the deck and equipped with a web-harness to keep its occupant in place. Tuf had pushed over to it with awkward dignity and strapped himself down tightly, and she had settled in comfortably in front of him, at about the level of his head. A man the size of Tuf could not possibly be accustomed to having to look up at anyone during conversation; Tolly Mune figured it gave her a certain psychological edge.

"Portmaster Mune," Tuf said, appearing remarkably unfazed by his inferior position, "I must protest. I comprehend that these repeated references to my own person as a fly are merely an instance of colorful local slang with no opprobrium attached. Still, I cannot but take a certain umbrage at this obvious attempt to, shall we say, pull my wings off."

Tolly Mune grinned down at him. "Sorry, Tuf," she said. "Our price is firm."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "Firm. An interesting word. Were I not awed to be in the mere presence of such an esteemed personage as yourself, and uneasy about giving offense, I might go so far as to suggest that this firmness approaches rigidity. Politeness forbears me from mouthing any statements about greed, avarice, and deep-space piracy in order to further my end of these thorny negotiations. I will point out however, that the sum of fifty million standards is several times greater than the gross planetary product of a good number of worlds."

"Small worlds," said Tolly Mune, "and this is a large job. You've got one hell of a big ship there."

Tuf remained impassive. "I concede that the *Ark is* indeed a large ship, but fear this has little bearing on matters, unless it is customary for you to charge by the square meter rather than by the hour."

Tolly Mune laughed. “This isn’t like fitting some old freighter with a few new pulse-rings or reprogramming your drive navigator. You’re talking thousands of hours even with three full crews of spinnerets on triple-shift, you’re talking massive systems work by the best cyber-techs we’ve got, you’re talking manufacture of custom parts that haven’t been used in hundreds of years, and that’s just for starts. We’ll have to research this damn museum piece of yours before we start ripping it apart, or we’ll never be able to get it back together. We’ll have to lure some planetside specialists up the elevator, maybe even go out of system. Think of the time, the energy, the calories. The docking fees alone—That thing is *thirty kilometers long*, Tuf. You can’t get her into the web. We’ll have to build a special dock around her, and even then she’ll take up the berths we could have used for three hundred ordinary ships. You don’t want to know what it would cost, Tuf.” She did some quick figuring on her wrist computer, and shook her head. “If you’re here one local month, a real optimistic projection, that’s nearly a million cal in docking fees alone. More than three hundred thousand standards in your money.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

Tolly Mune spread her hands helplessly. “If you don’t like our price, you could, of course, take your business elsewhere.”

“This suggestion is impractical,” said Haviland Tuf. “Unfortunately, as simple as my requests are, it appears that only a handful of worlds possess the expertise to fulfill my requirements—a sad commentary on the present state of human technological prowess.”

“Only a handful?” Tolly Mune raised a corner of her mouth. “Perhaps we have priced our services too low.”

“Madam,” said Haviland Tuf. “Surely you would not be so crass as to take advantage of my naive frankness.”

“No,” she said. “As I said, our price is firm.”

“It appears we have reached an embarrassing and knotty impasse. You have your price. I, unfortunately, do not.”

“I never would have guessed. A ship like yours, I would have figured you to have calories to burn.”

“No doubt I shall soon pursue a lucrative career in the field of ecological engineering,” said Haviland Tuf. “Unfortunately, I have not yet commenced my practice, and in my previous trade I had recently suffered some unaccountable financial reverses. Perhaps you would be interested in some excellent plastic reproductions of Cooglish orgy-masks? They make unusual and stimulating wall decorations, and are also said to have certain mystic aphrodisiac properties.”

“I’m afraid not,” Tolly Mune replied, “but you know what, Tuf? Today is your lucky day.”

“I fear you are making light with me,” said Haviland Tuf. “Even if you are about to inform me of a half-price sale or two-for-one service special, I am not optimally positioned to take advantage of it. I will be bitterly and brutally candid with you, Portmaster Mune, and admit that I am presently suffering from a temporary inadequacy of funds.”

“I have a solution,” said Tolly Mune.

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“You’re a trader, Tuf. You don’t really need a ship as large as the *Ark*, do you? And you know nothing about ecological engineering. This derelict is of no possible good to you. But it does have considerable salvage value.” She smiled warmly. “I’ve talked to the folks downstairs on S’uthlam. The High Council felt it might be in your best interest to sell us your find instead.”

“Their concern is touching,” said Haviland Tuf.

“We’ll pay you a generous salvage fee,” she said. “Thirty percent of the ship’s estimated value.”

“The estimate to be made by you,” said Tuf flatly.

“Yes, but that’s not all. We’ll toss in a million standards cash, over and above the salvage fee, and we’ll give you a new ship. A brand-new Longhaul Nine, the biggest freighter we make, with fully automated kitchen, passenger quarters for six, gravity grid, two shuttles, cargo bays big enough to hold the largest Avalonian and Kimdissi traders side-by-side, triple redundancy, the latest Smartalec-series computer, voice-activated, and even a weapons capability if you want one. You’ll be the best-equipped independent trader in this whole sector.”

“Far be it from me to deprecate such generosity,” said Tuf. “The very thought of your offer makes me want to swoon. And yet, though I would no doubt be far more comfortable aboard the handsome new ship you offer me, I have come to have a certain foolish sentimental attachment to the *Ark*, ruined and useless as it is, it is nonetheless the last remaining seedship of the vanished Ecological Engineering Corps, a living piece of history as it were, a monument to their valor and genius, and yet still not without its small uses. Some time ago, as I made my lonely way across space as best I could, the whim struck me to give up the uncertain life of a trader and take up, instead, the profession of ecological engineer. As illogical and no doubt ignorant as this decision was, it still has a certain appeal to me, and I fear that my stubborn nature is a great vice. Therefore, Portmaster Mune, it is with the deepest regret that I must decline your offer. I shall keep the *Ark*.”

Tolly Mune gave herself a little twist, spun upside down, and pushed off lightly from the ceiling, so as to come right up into Tuf’s face. She pointed a finger at him. “Damn it to hell,” she said, “I have no patience with this haggling over every puling calorie, Tuf. I’m a busy woman and I don’t have the time or the energy for your trader’s games. You’re going to sell—I know it and you know it—so let’s get this over with. Name your price.” She poked his nose lightly with the point of her finger. “Name,” poke, “your,” poke, “price,” poke.

Haviland Tuf unstrapped his harness and kicked off from the floor. He was so huge he made her feel petite—*her*, who’d been called a giant half her life. “Kindly cease your assault upon my person,” he said. “It can have no positive benefit upon my decision. I fear you grossly misapprehend me, Portmaster Mune. I have been a trader, true, but a poor one—perhaps because I have never mastered the skill as a haggler which you wrongly impute to me. I have stated my position concisely. The *Ark* is not for sale.”

“I have a certain amount of affection for you, from my years upstairs,” Josen Rael said crisply over a shielded comm-link, “and there’s no denying that your record as Portmaster has been exemplary. Otherwise, I’d remove you right now. You let him get back to his ship? How *could* you? I thought you had better sense than that.”

“I thought you were a politician,” Tolly Mune said with a certain amount of scorn in her voice. “Josen, think of the goddamned ramifications if I had security grab him in the middle of Spiderhome! Tuf isn’t exactly inconspicuous, even when he slips into his silly wig and tries to go incognito. This place is lousy with Vandeeni, Jazbots, Henrys, you name it, all of them watching Tuf and watching the *Ark*, waiting to see what we do. He’s already been approached by a goddamned Vandeeni agent. They were observed deep in conversation on the tubetrain.”

“I know,” the Councillor said unhappily. “Still, something should have...you could have had him taken surreptitiously.”

“And then what do I do with him?” Tolly Mune said. “Kill him and shove him out an airlock? I won’t do that, Josen, and don’t even think of having it done for me. If you try it, I’ll expose you to the newsfeeds and bring down the whole puling house.”

Josen Rael mopped at his sweat. “You’re not the only one with principles,” he said defensively. “I would not suggest any such thing. Still, we must have that ship, and now that Tuf is back inside it, our task has been made more difficult. The *Ark* still has formidable defenses. I’ve had scenarios done, and the odds

are good that it might be able to withstand a full-scale assault by our entire Planetary Defense Flotilla.”

“Oh, puling hell, he’s parked a bare five kays beyond the terminus of tube nine, Josen. A goddamned full-scale assault by *anybody* would probably destroy the port and bring down the elevator on top of your puling head! Just hold your bladder, and let me work on this. I’ll get him to sell, and I’ll do it legally.”

“Very well,” the Councillor replied. “I’ll give you a little more time. But I warn you, the High Council is following the affair closely, and they’re impatient. You have three days. If Tuf hasn’t thumbed a transfer slip by then, I’m sending up some assault squads.”

“Don’t worry,” said Tolly Mune, “I have a plan.”

The communications room of the *Ark* was long and narrow, its walls covered with arrays of blank, dark telescreens. Haviland Tuf had settled in comfortably with his cats. Havoc, the boisterous black-and-white female, was curled up on his legs asleep, while longhaired gray Chaos, scarcely out of his kittenhood, rambled back and forth across Tuf’s ample shoulders, rubbing against his neck and purring loudly. Tuf had folded his hands atop his paunch patiently as various computers took his request and reviewed it, relayed it, checked it, transferred it, and cross-indexed it. He had been waiting for some time. When the geometric pavane on the screen finally cleared, he was looking at the typically sharp features of an elderly S’uthlamese woman. “Curator,” she announced. “Council databanks.”

“I am Haviland Tuf, of the starship *Ark*,” he announced.

She smiled. “I recognized you from the newsfeeds. How may I be of help?” She blinked, “Ack, there’s something on your neck.”

“A kitten, madam,” he said. “Quite friendly.” He reached up and scratched Chaos under the chin. “I require your assistance in a small matter. As I am but a hopeless slave to my own curiosity, and always eager to improve my meager store of knowledge, I have recently been occupying myself in the study of your world—its history, customs, folklore, politics, social patterns, and the like. I have of course availed myself of all the standard texts and popular data services, but there is one particular bit of information that I have been hitherto unable to secure. A small thing, truly, no doubt laughably easy to find had I only the wisdom to know where to look, but nonetheless unaccountably absent from all the sources I have checked. In pursuit of this crumb of data, I have contacted the S’uthlam Educational Processing Center and your major planetary library, both of which referred me to you. Thus, here I am.”

The Curator’s face had grown guarded. “I see. The council databanks are not generally open to the public, but perhaps I can make an exception. What are you looking for?”

Tuf raised his finger. “A single small nubbin of information, as I have said, but I would be in your debt if you would be so kind as to answer my query and salve my burning curiosity. Precisely what is the current population of S’uthlam?”

The woman’s face grew cold and clouded. “That information is restricted,” she said flatly. The screen went black.

Haviland Tuf paused for a moment before plugging back into the data service he had been employing. “I am interested in a general survey of S’uthlamese religion,” he told the search program, “and in particular in a description of the beliefs and ethical systems of the Church of Life Evolving.”

Some hours later, Tuf was deeply immersed in his text and playing absently with Havoc, who had woken up feisty and hungry, when Tolly Mune’s call came through. He stored the information he had been reviewing and summoned her face on another of the room’s screens. “Portmaster,” he said.

“I hear you’re trying to pry into planetary secrets, Tuf,” she said, grinning at him.

“I assure you that I had no such intent,” Tuf replied, “but in any case, I am a most ineffectual spy, as my

attempt was a dismal failure.”

“Let’s have dinner together,” Tolly Mune said, “and maybe I can answer your little question for you.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “In that case, Portmaster, permit me to invite you to dine aboard the *Ark*. My cuisine, while unexceptional, is nonetheless more flavorful and considerably more bountiful than the fare available in your port.”

“Afraid not,” said Tolly Mune. “Too goddamned many duties, Tuf, I can’t leave my station. Don’t get your guts in an uproar, though. A big freighter just arrived from the Larder—our farming asteroids, a little in from here, terraformed and fertile as hell. The P.M. gets first grab at the calories. Fresh neograss salads, tunnel-hog ham steaks in brown sugar sauce, spicepods, mushroom bread, jellyfruit in real squirter cream, and beer.” She smiled. “*Imported* beer.”

“Mushroom bread?” said Haviland Tuf. “I do not eat of animal flesh, but the remainder of your menu sounds most attractive. I shall gladly accept your kind invitation. If you will prepare a dock for my arrival, I will shuttle over in the *Manticore*.”

“Use dock four,” she said. “Very close to Spiderhome. Is that one Havoc or Chaos?”

“Havoc,” Tuf replied. “Chaos has departed on mysterious errands of his own, as cats are wont to do.”

“I’ve never actually seen a live animal,” said Tolly Mune cheerfully.

“I shall bring Havoc with me for your elucidation.”

“See you soon,” Tolly Mune closed.

They dined at one-quarter gee. The Crystal Room clung to the underside of Spiderhome, its exterior a dome of transparent crystalline plasteel. Beyond the all-but-invisible walls of the dome, they were surrounded by the black clarity of space, fields of cool clean stars, and the intricate trceries of the web. Below was the rocky exterior of the station, transport tubes tangled thickly across its surface, the swollen silvery blisters of habitats clinging to nexus points, the sculpted minarets and shining arrow-towers of starclass hotels rising into the cold darkness. Directly overhead hung the immense globe of S’uthlam itself, pale blue and brown, aswirl with cloud patterns, the elevator hurtling up toward it, higher and higher, until the huge shaft became a thin bright thread and then was lost to the eye entirely. The perspectives were dizzying, and more than a little unsettling.

The room was customarily used only on major state occasions; it had last been opened three years ago, when Josen Rael had come upstairs to entertain a visiting dignitary. But Tolly Mune was pulling out all the stops. The food was prepared by a chef she borrowed for the night from a Transcorp liner, the beer was commandeered from a trader in transit to Henry’s World; the service was a rare antique from the Museum of Planetary History; the great ebonfire table, made of gleaming black wood shot through with long scarlet veins, had room enough for twelve; and everything was served by a silent, discreet phalanx of waiters in gold and black livery.

Tuf entered cradling his cat, considered the splendor of the table, and gazed up at the stars and the web.

“You can see the *Ark*,” Tolly Mune told him. “There, that bright dot, beyond the web to the upper left.”

Tuf glanced at it. “Is this effect achieved through three-dimensional projection?” he asked, stroking the cat.

“Hell no. This is the real thing, Tuf.” She grinned. “Don’t worry, you’re safe. That’s triple-thick plasteel. Neither the world nor the elevator is likely to fall on us, and the chances of the dome being struck by a meteor are astronomically low.”

“I perceive a substantial amount of traffic,” said Haviland Tuf. “What are the chances of the dome being struck by a tourist piloting a rented vacuum sled, a lost circuit-tracer, or a burned-out pulse-ring?”

“Higher,” admitted Tolly Mune. “But the instant it happens, the airlocks will seal, claxons will sound, and an emergency cache will spring open. They’re required in any structure that fronts on vacuum. Port regs. So in the unlikely event that anything happens, we’ll have skinthins, breather pacs, even a laser torch if we want to try and repair the damage before the spinnerets get here. But it’s only happened two, three times in all the years there’s been a port, so just enjoy the view and don’t get too nervous.”

“Madam,” said Haviland Tuf with ponderous dignity, “I was not nervous, merely curious.”

“Right,” she agreed. She gestured him to his seat. He folded himself stiffly into it and sat quietly stroking Havoc’s black-and-white fur while the waiters brought out appetizer plates and baskets of hot mushroom bread. The savories were of two sorts—tiny pastries stuffed with deviled cheese and mushroom pate, and what appeared to be small snakes, or perhaps large worms, cooked in an aromatic orange sauce. Tuf fed two of the latter to his cat, who devoured them eagerly, before lifting one of the pastries, sniffing at it, and biting into it delicately. He swallowed and nodded. “Excellent,” he pronounced.

“So that’s a cat,” said Tolly Mune.

“Indeed,” replied Tuf, tearing off some mushroom bread—a wisp of steam rose from the interior of the loaf when he broke it open—and methodically slathering it with a thick coating of butter.

Tolly Mune reached for her own bread, burning her fingers on the hot crust. But she persisted; it would not do to show any weakness in front of Tuf. “Good,” she said, around the first mouthful. She swallowed. “You know Tuf, this meal we’re about to have—most S’uthlamese don’t eat this well.”

“This fact had not escaped my notice,” said Tuf, lifting another snake between thumb and forefinger and holding it out for Havoc, who climbed halfway up his arm to get at it.

“In fact,” said Tolly Mune, “the actual caloric content of this meal approximates what the average citizen consumes in a week.”

“On the strength of the savories and bread alone, I would venture to suggest that we have already enjoyed more gustatory pleasure than the average S’uthlamese does in a lifetime,” Tuf said impassively.

The salad was set before them; Tuf tasted it and pronounced it good. Tolly Mune pushed her own food around on her plate and waited until the waiters had retreated to their stations by the walls. “Tuf,” she said, “you had a question, I believe.”

Haviland Tuf raised his eyes from his plate and stared at her, his long white face blank and still and expressionless. “Correct,” he said. Havoc was looking at her, too, from slitted eyes as green as the neograss in their salads.

“Thirty-nine billion,” said Tolly Mune in a crisp, quiet voice.

Tuf blinked. “Indeed,” he said.

She smiled. “Is that your only comment?”

Tuf glanced up at the swollen globe of S’uthlam overhead. “Since you solicit my opinion, Portmaster I shall venture to say that while the world above us seems formidably large, I cannot but wonder if it is indeed large enough. Without intending any censure of your mores, culture, and civilization, the thought does occur to me that a population of thirty-nine billion persons might be considered, on the whole, a trifle excessive.”

Tolly Mune grinned. “You don’t say?” She sat back, summoned a waiter, called for drinks. The beer was thick and brown, with a heavy fragrant head; they served it in huge double-handled mugs of etched glass. She lifted hers a bit awkwardly, watching the liquid slosh about. “The one thing I’ll never get used to about gravity,” she said. “Liquids ought to be in squeeze bulbs, goddamnit. These seem so damned...messy—like an accident waiting to happen.” She sipped, and came away with a foam mustache. “Good, though,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Time to quit this damned fencing, Tuf,” she continued as she lowered the mug back to the table with the excessive care of

one unaccustomed to even this trace gravity. “You obviously had some suspicion of our population problem, or you would never have inquired after it. And you’ve been soaking up all kinds of other information. To what end?”

“Curiosity is my sad affliction, madam,” Tuf said, “and I sought merely to solve the puzzle that was S’uthlam, with perhaps the vaguest hope that in study I might come across some means of resolving our present impasse.”

“And?” Tolly Mune said.

“You have confirmed the assumption I was forced to make about your excessive population. With that datum in place, all becomes clear. Your sprawling cities climb ever higher because you must accommodate this swelling population even as you struggle futilely to preserve your agricultural areas from encroachment. Your proud port is impressively busy, and your great elevator moves constantly, because you lack the capacity to feed your own population and must import food from other worlds. You are feared and perhaps even hated by your neighbors because centuries ago you attempted to export your population problem through emigration and annexation, until stopped violently by war. Your people keep no pets because S’uthlam has no room for any nonhuman species that is not a direct, efficient, and necessary link in the food chain. You are on the average distinctly smaller than the human norm due to the rigors of centuries of nutritional deprivation and rationing in all but name, economically enforced. Therefore generation succeeds generation, each smaller and thinner than the last, struggling to subsist on ever-diminishing provender. All these woes are directly attributable to your surfeit of population.”

“You don’t sound very approving, Tuf,” Tolly Mune said.

“I intend no criticism. You are not without your virtues. In the main, you are an industrious, cooperative, ethical, civilized, and ingenious folk, and your society, your technology and especially your rate of intellectual advance, is much to be admired.”

“Our technology,” said Tolly Mune drily, “is the only thing that has saved our goddamned asses. We import thirty-four percent of our raw calories. We grow perhaps another twenty percent on what agricultural land remains to us. The rest of our food comes out of the food factories, processed from petrochemicals. That percentage goes up every year. Has to. Only the food factories can gear up fast enough to keep pace with the population curve. One goddamned problem, though.”

“You are running out of petroleum,” ventured Haviland Tuf.

“Damned right we are,” said Tolly Mune. “A nonrenewable resource and all that, Tuf.”

“Undoubtedly your governing bodies know approximately when the famine will come upon you.”

“Twenty-seven standard years,” she said. “More or less. The date changes constantly, as various factors are altered. We may get a war before we get famine. That’s what some of our experts believe. Or maybe we’ll get war *and* famine. Either way we get a lot of dead people. We’re a civilized people, Tuf, you said it yourself. So goddamned civilized you wouldn’t believe it. Cooperative, ethical, life-affirming, all that bladder-bloat. Even that’s breaking down, though. Conditions in the undercities are growing worse, have been for generations, and some of our leaders go so far as to say they’re devolving down there, turning into some kind of puling *vermin*. Murder, rape, all the violent crimes, the rates go up each year. Within the past eighteen months, two reports of cannibalism. All that will get a lot worse in years to come. Rising with the puling population curve. You receiving my transmission, Tuf?”

“Indeed,” he said impassively.

The waiters returned, bearing the entrees. Slices of meat were piled high on the platter, still steaming from the oven, and four different types of vegetables were available. Haviland Tuf allowed his plate to be filled to overflowing with spicepods, mashed smackles, sweetroot, and butterknots, and bid the waiter cut several thin slivers of ham for Havoc. Tolly Mune took a thick ham slice herself, and drowned it in brown

sauce, but after the first taste she found herself without appetite; she watched Tuf eat. “Well?” she prompted.

“Perhaps I can be of some small service to you in this quandary,” Tuf said, deftly spearing a forkful of spicepods.

“You can be a big service to us,” Tolly Mune said. “Sell us the *Ark*. It’s the only way out, Tuf. You know it. I know it. Name your own price. I appeal to your goddamned sense of morality. Sell, and you’ll save millions of lives—maybe billions. Not only will you be wealthy, you’ll be a hero. Say the word and we’ll name the goddamned planet after you.”

“An interesting notion,” said Tuf. “Yet, my vanity notwithstanding, I fear you greatly overestimate the prowess of even the lost Ecological Engineering Corps. In any case the *Ark* is not for sale, as I have already informed you. Perhaps I might venture to suggest an obvious solution to your difficulties? If it proves efficacious, I would be pleased to allow you to name a city or a small asteroid after me.”

Tolly Mune laughed and took a healthy swallow of beer. She needed it. “Go on, Tuf. Say it. Tell me this easy, obvious solution.”

“A plethora of terms come to mind,” said Tuf. “Population control is the heart of the concept, to be achieved through biochemical or mechanical birth control, sexual abstinence, cultural conditioning, legal prohibitions. The mechanisms may vary, but the end result must be the same. The S’uthlamese must breed at a somewhat diminished rate.”

“Impossible,” said Tolly Mune.

“That is scarcely so,” said Tuf. “Other worlds, vastly older than S’uthlam, have accomplished the same.”

“Makes no damned difference,” Tolly Mune said. She made a sharp gesture with her mug, and beer sloshed on the table. She ignored it. “You don’t win any prizes for original thinking, Tuf. This is anything but a new idea. In fact, we’ve got a political faction that has been advocating this for, hell, hundreds of years. The zeros, we call ’em. They want to zero out the population curve. I’d say maybe seven, eight percent of the citizenry supports them.”

“Mass famine will undoubtedly increase the number of adherents to their cause,” Tuf observed, lifting a heavily laden forkful of mashed smackles. Havoc yowled in approval.

“By then it will be too puling late, and you damn well know it. Problem is, the teeming masses down there really don’t believe any such thing is coming, no matter what the politicians say, no matter how many dire predictions they hear over the newsfeeds. We’ve heard *that* before, they say, and damned if they haven’t. Grandmother and great-grandfather heard similar predictions about famine just around the corner. But S’uthlam has always been able to avoid the catastrophe before. The technocrats have stayed on top for centuries by perpetually managing to keep the day of collapse a generation away. They always find a solution. Most citizens are confident they always *will* find a solution.”

“Such solutions as you imply are by their very nature only stopgaps,” commented Haviland Tuf. “Surely this must be obvious. The only true solution is population control.”

“You don’t understand us, Tuf. Restrictions against birth are anathema to the vast majority of S’uthlamese. You’ll never get any meaningful number of people to accept them—certainly not just to avoid some damned unreal catastrophe that none of them believe in anyway. A few exceptionally stupid and exceptionally idealistic politicians have tried, and they’ve been dragged down overnight, denounced as immoral, as anti-life.”

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf. “Are you a woman of strong religious conviction, Portmaster Mune?”

She made a face and drank some more beer. “Hell no. I suppose I’m an agnostic. I don’t know, I don’t think about it much. But I’m also a zero, though I’d never admit it downstairs. A lot of spinnerets are zeros. In a small closed system like the port, the effects of unrestrained breeding soon become damned

apparent, and damned scary. Downstairs, it's not so puling clear. And the church...are you familiar with the Church of Life Evolving?"

"I have a certain cursory familiarity with its precepts," Tuf said, "of admittedly recent acquisition."

"S'uthlam was *settled* by the elders of the Church of Life Evolving," Tolly Mune said. "They were escaping from religious persecution on Tara, and they were persecuted because they bred so damned fast they were threatening to take over the planet, which the rest of the Tarans didn't much like."

"An understandable sentiment," said Tuf.

"Same damned thing killed the colonization program the expansionists launched a few centuries back. The church—well, its fundamental belief is that the destiny of sentient life is to fill up the universe, that life is the ultimate good. Anti-life—entropy—is the ultimate evil. The church believes that life and anti-life are in a kind of race. We must evolve, the church says, evolve through higher and higher states of sentience and genius into eventual godhood, and we must achieve that godhood in time to avert the heat-death of the universe. Since evolution operates through the biological mechanism of breeding, we must therefore breed, must ever expand and enrich the gene-pool, must spread our seed to the stars. To restrict birth...we might be interfering with the next step in human evolution, might be aborting a genius, a proto-god, the carrier of the one mutant chromosome that would pull the race up to the next, transcendent rung on the ladder."

"I believe I grasp the essentials of the credo," Tuf said.

"We're a free people, Tuf," Tolly Mune said. "Religious diversity, freedom of choice, all that. We've got Erikaners, Old Christers, Children of the Dreamer. We've got Steel Angel bastions and we've got Melder communes, anything you want. But more than eighty percent of the population still belongs to the Church of Life Evolving, and if anything, their beliefs are stronger now than they've ever been. They look around, and they see all the obvious fruits of the church's teachings. When you've got billions of people, you've got millions at genius level, and you've got the stimulus of virulent cross-fertilization, of savage competition for advancement, of incredible need. So, puling hell, it's only logical, S'uthlam has achieved miraculous technological breakthroughs. They see our cities, our elevator, they see the visitors coming from a hundred worlds to study here, they see us eclipsing all the neighboring worlds. They *don't* see a catastrophe, and the church leaders say everything will be fine, so why the bloody hell should anybody stop breeding!" She slapped the table hard, turned to a waiter. "You!" she snapped. "More beer. And quick." She turned back to face Tuf. "So don't give me these naive suggestions. Birth restrictions are utterly infeasible given our situation. Impossible. You understand that, Tuf?"

"There is no need to impugn my intelligence," said Haviland Tuf. He stroked Havoc, who had settled into his lap, surfeit with ham. "The plight of S'uthlam has touched my heart. I shall endeavor to do what I can to relieve your world's distress."

"You'll sell us the *Ark*, then?" she said sharply.

"This is an unwarranted assumption," Tuf replied. "Yet I shall certainly do what I can in my capacity as an ecological engineer, before moving on to other worlds."

The waiters were bringing out the dessert—fat blue-green jellyfruit swimming in bowls of thickened, clotted cream. Havoc sniffed the cream and leapt up on to the table for a closer investigation as Haviland Tuf lifted the long silver spoon they had provided him.

Tolly Mune shook her head. "Take it away," she snapped, "too damn rich. Just beer for me."

Tuf looked up and raised a finger. "A moment! No use in letting your portion of this delightful confection go to waste. Havoc will surely enjoy it."

The Portmaster sipped a fresh mug of brown beer, and scowled. "I've run out of things to say, Tuf. We have a crisis here. We must have that ship. This is your last chance. Will you sell?"

Tuf looked at her. Havoc moved in quickly on the dessert. “My position is unchanged.”

“I’m sorry, then,” Tolly Mune said. “I didn’t want to do this.” She snapped her fingers. In the quiet of that moment, when the only sound was Havoc lapping at the clotted cream, the noise was like a gunshot. All around the clear crystalline walls, the tall, attentive waiters reached beneath their snug gold-and-black jackets and produced nerveguns.

Tuf blinked, and moved his head first right, then left, studying each man in turn while Havoc plundered his jellyfruit. “Treachery,” he said flatly. “I am gravely disappointed. My trust and good nature have been ill used.”

“You forced my hand. Tuf, you damned fool—”

“Such rank abuse exacerbates this betrayal rather than justifying it,” said Tuf, with spoon in hand. “Am I now to be secretly and villainously slain?”

“We’re civilized people,” Tolly Mune said angrily, furious at Tuf, at Josen Rael, at the goddamned Church of Life Evolving, and mostly at herself for letting it come to this. “No, you won’t be killed. We won’t even steal that goddamned derelict of a ship you care so damned much about. This is all legal, Tuf. You’re under arrest.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “Please accept my surrender. I am always anxious to comply with all pertinent local laws. On what charge am I to be tried?”

Tolly Mune smiled thinly, without joy, knowing full well they’d be calling her the Steel Widow in Spiderhome tonight. She pointed down to the far end of the table, where Havoc sat licking cream off her whiskers. “Bringing illegal vermin into the Port of S’uthlam,” she said.

Tuf laid down his spoon carefully and folded his hands atop his paunch. “It is my recollection that I brought Havoc here with me on your specific invitation.”

Tolly Mune shook her head. “Won’t wash, Tuf. I’ve got our talk recorded. True, I observed that I’d never seen a live animal before, but that’s a simple factual declaration, and no court could possibly construe it as an incitement for you to commit a criminal violation of our health statutes. No court of ours, anyway.” Her smile was almost apologetic.

“I see,” said Tuf. “In that case, let us dispense with time-consuming legal machinations. I will plead guilty and pay the prescribed fine for this minor infraction.”

“Good,” said Tolly Mune. “The fine is fifty standards.” She gestured, and one of her men strode forward and gathered up Havoc from the table. “Of course,” she finished, “the vermin in question must be destroyed.”

“I hate gravity,” Tolly Mune said to Josen Rael’s smiling, magnified face after she’d finished her report on the dinner. “It exhausts me, and I hate to think what all that goddamned *drag* does to my muscles, my internal organs. How can you worms live that way? And all that puling food! It was obscene the way he put it away, and the *smells...*”

“Portmaster, we have more important things to discuss,” Rael said. “It’s done, then? We have him?”

“We have his cat,” she said glumly. “More precisely, *I* have his goddamned cat.” As if on cue, Havoc yowled and pressed her face against the meshwork plasteel cage that the security men had rigged up in a corner of her apartment. The cat yowled a lot; it was distinctly uncomfortable in weightlessness, and kept spinning out of control when it tried to move. Every time it caromed off the side of the cage, Tolly Mune winced with guilt. “I was sure he’d thumb the transfer to save the puling cat.”

Josen Rael looked upset. “I can’t say I think much of your plan, Portmaster. Why in the name of life would anyone surrender a treasure the magnitude of this *Ark* to preserve an animal specimen? Especially

since you tell me he has other samples of the same type of vermin back aboard his craft?"

"Because he's got an emotional attachment to this particular vermin," Tolly Mune said, with a sigh.

"Except that Tuf is even cagier than I thought. He called my bluff."

"Destroy the vermin, then. Show him we mean what we say."

"Oh, be sane, Josen!" she replied impatiently. "Where does that leave us? If I go ahead and kill the damned cat, then I've got nothing. Tuf knows that, and he knows that I know that, and he knows that I know that he knows. At least this way, we've got something he wants. We're stalemated."

"We'll change the law," Josen Rael suggested. "Let me...yes, the penalty for smuggling vermin into port should include confiscation of the ship used for the smuggling!"

"A goddamned masterstroke," said Tolly Mune. "Too bad the charter prohibits retroactive laws."

"I have yet to hear a better plan from you."

"That's because I don't have one yet, Josen. But I will. I'll argue him out of it. I'll swindle him out of it. We know he's got weaknesses. Food, his cats. Maybe there's something else, something we can use. A conscience, a libido, a weakness for drink, for gambling." She paused, thoughtful. "Gambling," she repeated. "Right. He likes to play games." She pointed a finger at the screen. "Stay out of it. You gave me three days, and my time's not up yet. So hold your bladder." She wiped his features off the huge vidscreen, and replaced them with the darkness of space, with the *Ark* floating against a field of unwinking stars.

The cat somehow seemed to recognize the image up on the screen, and made a thin, plaintive mewing sound. Tolly Mune looked over, frowned, and asked to be put through to her security monitor. "Tuf," she barked, "where is he now?"

"In the Worldview Hotel starclass gaming salon, Ma," the woman on duty responded.

"The Worldview?" she groaned. "He would pick a goddamned worm palace, wouldn't he? What's that under, full gee? Oh, puling hell, never mind. Just see that he stays there. I'm coming down."

She found him playing five-sided quandary against a couple of elderly groundworms, a cybertech she had had suspended for systems-looting a few weeks back, and a moon-faced, fleshy trade negotiator from Jazbo. Judging from the mountain of counters stacked in front of him, Tuf was winning handily. She snapped her fingers, and the salon hostess came gliding over with a chair. Tolly Mune sat herself next to Tuf and touched him lightly on the arm. "Tuf," she said.

He turned his head and pulled away from her. "Kindly refrain from laying hands upon my person. Portmaster Mune."

She pulled her hand back. "What are you doing, Tuf?"

"At the moment, I am assaying an interesting new strategem of my own devising against Negotiator Dez. I fear it will be proved unsound, but we shall see. In a larger sense, I strive to earn a few meager standards through the application of statistical analysis and applied psychology. S'uthlam is by no means inexpensive, Portmaster Mune."

The Jazbot, his long hair gleaming with iridescent oils, his fat face covered with rank-scars, laughed roughly and displayed a mouth of polished black teeth inset with tiny crimson jewels. "I challenge, Tuf," he said, touching a button underneath his station to flash his array upon the lighted surface of the table.

Tuf leaned forward briefly. "Indeed," he said. A long pale finger moved appropriately, and his own formation lit up within the gaming circle. "I fear you are lost, sir. My experiment has been proven successful, though no doubt by mere fluke."

"Blast you and your damnable luck!" the Jazbot said, lurching unsteadily to his feet. More counters changed hands.

“So you game well,” Tolly Mune said to him. “It won’t do you a damned bit of good, Tuf. The odds in these places favor the house. You’ll never gamble your way to the money you need.”

“I am not unaware of this,” Tuf replied.

“Let’s talk.”

“We are engaged in talking at this very moment.”

“Let’s talk *privately*,” she stressed.

“During our last private discussion, I was set upon by men with nerveguns, verbally pummeled, cruelly deceived, deprived of a beloved companion, and denied the opportunity to enjoy dessert. I am not favorably predisposed to accept further invitations.”

“I’ll buy you a drink,” said Tolly Mune.

“Very well,” said Tuf. He rose ponderously, scooped up his counters, and bid farewell to the other players.

The two of them walked to a privacy booth on the far side of the gaming room, Tolly Mune puffing a bit from the strain of fighting gravity. Once inside, she slumped into the cushions, ordered iced narcoblaster for two and opaqued the curtain.

“The ingestion of narcotic beverages will have scant effect on my decision-making capacities, Portmaster Mune,” said Haviland Tuf, “and while I am willing to accept your largesse as a token of redress for your earlier perversion of civilized hospitality, my position is nonetheless unchanged.”

“What do you want, Tuf?” she said wearily, after the drinks had come. The tall glasses were rimmed with frost, the liquor cobalt blue and icy.

“Like all of humanity, I have many desires. At the moment I most urgently wish the safe return of Havoc to my custody.”

“I told you, I’ll swap the cat for the ship.”

“We have discussed this proposal, and I have rejected it as inequitable. Must we go over the same ground again?”

“I have a new argument,” she said.

“Indeed.” Tuf sipped at his drink.

“Consider the question of ownership, Tuf. By what right do you own the *Ark*? Did you build it? Did you have any role in its creation? Hell no.”

“I found it,” said Tuf. “True, this discovery was made in the company of five others, and it cannot be denied that their claims to ownership were, in some cases, superior to my own. They, however, are dead, and I am alive. This strengthens my claim considerably. Moreover, I presently possess the artifact in question. In many ethical systems, possession is the key, indeed oftentimes the overriding determinant of ownership.”

“There are worlds where the state owns everything of value, where your goddamned ship would have been seized out of hand.”

“I am mindful of this and purposely avoided such worlds when choosing my destination,” said Haviland Tuf.

“We could take your damned ship by force if we wanted, Tuf. Maybe it’s power that conveys ownership, eh?”

“It is true that you command the fierce loyalty of numerous lackey armed with nerveguns and lasers, while I am alone, a humble trader and neophyte ecological engineer, companioned only by his harmless cats. Nonetheless, I am not without certain small resources of my own. It is theoretically possible for me to

have programmed defenses into the *Ark* that would make such a seizure perhaps less easily accomplished than you imagine. Of course this supposition is entirely hypothetical, but you might do well to give it due consideration. In any case, brutal military action would be illegal under the laws of S'uthlam."

Tolly Mune sighed. "Some cultures hold that utility confers ownership. Others opt for need."

"I am not unfamiliar with these doctrines."

"Good. S'uthlam needs the *Ark* more than you do, Tuf."

"Incorrect. I have need of the *Ark* to pursue my chosen profession and earn a livelihood. Your world has no need of the ship itself, but rather of ecological engineering. Therefore I have offered you my services, only to find my generous offer spurned and dubbed insufficient. "

"Utility," Tolly Mune interrupted. "We have a whole goddamned world of brilliant scientists. You're nothing but a trader, by your own admission. We can make better use of the *Ark*."

"Your brilliant scientists are largely specialists in physics, chemistry, cybernetics, and other like fields. S'uthlam is not especially advanced in the areas of biology, genetics, or ecology. This is doubly obvious. If you possessed such expertise as you imply, firstly, your need for the *Ark* would not be urgent, and secondly, your ecological problem would never have been allowed to reach its present ominous proportions. Therefore I question your assertion that your people would put the ship to more efficient use. Since coming upon the *Ark* and commencing my voyage here, I have dutifully immersed myself in study, and I would be so bold as to suggest that I am now the single most qualified ecological engineer in human space, possibly excluding Prometheus."

Haviland Tuf's long white face was without expression; he shaped each pronouncement carefully and fired them at her in cool salvos. Yet, unflappable as he was, Tolly Mune sensed that behind Tuf's calm facade was a weakness—pride, ego, a vanity she could twist to her own ends. She jabbed a finger at his face. "Words, Tuf. Nothing but puling empty words. You can call yourself an ecological engineer, but that doesn't mean a damned thing. You can call yourself a jellyfruit, but you'd still look damned silly squatting in a bowl of clotted cream!"

"Indeed," Tug said.

"I'll make you a wager," she said, going for the kill, "that you don't know what the hell you're doing with that damned ship."

Haviland Tuf blinked, and made a steeple of his—hands on the table. "This is an interesting proposition," he said. "Continue."

Tolly Mune smiled. "Your cat against your ship," she said. "I've described our problem. Solve it, and you get back Havoc, safe and sound. Fail, and we get the *Ark*."

Tuf raised a finger. "This scheme is flawed. Although you set me a formidable task, I am not loath to accept such a challenge, were the suggested stakes not so imbalanced. The *Ark* and Havoc are both mine, though you have unscrupulously, albeit legally, seized custody of the latter. Therefore it appears that by winning, I simply get back that which is rightfully mine to begin with, whereas you stand to gain a great prize. This is inequitable. I have a counteroffer. I came to S'uthlam for certain repairs and alterations. In the event of my success, let this work be performed without cost to me."

Tolly Mune lifted her drink to her mouth to give herself a moment to consider. The ice had turned slushy, but the narcoblaster still had a nice sting to it. "Fifty million standards of free repairs? That's too damn much."

"Such was my opinion," said Tuf.

She grinned. "The cat," she said, "may have been yours to start with, but now she's ours. But I'll go this far on the repairs, Tuf—I'll give you credit."

“On what terms and at what interest rate?” Tuf asked.

“We’ll do the refitting,” she said, smiling. “We’ll start immediately. If you win—which you won’t—you get the cat back, and we’ll give you an interest-free loan for the cost of the repair bill. You can pay us off from the money you make out there”—she waved vaguely toward the rest of the universe—“doing your damned eco-engineering. But we get a lien on the *Ark*. If you haven’t paid half the money back in five standard years, or all of it in ten, the ship is ours.”

“The original estimate of fifty million standards was excessive,” Tuf said, “obviously an inflated figure intended solely to force me to sell you my ship. I suggest we settle on a sum of twenty million standards as the basis for this agreement.”

“Ridiculous,” she snapped. “My spinnerets couldn’t even *paint* your goddamned ship for twenty million standards. But I’ll go down to forty-five.”

“Twenty-five million,” Tuf suggested. “As I am alone aboard the *Ark*, it is not strictly necessary that all decks and systems be restored to full optimal function. A few distant, dysfunctional decks are of no ultimate importance. I will trim my work order to include only the repairs that must be made for my safety, comfort, and convenience.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “I’ll go to forty million.”

“Thirty,” Tuf insisted, “would seem more than enough.”

“Let’s not quibble over a few million standards,” said Tolly Mune. “You’re going to lose, so it doesn’t matter one hot damn.”

“I have a somewhat different viewpoint. Thirty million.”

“Thirty-seven,” she said.

“Thirty-two,” Tuf replied.

“Obviously, we’re going to settle on thirty-five, right? Done!” She stuck out her hand.

Tuf looked at it. “Thirty-four,” he said calmly.

Tolly Mune laughed, withdrew her hand, and said, “What does it matter? Thirty-four.”

Haviland Tuf stood up.

“Have another drink,” she said, gesturing. “To our little wager.”

“I fear I must decline,” Tuf said. “I will celebrate after I have won. For the nonce, there is work to do.”

“I cannot believe you’ve done this,” Josen Rael said, very loudly. Tolly Mune had turned the volume up high on her comm unit, to drown out the constant irritating protests of her captive cat.

“Give me a little sanity, Josen,” she said querulously. “This is goddamned brilliant.”

“You’ve *bet* the future of our world! Billions and billions of lives! Do you seriously expect me to honor this little pact of yours?”

Tolly Mune sucked on her beer bulb and sighed. Then, in the same voice she would have used to explain things to an especially slow child, she said, “We *can’t* lose, Josen. Think about it, if that wormy thing in your skull isn’t too atrophied by gravity to be capable of thought. Why the hell did we want the *Ark*? To feed ourselves, of course. To avoid the famine, to solve the problem, to work a puling biological miracle. To multiply the loaves and fishes.”

“Loaves and fishes?” the First Councillor said, baffled.

“Times infinity. It’s a classical allusion, Josen. Christian, I think. Tuf is going to take a try at making fish sandwiches for thirty billion. I think he’ll just get flour on his face and choke on a fish bone, but that

doesn't matter. If he fails, we get the goddamned seedship, all nice and legal. If he succeeds, we don't need the *Ark* any more. We win either way. And the way I got things rigged, even if Tuf does win, he'll still owe us thirty-four million standards. If by some miracle he pulls it off, odds are we'll get the ship anyway, when he comes up short on his damned note." She drank some more beer and grinned at him. "Josen, you're damned lucky I don't want your job. Has it ever dawned on you that I'm a lot smarter than you?"

"You're a lot less politic too, Ma," he said, "and I doubt you'd last a day in my job. I can't deny that you do yours well, however. I suppose your plan is viable."

"You *suppose*?" she said.

"There are political realities to consider. The expansionists want the ship itself, you must realize, against the day they regain power. Fortunately, they are a minority. We'll outvote them in council once again."

"See that you do, Josen," Tolly Mune said. She broke the connection and sat floating in the dimness of her home. On her vidscreen, the *Ark* came into view again. Her work crews were all over it now, jury-rigging a temporary dock. Permanence would come later. She expected the *Ark* to be around for a good few centuries, so they needed a place to keep the damned thing, and even if Tuf did make off with it by some freakish chance, a major expansion of the web was long overdue and would provide new docking facilities for hundreds of ships. With Tuf paying the bill, she saw no sense in postponing the construction any longer. A long translucent plasteel tube was being assembled, section by section, to link the huge seedship to the end of the nearest major spur, so shipments of materials and teams of spinnerets could reach it more easily. Cybertechs were already inside, linked to the ship's computer system, reprogramming to suit Tuf's requirements and, incidentally, dismantling any internal defenses he might have coded in. Secret orders from the Steel Widow herself; Tuf didn't know. It was just a little extra precaution, in case he was a poor loser. She didn't want any monsters or plagues popping out of her prize box when she opened it.

As for Tuf, her sources said he had been in his own computer room almost continuously since leaving the Worldview's gaming salon. On her authority as Portmaster, the council databanks had been authorized to give him whatever information he required, and he certainly required a great deal, from the reports she was getting. He had the *Ark*'s own computers data-storming extensive series of projections and simulations. Tolly Mune had to give him credit; he was giving it his best.

The cage in the corner thumped as Havoc crashed against its side and gave out a small, hurt mew. She felt sorry for the cat. She felt sorry for Tuf, too. Maybe, when he failed, she'd see if she couldn't get him that Longhaul Nine anyway.

Forty-seven days passed.

Forty-seven days passed with the work crews working triple-shift, so the activity around the *Ark* was constant, unrelenting, and frenetic. The web crawled out to the seedship and covered it; cables snaked around it like vines; a network of pneumatic tubes plunged in and out of its airlocks as if it were a dying man in a downstairs medcenter; plasteel bubbles swelled out on its hull like fat silver pimples; tendrils of steel and duralloy crisscrossed it like veins; vacuum sleds buzzed about its immensity like stinging insects trailing fire; and everywhere, inside and out, walked platoons of spinnerets. Forty-seven days passed and the *Ark* was repaired, refinished, modernized, restocked.

Forty-seven days passed without Haviland Tuf leaving his ship for so much as a minute. At first he lived in his computer room, the spinnerets reported, with the simulations running day and night and the data crashing in all around him. These past few weeks he had most often been seen riding in a small three-wheeled cart down the thirty-kilometer length of the seedship's huge central shaft, a green duck-billed cap perched atop his head, a small long-haired gray cat in his lap. He took only scant and perfunctory notice of the S'uthlamese workers, but at intervals he would pull over to recalibrate

instrumentation at scattered random work stations or check the endless series of vats, large and small, that lined those towering walls. The cybertechs noticed that certain cloning programs were up and running, and that the chronowarp had been engaged, drawing off enormous amounts of energy. Forty-seven days passed with Tuf in near seclusion, companioned only by Chaos, working.

Forty-seven days passed during which Tolly Mune talked neither to Tuf nor to First Councillor Josen Rael. Her duties as Portmaster, neglected during the onset of the *Ark* crisis, were more than sufficient to keep her occupied. She had disputes to hear and adjudicate, promotions to review, construction to supervise, beribboned fly diplomats to entertain before flushing them down the elevator, budgets to draw up, payrolls to thumb. And she had a cat to deal with, too.

At first, Tolly Mune feared the worst. Havoc refused to eat, seemed unable to reconcile herself to weightlessness, fouled the air in the Portmaster's apartment with her waste products, and insisted on making some of the most pitiful noises the Portmaster had ever had the misfortune to hear. She got worried enough to bring in her chief verminologist, who assured her that the cage was spacious enough and the portions of protein paste were more than adequate. The she-cat did not agree, and continued to sicken, mewling and hissing until Tolly Mune was certain that insanity, either feline or human, was just around the corner.

Finally she took steps. She discarded the nutritious protein paste and began to feed the creature with the meat-sticks Tuf had sent over from the *Ark*. The ferocity with which Havoc attacked them when she thrust the ends through the bars was reassuring. Once she licked at Tolly Mune's fingers after consuming a stick in record time; it was a strange sensation, but not entirely unpleasant. The cat took to rubbing up against the cage, too, as if she wanted contact; Tolly touched her tentatively, and was repaid with a far more pleasant sound than the cat had uttered previously. The touch of the creature's black-and-white fur was almost sensuous.

After eight days, she let it out of its cage. The larger confines of the office would be a sufficient prison, she thought. No sooner did Tolly Mune slide back the cage door than Havoc bounded through, but when the bound took her sailing clear across the room, she began hissing wildly in distress. Tolly kicked off after her and snatched her as she tumbled, but the cat struggled wildly, clawing long gashes down the backs of her hands. After the medtech had come and gone, Tolly Mune called through to security. "Requisition a room in the Worldview," she said, "a tower room with gravity control. Tell them to set the grid for one-quarter gee."

"Who's the guest?" they asked her.

"A port prisoner," she snapped, "armed and dangerous."

After the move, she visited the hotel daily at the end of her work-shift, at first strictly to feed her hostage and check on its welfare. By the fifteenth day, she was lingering long enough to soak up a few calories and give the cat the contact it craved. The beast's personality had changed dramatically. It made sounds of pleasure when she opened the door for her daily inspection (although it still tried constantly to escape), rubbed up against her leg without provocation, kept its claws sheathed, and even seemed to be growing fat. Whenever Tolly Mune permitted herself to sit, Havoc was in her lap instantly. On the twentieth day she slept over. On the twenty-sixth she moved in temporarily.

Forty-seven days passed, and by the end of them Havoc had grown accustomed to sleeping next to her, curled up on her pillow, her soft black-and-white fur brushing against the Portmaster's cheek.

On the forty-eighth day, Haviland Tuf called. If he was shocked to see his cat nestled in her lap, he gave no sign. "Portmaster Mune," he said.

"Give up yet?" she asked him.

"Scarcely," Tuf replied. "In point of fact, I stand ready to claim my victory."

It was too important a meeting for a tele-link, even a shielded tele-link, Josen Rael had ruled. The Vandeeni might have ways of penetrating the shields. And yet, because Tolly Mune had dealt with Tuf firsthand and might understand him in a way the council could not, her presence was imperative, and her aversion to gravity was considered unimportant. She took the elevator down to the surface, for the first time in more years than she cared to contemplate, and was whisked by aircab to the highest chamber atop the council tower.

The huge drafty room had a certain spartan dignity. It was dominated by a long, wide conference table with a mirror-bright monitor-top. Josen Rael sat in the position of authority, in a high-backed black chair with the globe of S'uthlam worked in three-dimensional relief above his head. "Portmaster Mune," he said, nodding to her as she struggled to an unoccupied seat near the foot of the table.

The room was crowded with the powerful—the inner council, the elite of the technocratic faction, key bureaucrats. Half her life had passed since the last time she had been summoned downstairs, but Tolly Mune watched the newsfeeds, and recognized many of the people—the young councillor for agriculture, surrounded by under-councillors, his assistants for botanical research, oceanic development, food processing. The councillor for war and his cyborg tactician. The transport administrator. The curator of the databanks and her chief analyst. The councillors for internal security, science and technology, interstellar relations, industry. The commander of the Planetary Defense Flotilla. The senior officer of the world police. They all nodded at her blankly.

To his credit, Josen Rael dispensed with all formality. "You've had a week with Tuf's projections and the seedstock and samples he provided us," he asked his council. "Well?"

"It's difficult to judge with any degree of accuracy," said the data analyst. "His projections may be right on target or they may be completely wrong, based on mistaken assumptions. I can't begin to check for accuracy until, well, I'd say it will take several plantings at least, several years. These things Tuf has cloned for us, these plants and animals and the like, all of them are new to S'uthlam. Until we have some hard experience with them, to determine how they will flourish under S'uthlamese conditions, we can't be certain how much of a difference they'll make."

"If any," said the councillor for internal security, a short square brick of a woman.

"If any," echoed the analyst.

"You're being much too conservative," the councillor for agriculture interrupted. He was the youngest man in the room, brash and outspoken, and at the moment his smile looked as though it might crack his thin face clean in two. "My reports are all positively *glowing*." He had a tall pile of crystal data-chips on the conference table in front of him. He spread them out and shoved one into a port on his station; lines of readout began to scroll down the mirrored table-top, below the polished surface. "This is our analysis of the thing he calls omni-grain," the councillor said. "Incredible, really incredible. A gene-tailored hybrid, completely edible. *Completely edible*, councillors, every part of the plant. The stalks grow waist high, like neograss, very high in carbohydrates, crunchy texture, not at all bad with a little dressing, but primarily useful as fodder for food animals. The heads yield an excellent cereal grain with a better food-to-chaff ratio than nanowheat or s'rice. The yield is easy to transport, stores forever without refrigeration, is impossible to bruise, and is high in protein. And the roots are edible tubers! Not only that, but it grows so damn fast that it will give us twice as many crops per season. Just guesswork, of course, but I estimate that if we plant omni-grain on the kays we've got allotted to nanowheat, neograss, and s'rice, we'll reap three, four times the calories from the same plots."

"It must have some disadvantages," Josen Rael objected. "It sounds too good to be true. If this omni-grain is so perfect, why haven't we heard of it before? Tuf certainly didn't gene-splice it together in these past few months."

"Of course not. It's been around for centuries. I found a reference to it in the databanks, believe it or not. It was developed by the EEC during the war, as military fodder. The stuff grows so quickly that it's ideal

when you're not sure whether you'll be reaping the crops you're sowing or fertilizing them, ah, personally. But it was never adapted by civilians. The taste was considered inferior. Not awful or unpleasant, you understand, just inferior to existing grains. Also, it exhausts the soil in a very short time."

"Aha," said the councillor for internal security. "So it's a trap of sorts?"

"By itself, yes. You'd get maybe five years of bountiful crops and then disaster. But Tuf has also sent along some vermin—incredible things, super-worms and other aerators—and a symbiote, a kind of slime-mold that will grow together with the omni-grain without harming it, living off—get this now—living off *air pollution* and certain kinds of useless petrochemical waste, and using that to restore and enrich the soil." He threw up his hands. "It's an incredible breakthrough! If our own research teams had developed this, we'd have already declared a holiday."

"What about the other things?" Josen Rael asked curtly. The First Councillor's face did not reflect any of the enthusiasm of his subordinate.

"Almost as exciting," was the reply. "The oceans—we've *never* been able to get a decent caloric yield from the oceans, relative to their size, and the last administration practically fished them to extinction with their sea-sweepers. Tuf is giving us a dozen new sorts of fast-breeding fish, and a variety of plankton..." He fished around in front of him, found another data-chip, plugged it in. "Here, this plankton, it will gum up the sea lanes, certainly, but ninety percent of our commerce is subsurface or airborne, so it doesn't matter. The fish will thrive on it, and under the right conditions, the plankton itself will grow so thick it will cover the water to a depth of three meters, like some vast gray-green carpet."

"An alarming prospect," said the councillor for war. "Is it edible? By humans, I mean."

"No." The agri-councillor grinned. "But when it's dead and decaying, it will serve admirably as a raw material for our food factories, once the petroleum runs out."

All the way down at the far end of the table, Tolly Mune laughed loudly. Heads turned to face her. "I'll be damned," she said. "He gave us loaves and fishes after all."

"The plankton's not really a fish," the councillor said.

"If it lives in the goddamned ocean, it's a puling fish as far as I'm concerned."

"Loaves and fishes?" asked the councillor for industry.

"Go on with your report," Josen Rael said impatiently. "Was there anything else?"

There was. There was a nutritious lichen that would grow on the highest mountains, and another that could survive even in airless conditions under hard radiation. "More Larder asteroids," announced the agricultural councillor, "without having to spend decades and billions of cal terraforming." There were parasitic food-vines that would infest S'uthlam's steamy equatorial swamps and gradually choke out and displace the fragrant and poisonous native forms that now grew there in profusion. There was a grain called snow-oats that would grow on frozen tundra, and tunnel-tubers that could honeycomb even the frozen earth beneath a glacier with huge airy passages walled by buttery brown nut-meat. There were genetically improved cattle, pigs, fowl, and fish; a new bird that Tuf claimed would eliminate the leading S'uthlamese agricultural pest; and seventy-nine new varieties of edible mushroom and fungus that could be raised in the darkness of the undercities and nourished with human waste products.

And when the councillor had finished his report, there was silence.

"He's won," Tolly Mune said, grinning. The rest were all deferring to Josen Rael, but she was damned if she was going to sit and play politics. "I'll be damned, Tuf actually did it."

"We do not know that," said the databanks curator.

"It will be years before we have meaningful statistics," said the analyst.

"There may be a trap," warned the councillor for war. "We must be cautious."

“Oh, to hell with that,” said Tolly Mune. “Tuf has proved that—”

“*Portmaster!*” interrupted Josen Rael, very sharply.

Tolly Mune closed her mouth; she had never heard him use that tone before. The others all looked at him as well.

Josen Rael took out a cloth and mopped the perspiration from his brow. “What Haviland Tuf has proven, beyond any doubt, is that the *Ark* is far too valuable for us to even consider letting it go. We will now discuss how best to seize it, while minimizing the loss of life and the diplomatic repercussions.” He called upon the councillor for internal security.

Portmaster Tolly Mune listened quietly to her report, and sat through an hour of the discussion that followed, while they argued about tactics, the proper diplomatic stance, the most efficient utilization of the seedship, which department ought to take charge of it, and what to say to the newsfeeds. The discussion promised to last half the night, but Josen Rael said firmly that they would not break until the whole affair had been settled to the last jot and tittle. Food was ordered, records were sent for, subordinates and specialists were summoned and dismissed. Josen Rael gave orders that they were not to be interrupted for any reason whatsoever. Tolly Mune listened. Finally, she got unsteadily to her feet. “Sorry,” she apologized, “it’s...it’s the puling gravity. Not used to it. Where’s the nearest sani...sanitary...ulp.”

“Of course, Portmaster,” said Josen Rael. “Outside, the left corridor, fourth door down.”

“Thank you,” she said. They resumed talking as Tolly Mune staggered outside. She could hear their droning through the door. There was one police guard. She nodded to him, walked off briskly, and turned right.

Once out of his sight, she began to run.

On the roofdeck she commandeered an aircab. “The elevator,” she snapped, “and scream it.” She showed him her priority band.

A train was just about to leave. It was full. She bumped a starclass passenger. “Emergency in the web,” she said. “I have to get back in a hurry.” They made a record ascent, since after all she was Ma Spider, and transportation was waiting in Spiderhome to whisk her to her quarters.

She sailed in, sealed the door, turned on her comm, coded it to transmit a recording of her deputy’s face, and tried to punch through to Josen Rael. “I’m sorry,” the computer said with cybernetic sympathy. “He’s in meeting, and cannot be interrupted at this time. Would you care to leave a message?”

“No,” she said. She sent her own image when she punched through to her foreman out on the *Ark*. “How are things floating, Frakker?”

He looked tired, but he managed a smile for her. “We’re going great, Ma,” he said. “I guesstimate ninety-one percent done. Work will be complete in another six, seven days, and then it will be just clean-up.”

“The work’s done now,” Tolly Mune said.

“What?” He looked baffled.

“Tuf has been lying to us,” she said glibly. “He’s a con man, a puling abortion, and I’m pulling the crews on him.”

“I don’t understand,” the cybertech said.

“Sorry. Details are classified, Frakker. You know how it goes. Just get off the *Ark*. All of you. Spinnerets, cybertechs, security, everybody. I’ll give you an hour, then I’m coming over, and if I find anybody on that derelict except Tuf and his goddamned vermin, I’ll ship their rectums out to the Larder faster than you can say *Steel Widow*, you got that?”

“Uh, yes.”

“I mean *now!*” snapped Tolly Mune. “*Move, Frakker.*”

She cleared the screen, keyed in a top-priority shield, and placed her final call. Haviland Tuf, infuriatingly, had instructed the *Ark* to screen his calls while he napped. It took her fifteen priceless minutes to find the right formula of words to convince the idiot machine that this was an emergency.

“Portmaster Mune,” Tuf responded when his image finally materialized before her, wearing an absurd fuzzy robe belted around his overample stomach. “To what do I owe the singular delight of your call?”

“The refitting is ninety percent done,” Tolly Mune said. “Everything important. You’ll have to live with anything we left undone. My spinnerets are scuttling off down the web, fast. They’ll all be gone in, uh, now it’s down to forty-odd minutes. When that time’s up, I want you out of port, Tuf.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“You’re spaceworthy,” she said. “I’ve seen your specs. You’ll rip apart the dock, but there’s no time to pull it down and it’s a small price to pay for what you’ve done. Shift to drive and get out of our system and don’t look back over your shoulder, unless you want to turn to goddamned salt.”

“I fail to understand,” said Haviland Tuf.

Tolly Mune sighed. “So do I, Tuf, so do I. Don’t argue with me. Prepare for departure.”

“Am I to make the assumption that your High Council found my humble offering to be a satisfactory solution to your crisis, so that I have been adjudged winner of our wager?”

She groaned. “Yes, if that’s what you want to hear, you give great vermin, they loved the omni-grain, the slime-mold was a real hit, you win, you’re brilliant, you’re wonderful. Now scream it, Tuf, before someone thinks to ask the sickly old Portmaster a question and they notice that I’m gone.”

“Your haste has left me nonplussed,” said Haviland Tuf, folding his hands calmly atop his paunch and staring at her.

“*Tuf,*” Tolly Mune said, from between clenched teeth. “You won your goddamned wager, but you’ll lose your ship if you don’t wake up and learn to dance. Get moving! Do I have to spell it out for you, damn it? Treachery, Tuf. Violence. Betrayal. Right at this very moment, the High Council of S’uthlam is discussing all the fine details of how to grab the *Ark* and dispose of you, and arguing about what kind of perfume will make it smell the best. Now do you understand? As soon as they finish talking, and it won’t be long, they’ll give the orders, and security will be converging on you with vacuum sleds and nerveguns. The Planetary Defense Flotilla has four protector-class ships and two dreadnaughts in the web right now, and if they go on alert, you might not even be able to run. I don’t want any goddamned space battle slagging my port and killing my people.”

“An understandable aversion,” Tuf said. “I shall initiate immediate implementation of departure programming. One small difficulty remains, however.”

“What?” she said, all wire-edged impatience.

“Havoc remains in your custody. I cannot leave S’uthlam until she has been returned safely to me.”

“Forget the puling cat!”

“A selective memory is not among my capabilities,” Tuf said. “I have fulfilled my portion of our understanding. You must return Havoc or be in breach of contract.”

“I *can’t,*” Tolly Mune said angrily. “Every fly, worm, and spinneret in the station knows that damned cat is our hostage. If I jump on a train with Havoc under my arm, it will be noticed, and someone is going to ask questions. Wait for that cat, and you’re risking everything. “

“Nonetheless,” said Haviland Tuf, “I fear I must insist.”

“Goddamn you,” swore the Portmaster. She wiped out his image with a single furious snap of her fingers.

When she reached the Worldview's lofty atrium, the host greeted her with a brilliant smile. "Portmaster!" he said happily. "How good to see you. You're being paged, you know. If you'd care to take the call in my private office..."

"Sorry," she said, "pressing business. I'll check in from the room." She rushed past him to the elevators.

Outside the door were the guards she had posted. "Portmaster Mune," the left one said. "We were notified to watch for you. You're to call in to the security office at once."

"Certainly," she said. "You two, get down to the atrium, and fast."

"Is there a problem?"

"A big one. A brawl. I don't think the staff can handle it alone."

"We'll take care of it, Ma." They ran off together.

Tolly Mune went inside. The room was a relief; only a quarter gee, compared to the full gravity of the corridors and atrium. It was a tower suite. Beyond a triple-thick window of transparent plasteel was the vast globe of S'uthlam, the rocky surface of Spiderhome, and the brilliance of the web. She could even see the bright line that was the *Ark*, shining in the yellow light of S'ulstar.

Havoc was curled up asleep on the floater cushion in front of the window, but the cat hopped down when she entered and came bounding across the carpet, purring loudly. "I'm glad to see you, too," Tolly Mune said, scooping up the creature. "But now I have to get you out of here." She looked around for something large enough to hide her hostage.

The comm unit began to scream at her. She ignored it and continued to search. "Goddamn it," she said furiously. She had to hide the puling cat, but how? She tried wrapping her up in a towel, but Havoc didn't like that idea at all.

The comm unit cleared—a security override. The head of port security was staring at her. "Portmaster Mune," he said, deferential for the moment, though she wondered how long that would last once the situation became clear to him. "There you are. The First Councillor seems to believe you have some difficulty. Is there a problem?"

"None at all," she said. "Is there any reason for intruding on my privacy, Danja?"

He looked abashed. "My apologies, Ma. Orders. We were instructed to locate you immediately and report on your whereabouts."

"Do that," she said.

He apologized again and the screen blanked. Obviously, no one had yet informed him that the *Ark* was being cleared. Good, that bought her a bit more cushion. She moved methodically through the suite one final time, taking a good ten minutes to search everywhere and anywhere for something to stash Havoc in, before she finally gave it up as a lost cause. She'd just have to brazen it out, stride to the docks and requisition vacuum sled, skinthins, and a carrier for the cat. She moved toward the door, opened it, stepped out...and saw the guards running toward her. She darted back inside. Havoc yowled in protest. Tolly Mune triple-locked the door and raised the privacy shield. That didn't stop them from banging. "Portmaster Mune," one of them called through the door, "there was no brawl. Open please, we need to talk."

"Go away," she snapped. "Orders."

"Sorry, Ma," he replied, "they want us to take that cat downstairs. That's right from the council, they say."

Behind her, the comm unit came on once more. This time it was the councillor for internal security herself.

"Tolly Mune," the woman said, "you are wanted for questioning. Surrender yourself immediately."

"I'm right here," Tolly Mune snapped back. "Ask your goddamned questions." The guards kept

pounding on the door.

“Explain your return to port,” the woman said.

“I work here,” Tolly Mune said sweetly.

“Your actions are not in accord with policy. They have not been approved by High Council.”

“High Council’s actions haven’t been approved by me,” the Portmaster said. Havoc hissed at the screen.

“Place yourself under arrest, if you please.”

“I’d rather not.” She lifted a small, thick table—it was easy under a quarter gee—and sent it sailing into the vidscreen. The councillor’s square features disintegrated in a shower of glass and sparks.

At the door, the guards had coded in a security override. She countermanded it, using Portmaster’s priority, and heard one of them swearing. “Ma,” the other one said, “that won’t do any good. Open up, now. You can’t get by us and it won’t take them more than ten, twenty minutes to cancel your priority.”

He was right, Tolly Mune realized. She was trapped, and once they unsealed the door it was all over. She looked around helplessly, searching for a weapon, a way out, anything. There was nothing.

Far away at the end of the web the *Ark* shone with reflected sunlight. It ought to be clear by now. She hoped Tuf had had the sense to seal up tight when the last spinneret had departed. But would he leave without Havoc? She looked down, stroked the cat’s fur. “All this trouble for you,” she said. Havoc purred. She looked back at the *Ark*, then at the door.

“We could pump some gas in,” one of the guards was saying. “The room’s not airtight, after all.”

Tolly Mune smiled.

She placed Havoc back on the floater cushion, climbed up on a chair, and pulled the cover off the emergency sensor box. It had been a long time since she’d done any mech work. It took her a few moments to trace the circuits, and a few more moments to puzzle out how to make the sensors think the airseal had been broken. When she did, an alarm claxon began to shrill hideously in her ear. There was a sudden hissing and foaming around the edges of the door as the airseal was activated. The gravity went out, the air stopped circulating, and on the far side of the room, a panel slid open on the cache of emergency vacuum gear.

Tolly Mune moved to it quickly. Inside were breather-pacs, airjets, a half dozen sets of skinthins. She dressed and sealed herself up. “Come here,” she said to Havoc. The cat didn’t like all the noise. “Careful now, don’t claw the fabric.” She shoved Havoc inside a bubble helmet, attached it to a limp set of skinthins, clipped on a breather pac and turned it all the way up, way past the recommended pressure. The skinthins inflated like a balloon. The cat tried her claws against the inside of the plasteel helmet and yowled piteously. “I’m sorry,” said Tolly Mune. She let Havoc float in mid-room while she removed the laser torch from its brackets.

“Who said it was a puling false alarm?” she said as she kicked herself toward the window, torch in hand.

“Perhaps you would care for some mulled mushroom wine,” said Haviland Tuf. Havoc was rubbing up against his leg. Chaos was up his shoulder, long gray tail twitching, peering down at the black-and-white cat as if he were trying to remember just who that was. “You appear to be tired.”

“Tired?” Tolly Mune said. She laughed. “I just burned my way out of a starclass hotel and crossed kilometers of open space, flying on nothing but airjets and using my feet to tug along a cat in an over-inflated pair of skinthins. I had to outdistance the first security squad they scrambled from the dockside ready-room, and use a laser torch to cripple the sled the second bunch came cruising up on, dodging their snares the whole time, still pulling your damned cat. Then I got to spend a half-hour crawling around on the outside of the *Ark*, knocking on the hull like a brain-damage case, all the time

watching my port go insane with activity. I lost the cat twice and had to chase her down again before she floated off to S'uthlam, and whenever I misjudged an airblast, off we went. Then a puling *dreadnought* came heaving up at me. I got to enjoy the suspense of wondering when the hell you'd raise your defense sphere, and got to relish the exciting pyrotechnics when the flotilla decided to test your screens. I had a nice long time to ponder whether they'd see me, crawling around like so much vermin on the skin of some damned animal, and Havoc and I had this great conversation about what we'd do when it occurred to them to send in a wave of security on sleds. We decided I'd speak sternly to them and she'd scratch their eyes out. And then you *finally* notice us and drag us inside just as the goddamned flotilla is opening up with plasma torpedoes. And you think I might be *tired*?"

"There is no call for sarcasm," said Haviland Tuf.

Tolly Mune snorted. "Do you have a vacuum sled?"

"Your crew abandoned four in their haste to depart."

"Good. I'll take one with me." A glance at the instruments told her that Tuf finally had the seedship under way. "What's happening out there?"

"The flotilla continues to hound me," said Tuf. "The dreadnaughts *Double Helix* and *Charles Darwin* pursue, with their protector escorts close astern, and a cacophony of commanders clamor at me, making rude threats, stern martial pronouncements, and insincere entreaties. Their efforts are to no avail. My defensive screens, now that your spinnerets have so excellently restored them to full function, are more than equal to any weaponry in the S'uthlamese armory."

"Don't test it," Tolly Mune said sourly. "Just get into drive as soon as I'm gone, and get the hell out of here."

"This is sound advice," Haviland Tuf agreed.

Tolly Mune looked at the banks of vidscreens along both walls of the long, narrow communications room that they had refitted as Tuf's control center. Slumped in her chair and crumpled under the gravity, she suddenly looked and felt her age.

"What will become of you?" Tuf asked.

She looked at him. "Oh, that's a choice question. Disgrace. Arrest. Removal from office—maybe trial for high treason. Don't worry, they won't execute me. Execution is anti-life. A penal farm on the Larders, I suppose." She sighed.

"I see," said Haviland Tuf. "Perhaps you might wish to reconsider my offer to furnish you with transportation out of the S'uthlamese system. I would be only too glad to take you to Skrymir or Henry's World. If you wished to remove yourself further from the site of your infamy, I understand that Vagabond is quite pleasant during its Long Springs."

"You'd sentence me to a life under gravity," she said. "No thanks. This is my world, Tuf. Those are my own puling people. I'll go back and take what comes. Besides, you're not getting off the hook that easily." She pointed. "You owe me, Tuf."

"Thirty-four million standards, as I recall," Tuf said.

She grinned.

"Madam," said Tuf, "if I might so bold as to ask—"

"I didn't do it for you," she said quickly.

Haviland Tuf blinked. "My pardon if I seem to be prying into your motives. Such is not my intent. I fear curiosity will be my downfall someday, but for the nonce I must inquire—why *did* you do it?"

Portmaster Tolly Mune shrugged. "Believe it or not, I did it for Josen Rael."

“The First Councillor?” Tuf blinked again.

“Him, and the others. I knew Josen when he was just starting out. He’s not a bad man, Tuf. He’s not evil. None of them are evil. They’re decent men and women, doing their best. All they want to do is to feed their children.”

“I do not understand your logic,” said Haviland Tuf.

“I sat at that meeting, Tuf. I sat there and listened to them talk, and I heard what the *Ark* had done to them. They were honest, honorable, ethical people, and the *Ark* had already turned them into cheats and liars. They believe in peace, and they were talking about the war they might have to fight to keep this puling ship of yours. Their entire creed is based on the holy sanctity of human life, and they were blithely discussing how much killing might be necessary—starting with yours. You ever study history, Tuf?”

“I make no special claims to expertise, but neither am I entirely ignorant of what has gone before.”

“There’s an ancient saying, Tuf. Came out of Old Earth. Power corrupts, it went, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing. Havoc bounded onto his knees and settled down. He began to stroke her with a huge pale hand.

“The dream of the *Ark* had already begun to corrupt my world,” Tolly Mune told him. “What the hell would the reality of possession have done to us? I didn’t want to find out.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “A further question suggests itself.”

“What’s that?”

“I now control the *Ark*,” Tuf said, “and therefore wield near absolute power.”

“Oh, yes,” Tolly Mune said.

Tuf waited, saying nothing.

She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe I didn’t think things through. Maybe I was just making it up as I went along. Maybe I’m the biggest damned fool you’ll find for light-years.”

“You do not seriously believe this,” said Tuf.

“Maybe I just figured it was better you got corrupted than my own people. Maybe I think you’re naive and harmless. Or maybe it was instinct.” She sighed. “I don’t know if there is such a thing as an incorruptible man, but if there is, you’re the one, Tuf. The last goddamned innocent. You were willing to lose the whole thing for her.” She pointed at Havoc. “For a cat. Damned puling vermin.” But she smiled as she said it.

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf.

The Portmaster pulled herself wearily to her feet. “Now it’s time to go back and make that speech to a less appreciative audience,” she said. “Point me to the sleds and tell them that I’m coming out.”

“Very well,” said Tuf. He raised a finger. “One further point remains to be clarified. As your crews did not complete all of the agreed-upon work, I do not think it equitable to charge me the full price of thirty-four million standards. I suggest an adjustment. Would thirty-three million five-hundred thousand standards be acceptable to you?”

She stared at him. “What difference does it make?” she asked. “You’re never coming back.”

“I beg to differ,” said Haviland Tuf.

“We tried to steal your ship,” she said.

“True. Perhaps thirty-three million would be fair, the rest being considered a penalty of sorts.”

“You’re really planning to return?” Tolly Mune said.

“In five years,” said Tuf, “the first payment on the loan will be due. By that time, moreover, we will be able to judge what effect, if any, my small contributions have had upon your food crisis. Perhaps more ecological engineering will be necessary.”

“I don’t believe it,” she said, astonished.

Haviland Tuf reached up to his shoulder and scratched Chaos behind the ear. “Why,” he asked reproachfully, “are we always doubted?”

The cat did not reply.