

Anne McCaffrey - Tsw 6 Honeymoon

For those of you who have consistently asked for more Helva stories, here is "Honeymoon." Only it's an un'story. I call it that because it cannot stand without a lot of explanation which really makes the minor incident that is the meat of the story much too top' heavy. You really ought to have read at least "The Ship Who Sang," the story, if not the full novel, to understand what is left out.

I have often called Helva my alter ego. "The Ship Who Sang" is my favorite story; I still cannot reread it without weeping, for I wrote it in an unconscious attempt to ease my grief over the death of my father, the Colonel. The other yams in the novel were therapy for other personal problems, none of which actually figure in the plots. So, although this tale should have been the starting point of a new volume about Niall Parollan and Helva, I don't really yet know if Helva will sing again. "Honeymoon" does tie up the one loose end which the majority of my readers have complained to me about.

well, that young Honeymoon

"MAY I COME ABOARD, HELVA?"

Helva said yes without thinking because the traffic in technicians and Base officials attending to her refitting was constant. Then, she checked identity because while the voice was familiar, no technician would have couched such a formal request.

Rocco, Regulus representative for Mutant Minorities, was her unexpected caller. With the easy manner of one used to the protocol of brainbrawn ships, the Double M man saluted her behind the central column and sauntered into the lounge, looking about him with interest at the choice artifacts Niall had introduced, the circuit prints and cables draped about the control console, the pattern of dust and grit leading toward her engineering and cargo compartments.

"I've stopped apologizing for the mess," Helva said, "but the galley's intact if you don't mind serving yourself while Niall's not here..."

"I'm here because he isn't, Helva," Rocco said, refusing her hospitality with a courteous gesture and seating himself facing her panel.

"In which capacity? Double M, or Rocco?"

"Unofficially, but Rocco is always willing." Then he hesitated, biting the corner of his lip while Helva waited, amused that the suave, fashionably attired troubleshooter for Double M was at a loss for words. He'd had no block a scant seven days ago when he'd been needling Chief Raily before she'd extended her Central Worlds contract. "Let's just say that I had an interesting conversation yesterday which leads me to beg the indulgence of a chat—an unofficial chatwith you."

"On what subject?"

"Coercion?"

"Whose?" Helva was amused.

"Yours, primarily. Parollan's.. man can take care of himself."

Helva chuckled. "Now, Mr. Rocco, you were in Chief Raily's office that day."

Rocco impatiently brushed that side. "Yes, I heard the official line. They got you to extend your original contract with them... which was almost legal."

"Very legal, Rocco. I did some surreptitious checking myself. And I got them..."

Rocco held up his hand, peremptorily cutting her off. "Did or did not Raily deploy a detachment around you, effectively preventing you from lifting off if you'd so desired? And did or did not Parollan have to short out a perimeter fence to get to you?" "There was a little misunderstanding..." "Little?" Rocco's swarthy face darkened to emphasize that single explosion. "My dear Helva, I have my sources, too. Raily had the entire planetary security force, civilian and service, looking for Parollan."

"I had Broley on my side." Helva chuckled for the city shell person's cooperation had been involuntary. Broley still wasn't speaking to her because she hadn't opted for independent status and taken on one of the clients he had lined up for her. "So you did. Do you now?" "Oh, he'll sulk a while longer, I expect." Rocco hitched himself to the edge of the couch. "Now, look, Helva, I know what it says on paper but I also know that Parollan's resignation from the Service is still in effect. Oh, he's brawning you to Beta Corvi, but there isn't anything contractual after that." "So?"

"Helva, I don't mean for you to be left high and dry. Especially with an incredible extension of debt which you must work off. And with Chief Raily overtly your enemy because of Parollan. Now that guy may have been a brawnbrain ship supervisor for the last twelve years, and bloody good at it from what I hear, but that doesn't mean he's going to be a good brawn. By anything left holy, Helva, it's a long way from telling to doing."

"Do you remember my last brawn, Teron of Achion, that welltrained, physically stalwart twithead?"

Rocco gave a long sigh that ended with a grudging grin. "Okay, so he was a dud that BB School turned out by mistake. You can go too far in the opposite direction." Obviously Rocco felt she had with Parollan. "Seriously, Helva, that contract extension makes my skin crawl. You're committed to repaying almost 600,000 credits... by the latest figuring."

"You do have good sources, Rocco."

He grinned again, maliciously. "In Double M, I've got to. Look, there's a lot more to this whole affair than the fact that in a scant ten years you paid off your original indebtedness to Central Worlds for your early childhood care, the initial shell, education, the surgery needed to fit you into this ship, maintenance, and so forth."

"I paid off partly due to Niall Parollan, remember?"

"Granted, granted."

"And when this cyclevariant drive we're taking back to Beta Corvi gets approved, we'll be out of debt in next to no time."

"Not when, Helva. // If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. I saw the reports on that cyclevariant drive, Helva. I heard what happened to the manned test ship."

Helva snorted with contempt. "Hamhanded fools."

Rocco would not be diverted. "I don't mean the fact that they inadvertently cycled the power source too high, Helva, I mean that curious discharge that is worrying the nuclear boys juiceless."

"Why do you think we're taking it back to Beta Corvi?"

"And thank the gods that you are." Rocco recrossed his neatly booted legs in a nervous fashion. "Whatever that particular force is, it's bloody dangerous. And no one seems to know why or how."

"They'll tell me." At least, she amended privately, she thought they would. If only because the use to which humans put their minor form of stabilized energy amused them. (And what did you do on Beta Corvi for an encore, Helva?) She was far from happy about having to go back to Beta Corvi, but the ends justified the means... she hoped.

To have a warp drive in her bowels! To soar when she'd been forced to plod in a plebeian fashion. And the hell with Rocco's "if"... although the if was a valid consideration. Still, she trusted the Corviki: she'd been a Corviki.

"Look, Rocco, that drive is worth a great deal of hassling and stress. Niall knows it. I know it."

"Why?"

"The cyclevariant is faster than light drive, it's warp. By being able to stabilize an unstable isotope at just the moment it is releasing its tremendous quantity of energy, the cyclevariant drive captures all that energy because the isotope doesn't dwindle downscale to a useless half-life. It remains at the constant high-energy peak. That output is controlled in its cycle of peak energy, and the rate of thrust—the speed of the ship powered that way—is determined by the ratio of cycles used at any given time. True, you can't lift off-planet on cv drive, and a ship has to be structurally reinforced."

"And that odd trail of particles?" Rocco asked sardonically. "Those unknown thingies that have thrown communications haywire, loused up astrogational equipment, not to mention the solar phenomena recorded in the systems through which that test ship ran?"

Helva was silent. She was less certain of how the Beta Corviki could cope with those emissions. Unless there'd been a simple perversion of the data?

"Then there's the old philosophical question: Is this trip really necessary? Is man ready for this sort of progress?"

"Rocco! I'd thought better of you." Helva was surprised as well as scornful. "If man were meant to fly, he'd've been given wings."

Rocco regarded Helva with great tolerance and some sadness. "Helva, in my job, I become painfully aware that some progress costs too much in terms of human adjustment, or emotional, psychological, or even physiological stress."

"On the pro side, look at the exploration potential for a hundred different minorities."

Rocco sighed. "I suppose we're committed to progress at any cost. Onward and upward for bigger, better, faster, smaller, tougher. However, back to my original topic, your coercion."

"There isn't any, Rocco."

"Oh? Have you any idea, Helva, how many circuits lead into this?"

"I know of a few, but I think you're going to tell me."

"Setting aside your understandable yearning to be the fastest virgin in the Galaxy—and you'll need the speed with Parollan aboard..."

"Tsk, tsk, jealous?"

"Or Parollan's wish to prove himself a better brawn than the prototype, we have dear Chief Raily, all set for that jump onto Central Worlds Council."

"Is that why he's been on our backs like a leech?"

"You didn't know? Tsk! Tsk on you, Helva. Yesiree ma'am! Since the civilian branch has blown it with their manned ship, think of all the glory accruing to one Chief Raily for getting the drive approved, of getting you, the very valuable and very well known 834 to extend her contract, thanks to his masterful handling of the negotiations."

Helva made a rude noise. "Parollan masterminded it."

"Undoubtedly he did, but Raily gets the official credit. Not only does Raily have a finger in your pie to be goldplated; Dobrinon has first whack at the biggest Xeno plum in psychological history; Breslaw is frankly staryeyed with visions of commanding the warpdrive squadrons."

"Rocco? What's in it for you?"

"Me?" Rocco made his eyes innocently wide.

"I'd've thought you'd be flogging me, too, to rescue the four I left behind me. —Oh, so that's it. Yes, they would be classed as mutant minorities."

"That's the kindest designation." Rocco cleared his throat.

"Yes, there was a lot of unfavorable publicity about them. I'd've thought the news value long since exhausted."

"It wasn't so much publicity, Helva," said Rocco, again biting the corner of his lip thoughtfully. One booted toe swung up and down. "No, society just doesn't like its members opting out of its grasp, particularly into a total alien form."

"Not to mention leaving their bodies behind." Helva had always wondered what had happened to the empty husks of Kuria Ster, Solar Prane, Chaddress of Turo, and... Ansra Colmer. But not so much that she could bring herself to ask. When she and the rest of the dramatic troupe had presented Romeo and Juliet to the Beta Corvi—in exchange for the stabilization of isotopes—they had had to use "envelopes" suitable to the methaneammonia atmosphere of the planet. A timer had been rigged in the transfer helmets to insure that that consciousness returned to its proper environment. After the final performance, four people had not returned and were encapsuled in the Beta Corvi envelope. For very good and understandable reasons, or so Xenologist Dobrinon would like her to believe.

"There has been considerable pressure, you know," Rocco was saying, "on both SPRIM and Double M to investigate their defection/emigration/temptation..." He shrugged at the euphemisms employed. "Or at least to bring back conclusive evidence that they are happy in their new lives."

"I know two who are—three. Solar Prane has a new body; Kuria couldn't care less about hers so long as it was near his; Chadress had nothing to look forward to in retirement, and Ansra Colmer..."

Rocco eyed Helva keenly, expectantly. "And Ansra Colmer..."

"Oh, the Corviki knew how to handle her."

"Hmmm."

"But aren't you slightly in conflict with yourself, Rocco? I mean, you class shell people as mutant minorities, though strictly speaking I'm a cyborg—"

"Yes, Helva," Rocco sounded purposefully pathetic, "the boot does pinch." His foot in fact was swinging, which was an unconscious gesture that would intrigue the good Dobrinon. "I cannot reconcile coercing you to find out if the... flitting four were in any way coerced."

"I quite appreciate your dilemma, so I'll lift you off one horn. I do not, not even after all your interesting disclosures, consider myself coerced. Ah ah," for Rocco began to protest. "Pressured? Possibly, but I've been conditioned to a fine sense of responsibility, you see. I brought the equations for that nardy drive back to Regulus, and I inadvertently misplaced four passengers who were, you must admit, essentially my responsibility to convey thither and hither safely. I'd like some peace of mind on both counts."

"I'll forego knowing about our lost souls if you'll forego that drive."

"No way. I want that drive. How else can we pay oS my indebtedness?"

"I'll call foul for you?"

"Rocco, I'm surprised. Shocked! This cannot be the incorruptible..."

"Damn it, Helva, I want you out of that contract and out away from Parollan. He's dangerous!" Rocco was on his feet and pacing.

"Good heavens! Why?"

"He's got a fixation on you, a brawn fixation."

"Who told you that? Broley? Oh, fardles, Rocco! Because he had the Asurans extrapolate a solido of me from my genetic background?"

"You knew?"

"He had a set made of every BB ship he supervised."

Rocco pointed a finger at her. "You're different."

"Quite likely. He's my brawn. Bluntly, Rocco, you're making a tempest in a teacup."

"A fixation could be dangerous to you in space, Helva, in a man of Parollan's sexual appetite."

"That fixation reached critical... and passed. That's why Niall became my brawn. He's far more aware of the inherent dangers of a brawn fixation than you are, Rocco. Or Broley."

Rocco affected a shrug, but Helva suspected he was unconvinced.

"All right, Helva, we're back to Square One and I'll rephrase my initial question: Do you want what you now have, or were you mods to want it?"

"Hey, Helva," Niall said into the cornunit, "let the lift down."

"Think on it, Helva, and remember that you can count on my support if you feel that you have actually been constrained against your own best interests."

Niall's hearty "Helva, I got 'em," as he waved the grapelike cluster of circuit guards, dwindled off in surprise at seeing their guest. "Well, we're honored, Rocco?"

"My congratulations on your appointment, Parollan. I'll be following the exploits of the NH834 with renewed interest."

"I'll just bet you will." Niall's smile took the sting out of his slightly aggressive words.

"Fair enough," replied the Double M official, his own expression sardonic. He moved toward the airlock. "You are, you realize, very definitely in a minority."

"How so?" asked Niall, amused, as he neatly arranged the circuit guards on the gutted console and turned to face Rocco.

"My good Parollan, you are the only man who ever resigned from BB ship service to become a brawn."

"I'm no mutant."

Helva could hear the edge in Niall's voice, although generally his small stature didn't bother him.

"What is the definition of a mutant?" That was Rocco's exit line as the lift took him down, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

"Well, hump me, what was he after?" Niall asked.

"I gather he's been listening to Broley's gossip."

"And what is the gospel according to City Manager Shell Person Broley?"

"We're being coerced."

Niall scratched his ear, screwed up his face, and gazed out of the open airlock. Helva was situated by the immense Engineering sheds of the Regulus Base Complex. Niall had a clear view of the distant administration buildings at the opposite end of the plain. There were, as always, tremendous comings and goings of small ground vehicles and light helis. as well as slim BB ships.

Niall looked away from the airlock, toward her. Reetingly Helva wondered if Niall Parollan "saw" the titanium column behind which her encapsulating shell rested, or the solido the Asurans had made, extrapolating a mature human body from her genetic background.

"You should have asked Rocco what's the definition of 'coercion,' " he said.

Helva gave a snort. "Well, you've never been restrained, either morally or physically."

"Balls," Niall replied in disgust. "And I don't need Rocco on my tail, too."

"Speaking of tails," Helva said gently because she caught the pulse of the comset about to light up, "here's our daily Raily now."

"Fardles! He's two minutes late. Raily," said Niall before the Chief could speak, "I'm up to my crotch in circuit guards that I should have had two days ago. Go way now and I'll call you back when I've finished."

"Parollan, there's isn't a Guild on this Base that isn't... Come out from under that console while I'm addressing you!"

Helva realized that all Raily could see of Parollan was his rear end.

"As you're constantly addressing me, and I know what you look like, my position provides no impediment to hearing every word you say. Besides which, I'm busy."

"Parollan, I'm warning you..."

"Which you do hourly. But I thought you wanted this expensive ship to lift ass and cease to offend your eyes, so what are you complaining about now?"

"You are not, I repeat, you are not to walk into any other section of this Base and badger, bully, or beat any other section leader or supervisor into giving your request top priority!"

"And if I don't comply, what'll you do? Throw me off Base?" Niall suddenly reversed his position and glared up at the comscreen. "Good, then Helva does not have to complete this mission if I am not her brawn." He made as if to quit his task. 274 "Parollan! You get on with the job! But I'm warning you..."

"Let's see, that's the fourth warning today, isn't it, Helva?"

"I don't keep track, Niall," she said gently, hoping her tone would warn him to be a shade more diplomatic. They'd be completely at Raily's mercy if the cv drive weren't approved by the Corviki.

Fortunately Raily broke the connection. Chuckling, Niall ducked back under the panel.

"You know, Niall, if..."

"Helva!" His tone was slightly exasperated but reassuring. "The Raillys of this world can take a lot more backtalk than you think. Particularly, my girl, with all he stands to gain with you..."

Helva would rather he'd said "us."

"Even without that drive vetted, you're twice the ship. And with me to keep you from going soft with the likes of Raily, we'll make out one way or the other."

Helva was grateful for the plural pronoun. Now why had Rocco come to disturb her with his questions? While it was flattering to think she had so many friends, willing to do battle for her, she'd prefer to rely on her brawn.

Just then Supply arrived with an order of emergency rations to be stowed away.

"Why the fardles get in 'fortified coffee'? Yecht!" Niall was disgusted when the invoice was screened in. "// we try that drive and can't manage it, or the particular emissions disqualify that application..."

"Think positively, my dear, and besides you're not hamhanded, gal, like those cloddies on the manned test ship."

"You might need concentrated supplies..."

"That coffee bubka is for—"

"It's better than no coffee. And half the supply hold is coffee. I wish I could figure out why everyone wants that stuff."

"Which reminds me," said Niall, crawling out from under the console and heading for the galley.

"Ah yes, you haven't had a cup in the last fifteen minutes."

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"Longer. I had to extrude these things myself, you know. And we're having a party tonight."

"We've had a party every night."

Niall shot an overly innocent glance at her. "All •work and no play..."

"What'll you do when we're aspace?" The question slipped out of her, probably due to Rocco's crack about enforced celibacy and Niall Parollan.

"The modern man is not dominated by his gonads, love. Think of the memories I'll have to sustain me." He cracked the seal on the coffee container as neat emphasis.

The lift buzzer rang. "If that isn't Breslaw, I'll have him arrested on board."

It was indeed the engineering officer, panting from the run across the huge engineering field. Helva was certain that Commander Breslaw had never, since he reached that rank, worked as hard as he was in overseeing each detail of her refitting, his computer cassette overheating from his constant demands. He was losing weight, too, Helva noticed with a critical eye. Do him good; make him look better in uniforms if he won his gamble on Helva's future.

"Do you two appreciate me?" asked Breslaw, leaning against the lock bulkhead to catch his breath.

"Anyway, the ceramic coating is scheduled for tomorrow at 0900."

"About bloody time."

"Parollan..." And there was a slight edge to Breslaw's mock animosity. "One of these days I'm going to—"

"Get that final stripe for doing some work for a change," Niall finished. "You've only been promising that ceramic coating for the past three days. Fardles, how do you guys run this Base at all?"

"Look, Parollan, I want to run a final check on those tolerances in the drive room."

"Bloody right. I don't want something coming adrift at the speeds we'll be traveling."

"You hope," Breslaw amended gloomily.

Niall ignored him but the Commander's pessimism did not reassure Helva, not after Rocco's disturbing visit.

"Helva," her brawn said, "when those electricians appear—"

"I'll assemble them."

"Make 'em do it right the first time."

No sooner had he and Breslaw disappeared down the hatch to the drive room than the four tech ratings arrived, tremendously relieved that Parollan was not in evidence.

"He's a bugger to work for," muttered one of the men as he surveyed the console.

"Then use the luck," said another, "and let's get cracking before he does come back or we'll have to do the job over to prove we did it properly."

"Then do it right the first time," said Helva.

"Fardles," exclaimed the first man, looking nervously around him. "I forgot she was here."

"Where else did you think Helva would be?" asked the oldest of the quarter. "Sorry, ma'am. Now these green circuits have to be laid in first. Get with it, Sewel."

Helva turned on microvision, focusing it on Sewel's hands. Once she was certain he knew what he was about, she scanned the others. That panel had to be wired with the utmost precision or a crosscircuit could short out the entire panel at a crucial time. Further, the work was done with a minimum of waste motion. Niall Parollan may have been a bugger to work for, but work for him, and her, was well and expeditiously completed.

When they'd finished, she broached some of the party spirits for them in appreciation.

"Sun's over the yardarm for you, too, Commander," said Niall, returning with a dusty but pleased Breslaw. "Well worth it," he said after he'd inspected the console wiring. "I appreciate it, men," he said, toasting them: "my partner appreciates it," and he raised the glass to Helva's column: "Commander Breslaw appreciates it, and the Service will undoubtedly not bother to appreciate this unusual and prompt performance of your duties."

Sewel and the others were not certain that they should appreciate his toast, but the spicy Vegan liquor was far too palatable to resist.

After a third round from the bottle, Breslaw suddenly remembered that he was the supervisor of the Engineering Section of Regulus Base and that there were other matters for his attention as urgent as refitting the NH834.

"But not as rewarding," Niall said, and restrained Breslaw.

When Sewel tried to leave, he and his men were all told to stay until the party had begun.

"Hell, your work day's over. We can't do anything more to Helva until tomorrow when she gets her unbreakable, unbeatable, unwarpable, fusionresistant coat, so let's have some fun."

The tech ratings were far too nattered to think of going and Helva was certain that the next time Niall Parollan needed an urgent electrical systems job done, these same men would leap at the chance to work on it.

The lift signal went just then as the duly invited members of the party began to arrive.

As usual during one of Niall's parties, the lounges, the cabins, the galley, the passageways soon filled with people prepared to enjoy and give enjoyment. Several brawns arrived, two of whom Helva knew were awaiting assignment and very envious of Niall's luck, but the majority of visitors were not service personnel. Therefore Helva was not only pleased but flattered that every new arrival first directed attention to the hostess, coming to her panel and either introducing themselves if this were their first appearance, or renewing their acquaintance with a chat. They tended to treat her as if she were visible and as mobile as themselves. She would have expected such courtesy from servicetrained people, but in her travels Helva had regrettably discovered that the average person found it hard to cope with the concept, much less the reality, of a shell person. She'd used that to her advantage, but it was a welcome change to be considered a real person. How much of this was Niall's preparty instruction or the good manners of intelligent, welltraveled men and women, she didn't know. But she enjoyed it.

A youngish art dealer, Permut Capiam from Ophiuchus Minor, gave her one explanation.

"Actually, I met Niall when he commissioned those Asuran solidos he used to get done for his BB ships. He used to complain that he had to spend a fortune keeping solidos of your partners because you changed so often. Seen yours?" Permut frowned. "No, I don't suppose that'd be good or rather..." he giggled, "a bit too good for your old ego." He waggled a finger at her exact position behind the panel. "Can't blame old Parollan for having a fix on you, Helva. You 'strapolated out the best of the lot. Must say, though, that it makes it easier to think of your solido than all this tinplating."

So, Niall's emotional attachment to her was public knowledge? Was this a good sign or a bad one?

Permut rattled on knowledgeably about Asuran extrapolations as he'd handled quite a few commissions. "Prehistory Roman and Greek statues are the rage right now. The Asurans merely need a fragment to do the whole sculpture, you know. They do it up in whatever material the client wishes—anything inanimate. There's a law now against lowlife constructs." He became very serious. "That way lay madness... ugh! Zombie things. I was ever so relieved when the whole business was interdicted by CWC. The sort of lowlife restoration is very dangerous." He stressed the syllables of the last two words.

"Have you trids of the work you've handled?" Helva asked, curiously.

"You mean of the realities?" Permut was startled.

"No, trids of, say, your latest showing. I don't fit in most galleries..."

"Oh my word, my gallery'd fit in you."

"And lately I've been so busy I've not had tune to revise my library."

"My dear Helva, what an appalling omission. What's wrong with Parollan? It's the least he could do for you. Man doesn't live by bread alone, nor exist on a diet of pure physical sensation. Really. Say, I know just the person to give you. —Abu, honey girl, don't you have some spares of those marvelous tapes you did of the Ceta tour? You do like ET dance forms, don't you, Helva? I mean, you've done your stint on the boards, so to speak. Abu has some perfectly magnificent freefall performers."

Abu was an incredibly lithe albino who had capitalized on her genetic inheritance. She did wear remedial contacts for light sensitivity and, Helva noticed on fine vision, the girl also utilized a skin film so artfully applied that only magnification detected it.

Abu spoke with the lilt of one whose first language was pitched. The gently musical voice and her extreme grace fascinated Helva. Abu was equally entranced by Helva and the three of them chatted about new dance and art forms.

Suddenly Niall exploded back into the main lounge, carrying two long flaming skewers with bits of meat and vegetables. Behind him danced triplet girls, a dance team from Betelgeuse now the rage of Regulus City, dangerously brandishing their lighted skewers.

"Ancient earth recipe," Niall announced. "Shish kebabs. Have 'em while they're hot. There're plenty more where these came from. Don't burn your tongue."

Helva had wondered where he'd gone.

"Three of them?" Permut said with a rueful laugh. "No wonder he declared the galley out of bounds."

Helva caught the implication that more than culinary arts had been practiced there.

"With three of them?" asked Abu, taking the same interpretation. The gleam of regret in her eyes was not completely masked by her protective lenses.

"You know Parollan, my dear."

"Not as well as I'd like."

Then Niall was proffering them the still smoking meats.

"Oooh, this is good," Abu said, nibbling delicately and then rolling her eyes with appreciation. "This can't be mutton?"

"Regulan mutton!" Niall replied.

"It can't be," protested Permut, licking his fingers and grabbing more.

"All in the marinade, all in the marinade."

"Is that a new position?" Permut asked archly.

Niall laughed tolerantly and moved on to serve other guests, but the ambiguous ribaldry disturbed Helva.

"Do you have olfactory senses, Helva?" Abu asked. "It seems rude to be so... so... rapacious in front of you."

"I don't smell as you do but I am able to sense fairly minute alterations in the composition of the air within and about me that would indicate odor."

"That's not quite what Abu meant," Permut said.

"I know but it's all I got."

"And you can't taste either?"

"No."

Abu's sensitive face registered dismay at this lack. "I thought you shell people could do everything we could."

"Not... everything," Permut said, and then some unuttered thought convulsed him with laughter.

Abu regarded him blankly for a moment and then with growing impatience and disgust.

"Everything comes back to sex with you, Permut."

"Not... not everything," he managed to say between gasps of laughter.

"Actually, Abu, the programming of the olfactory sensors does give me an indication of a human's reception of smells. If there's sulfur in the air, I'd know it, I assure you, as something distinctly unpleasant. As for taste, I can't miss what I haven't had," Helva said, hoping that Permut would stop being so prurient. He'd been good company up till now. "I would like to know how coffee tastes. Everyone seems to fancy it so above all other beverages."

Abu laughed. "I think it smells better than it tastes. Especially if you've got roasted beans and grind them fresh," her tone of voice dripped with gustatory pleasure.

"You know, I'd forgot that coffee is brewed from beans. I've only the containertype aboard."

"The best beans come from Ipomena in the Alphecan sector. I've a small supply given me by an admirer that I keep for special occasions."

"You do?" Permut asked, abruptly recovering his composure. "You do?" he repeated, sidling up to Abu and making such absurd expressions that she began to laugh. "I tell you what, Abu, purely to aid in Helva's education, I will partake of your Ipomenan brew and give her a critical opinion of the quality, aroma, flavor, savor..."

"Oh, you!"

Suddenly Niall's voice rang out in happy surprise. "Davo Fillaneser? But of course, twice welcome. Come on up, Davo. Helva!"

Niall's clarion greeting had effectively silenced the babble and all eyes were on the newcomer appearing from the air lock. Davo smiled and so played up his entrance, bowing with such elaborate flourishes of nonexistent cape and hat, that everyone applauded.

"Fillaneser played Beta Corvi with Helva. Only he came back," Niall said by way of introduction, and the actor was quickly surrounded. Davo cast a humorously despairing glance toward Helva, mouthing "I want to talk to you later," as he was borne away.

It wasn't until after Niall mendaciously declared that Raily'd imposed a one o'clock curfew on his parties and started shoving people out the hatch as quick as the lift could make the trip, that Davo had a chance to approach Helva.

"Any chance of speaking to you, Helva?"

"You mean, privily?"

Davo nodded with a mirthless smile for her Shakespearean language.

"That is, if Niall can clear the deck..."

"Preferably of himself as well. Or is that too much to ask?"

Circumstances, in the persons of the triplets who helped to clean up the party debris, abetted Davo's wish. Niall found himself, or so he said, obliged to be sure the girls had transport into the City.

"It is past pumpkin time for Cinderellas," she said, and Niall commended her to Davo's company, and disappeared with his giggling trio.

"Does he mean to take on all three of them, Helva?" Davo asked.

"I'm under the impression that they've got something cooked up," she replied, and then chuckled over her phrasing. How would Dobrinon interpret that Freudian slip? Davo guffawed, so Helva decided he'd been told about the shish kebab episode.

The actor's laughter faded though, and he took to pacing around the lounge. Helva waited. The next line was all his.

"I'd heard you'd paid off, Helva."

"Great heavens to Betsy, does everyone in the Galaxy know that?"

"You don't know how many friends you have, Helva, who make it their business to keep track of you."

"I'd heard you'd volunteered to go back to Beta Corvi for Dobrinon," she said, starting her own offensive.

Davo winced. "That's when they were sending that manned test ship with the cv drive."

Helva laughed. "Just as well you didn't go, Davo, you'd be coming back for the next nine years."

"That wasn't why I didn't go, Helva. I copped out at the last moment. Did Dobrinon tell you that?" Davo looked directly at her now, and she could see the excited glitter in his eyes, the tenseness of his jaw muscles. "I turned coward. I couldn't go through that again. As much as I wanted to find out how Kuria and Prane... and Chaddress were. Helva..." Davo's voice shook with barely contained emotion, "is it true? That you're being forced to go back?" The question tumbled out of his mouth and his tone was distraught. "How can they let you put yourself in jeopardy like that again? I mean, Helva, you have many important friends, powerful ones. All you have to do is let us know..."

Helva was so flabbergasted at Davo's concern, at his suggestion that she almost laughed.

"Davo, my very good friend, I am in no jeopardy."

"Now, look, Helva," Davo assumed a mantoman stance, "I don't care how many circuits are being tapped, who I have to buy or suborn, you—"

"Davo, where are you getting this notion from? Broley?"

"Broley?" Davo's surprise suggested that the City Shell Manager was not his informant. 283 "No, I don't guess you'd have any contact with the City Manager."

"I have spoken with him. He goes to all the plays," Davo admitted, "but not this trip."

"Well, then, where did you get this wild notion that I'm in any danger?"

"It's all over," and Davo made an expansive gesture. "You can't want to go back to Beta Corvi?" His convulsive shudder was not feigned; nor was the glint of terror in his eyes.

"Truthfully, no. But it's the only way I'll find out."

"Find out what, for the love of reason?"

"Oh, if the cv drive works or will blow the cosmos to bits with the particular emissions, if our friends... exist. Take it easy, Davo," she added gently as she saw the man working himself up to another explosion. "Let's say I'm willing to take a gamble... with my eyes wide open to the probabilities. Which do, after all, favor me. The stakes are high, and when you get right down to the welded seam, there's more than that cv drive to be vetted and lost souls accounted for. Tell me, in all this wild talk, what's the gen on Niall Parollan?"

Davo looked uncomfortable for a split second, and then only hesitant. He took a sharp deep breath and regarded her frowningly.

"I tell you, Helva, Parollan had a lot to do with our debriefing when we got back here after Beta Corvi. I liked what I saw of the man then. He had real sympathy for all of us—and he was very worried about the effects of the mission on you. Get right down to it, most of his questions during his interview with me had to do with you."

Helva fondly remembered Niall's abrasively diverting and restorative presence the night she'd come

back... an empathy utterly shattered days later when he made known his opinion of her choice of Teron of Athion as brawn: a wellsubstantiated opinion.

"What I hear about Regulus City now..." Davo summarized that in a long low whistle.

"Tell me, what's the betting on our length of partnership? On the success of our mission? On Raily's making CW Council? And Breslaw hitting Chief?" With each of her questions, Davo's eyes opened wider.

"Damn it, Helva, the whole tone about you and Parollan, not to mention those others, is so... so disgustingly commercial, so sordid, that I had to see you. What I heard doesn't jibe with the Helva I know."

"Or the Parollan you've met."

"Right!"

"Do you agree that people under stress react more honestly than people in a party or gossip situation?"

"Certainly."

"So. Don't think I'm not highly flattered and touched by your concern, Davo. I am. But I think we, Niall and I, the NH834, are a winning combination."

"I certainly hope so, Helva. I certainly hope so."

Amusement bubbled up in Helva. "I wish you'd read that line with more convincing sincerity, Davo."

"I wish I felt it myself. I don't favor this part for you, Helva. And I'm not alone. Remember, gal, all you gotta do is shout."

"Shout in an ammoniamethane atmosphere?"

"Don't tell me you want to play a return engagement there, Fillaneser?" Niall asked from the lock.

"No entrance cues, Helva?" asked Davo, annoyed.

"This team can't operate on two levels, Davo, not and succeed."

The actor nodded. He extended his hand to Niall.

"I'll wish goodspeed and a safe trip home, Helva, Parollan."

That line did have the ring of sincerity.

"You weren't long about it," Helva said, relieved by Niall's return for several reasons she didn't care to probe.

Niall was peering out at the night, at Davo's descent, so Helva left the lock open until he gave a snort and turned back to the lounge, frowning as he surveyed it.

"No, when I got to the gate, the Yerries had been refueling so I let them take the girls on in. Besides," he stretched and yawned mightily, "I need my beauty sleep." He bent down to scoop up a container tucked against the end of a couch, lobbed it toward the disposal chute, dusting his hands as his shot hit dead center.

"And tomorrow, we skin you, m'love. And then..." He rubbed his hands with anticipation as he moved toward his quarters.

"Up, up, and away?"

"Yup!"

He stripped and washed with his usual neat despatch and then lay on his bunk, hands clasped behind his head.

"That was a real good bash," he murmured, eyes closed, a happy smile on his face. "Good night."

"Good night, sweet prince, and may..."

Niall's eyes flew open and he made a mockexasperated noise in his throat. "Will you never rid me of your Shakespeare saws? When I think of a perfectly good, wellbehaved ship consorting with ribald, rowdy actors... I cringe." But he yawned again and was asleep before his jaw closed.

Helva chuckled as she secured the lock, lowered all but her safety lights, and began her habitual nightly check. Suddenly it was too silent; too empty of Niall and his energy. He was sort of like having one's own private hurricane and he probably expended as much energy as the nardy cv drive could.

Would that thing work? And what accounted for Breslaw's pessimism? Had he rechecked some factor to a lower probability? Or was it the particle emission that troubled everyone? Even if the cv drive were feasible, the emissions could make it highly impractical in settled space, which would rule out its use as far as Helva was concerned. Unless of course they detached her to Search and Survey. But would that kind of longdistance lonely travel suit Niall Parollan?

Why had she been plagued with both Rocco and Davo today? And why had Abu asked about her two missing senses? She'd had them in the Beta Corvi envelope. Not that "coffee" would be anything tastable by a Corvikan. Did they have its equivalent, Helva wondered?

Had Niall really overcome that brawn fixation? More corrosive to her peace of mind, if ruthlessly suppressed, was her own disquieting wish to see that Asuran solido. Shell people were conditioned not to think about physical appearance. They were told that their bodies were physically stunted to fit in the shells. They knew that they were necessarily immersed in nutrient fluids, that there were masses of wires connecting the various sections of their brains to the sensors that allowed them to operate their particular vehicle or mechanisms. It was tacitly understood that a shell person was a grotesque in a civilization that could ensure physical perfection and pleasing looks.

Only now had it become important to Helva to know that, but for the birth defect that had destined her to be a shell person, she would have been beautiful. She wanted to be, she could have been, but she wasn't. And it was possible that Niall, deprived of all feminine companionship on long trips, might succumb to the temptation to open her shell. Illegally he had obtained the release words, a sequence and pitch unique and supposedly known only to one person, which would open the panel and give access to her titanium shell beyond. As Rocco had said, a brawn fixation was dangerous.

The unbidden thought of Niall sporting with the three nubile girls in the galley exacerbated her mind. Had he suggested to Permut and Abu that they keep her occupied while he was... ?

You... are a jealous bitch! Helva told herself in measured tones of surprise and selfrepugnance. A shell person jealous of a mobile? For a sexual reason? Ridiculous and yet, she'd all the symptoms of sheer flaming jealousy.

She'd loved Jennan, but there'd been no trace of that utterly human vice in their relationship.

Well, Helva thought sternly, you didn't have to worry about sharing Jennan with half the female population of the Galaxy. And you didn't love him this way: you loved Jennan with a purity equal to Juliet's, with not a care as to thingsastheyare. You'd've changed your tune if Jennan had lived.

Or would I?

Jennan, at least, had been discreet. Unlike the stud she'd aboard her now.

Had Niall passed the danger point of his fixation? Or, when his libido reached the unendurable in space, would the temptation to open her panel return?

How much did Niall count on the Corvikis approving the drive? How long would he stay her brawn if they didn't?

It was scant consolation to realize that the cyclevariant drive wasn't the only one undergoing a test run.

By the time the immense crane had swung her back on her tail fins, Helva was evaluating her new suit of superfine superskin.

"You gleam, baby, you glisten, you shine in the sun like a jewel," Niall said into his combutton. In the company of Breslaw and Raily and several of the ceramicists, he was standing at a distance from her on the apron of the kiln building. "By god, you're blue in some lights. Is that stuff iridescent, Breslaw?"

Helva increased the magnification of her scanner on the group. Breslaw was beaming fatuously, for the process was a new application of old techniques and the coating had been accomplished with relatively no halts or snags. Certainly the finished product was impressive.

"How d'you feel, Helva," Niall asked.

"How's one supposed to feel after a facelifting?"

"Bruised. Stop being so eternally female, woman. Are all your systems go? We don't need a clogged pore where we're going."

Helva'd been doing a rapid check of her exterior installations. Everything was in operating order, but she felt differently. Not uncomfortable, merely altered.

"So," Raily was saying to Niall in a steely, teethclenched voice, "now how soon can you lift?"

"Why, Chief, we'd've been away two days ago if I could've got any decent cooperation from servicing personnel." Blithely unaware of Raily's popeyed reaction, Niall turned to the startled ceramicists. "Do we

need to wait until her skin cools?"

The senior technician stammered out something about temperature variations and tolerances, and then shrugged assent.

"Great. Goodbye all. See you sometime yesterday!"

With art insolent salute, Niall strode across the permatarm toward Helva. She let down the lift for a quick getaway, keeping one eye on Raily, who was apoplectic at the calculated insolence. Breslaw began speaking to his superior, though Helva couldn't tell if he were pacifying Raily or diverting him with other matters. The ceramicists had certainly departed quickly.

No sooner was Niall within than he brusquely signaled her to secure for liftoff. She started to get clearance from the Control Tower before she remembered a minor detail.

"We've no supervisor."

"Oh yes, we have. Raily!" The name came out as a growled curse. Niall bounced into the pilot's seat, strapped down. "Let's get off this fardling base. Now!"

She began liftoff, sluggish because of the extra weight in drive chamber, strut, and skin.

"It's heavy going, Niall," she warned him and then piled on thrust.

Once clear of Regulus's service satellites, Niall spun himself away from the console.

"One more moment down there listening to Raily and I'd've done my nut!" He heaved himself out of the pilot chair and floated across the lounge, his expression bleak and weary.

As she felt rather elated to be finally away, she was momentarily dumbfounded by the transformation in her private whirlwind. She was even more surprised when he bypassed the galley and handpulled himself into his cabin.

"Wake me, girl, if anything startling occurs."

He kicked off his boots, stripped off the shipsuit, rolled under the cover, pulling the freefall strap across him, and was asleep before his arm dropped slowly back.

And so he slept and slept and slept. Which was no consolation to Helva.

She occupied herself at first by spacetesting all her functions, did a bit of jockeying on thrusters to get the feel of how the modifications in her hull affected her maneuverability. She felt like a scow, and wondered if the now inert mass of the cv drive would lighten once it was operative.

Asleep, Niall Parollan did not resemble his waking self; there was a curious vulnerability about his mouth, the sweep of rather long eyelashes on wide cheekbones. He looked altogether too young to be his chronological age and rather defenseless. He did not twitch, toss, or snore, moving less than usual in what she understood were normal sleep patterns. Economical that. She watched him for quite a long time, as if memorizing the very pores of his rather coarse skin, the way his hair pattern took an abrupt turn at the back of his head.

She firmly closed off that scanner and searched about her for sleeptime occupation. She dialed for Abu's dance tapes and viewed the first five minutes of one before it occurred to her that the dance forms were highly erotic and far too suggestive for her present state of mind. She nipped over to Permut's latest showing and, although she tried to be completely objective, discovered phallic symbols of one flagrant sort or another were the themes of all the art forms he was currently exhibiting. Exhibition indeed!

Rather appalled at the prominence of sexual motifs, she sought refuge in the good Solar Prane's nighttime occupation, but she had scarcely got into Julius Caesar, a play that ought to have been safe, when the tone of jealousy began to make itself obvious. King Lear was not much better, nor Coriolanus. She switched to comedy and got a good way into The Comedy of Errors before the stupidity of the lovers became too ironic. The Tempest was no good: she felt akin to poor Caliban and that did her morale no good.

She decided that the only safe subject was the specs of the cv drive, and tried to imagine that she were a Corviki examining the data and how it/she/they/he would react. The exercise was not felicitous because she began to think the cv drive wouldn't work: it was an appallingly wasteful use of energy because the thrust had to be directed away from the goal to protect frail human bodies. Her conclusion depressed her so she turned back to Abu's tapes. There must be some dances that did not depict loveerotic or lovedenied or...

Yes, the fifth tape was of a formal insect dance from the Lyrae IV system: color, motion, almost mesmerizing, very soothing certainly to Helva's distressed sensibilities. Gratefully, she gave herself up to the play of form and color. Halfway through the tape and much calmer, she wondered idly if it were Niall's sex drive she'd have to worry about.

Sixteen hours later Niall Parollan awoke, stretched, catapulted out of the bunk in one movement, and sang merrily away in the shower.

"What's our running time to Beta Corvi?" he asked as he was dressing. "And let's put on a bit of grav, love."

"Fourteen standard days, twelve hours, and nine minutes. How much grav, threequarters?" She began to apply gravity as he settled himself in the galley.

"That's it exactly," he said, holding up his hand, and making a cutoff gesture. He bounced a little as he made for the coffee cupboard. With a warming container in one hand, he prepared a staggering protein meal.

"What? No shish kebabs?"

"That junk's for show." He took a long swig of the now hot coffee. "Ah, that's the stuff. Gotta keep up the image." He snorted as if repudiating that same image. "I think what recommends you most to me, dear girl, is that I don't have to be anyone but Niall Parollan within your stately walls." He stretched again until his shoulder bones cracked. "God, I'm still tired, riding those ship monkeys to get us out of there. Say, how's your nutrient balance?"

"Just great."

"What'd you do to amuse yourself last night?"

"Actually, I settled on some tapes Abu sent on board... formal insect dances from Lyrae."

Niall stared at her. "Great jumping puddles of fardle! Couldn't you find anything more exciting?"

"Quite likely," and Helva giggled without explanation. "But you know, the dances were very soothing."

"Do you always do something like that?" The notion evidently distressed Niall, as if she'd suddenly sprouted facial hair.

"Oh no. If I'm near enough, I can chat up another ship."

He chuckled. "Yeah, you BB ships are diwils for knowing gossip before groundstaff."

They talked amiably about other inconsequentialities while he consumed his enormous meal. He stretched out on the couch, then patted the bulge of stomach.

"Do you eat like that often?"

"Fardles, no. I'd be fat. That'll last me a long while." He yawned. "Did you get any new music on board? Abu was talking about some new reels..."

He was asleep within half an hour. At first concerned, Helva came to the decision that one of the reasons Niall Parollan seemed indefatigable around people was because he could conserve energy at other times. He woke up refreshed several hours later, ate lightly, did isometrics "to get rid of some breakfast," and then settled down to browsing through the technical journals he'd had her collect from Regulus Central Information. They discussed the article on polymer extrusions from alien silicates, he studied the cv drive specs yet another time, relaxed over a coffee while the two worked a crossword puzzle in Deltan symbology, and then he bade her a fond goodnight and went to bed again.

That set the pattern for their trip as far as activity was concerned, exactly in accord with what could be expected from any trained brawn. Two evenings from Beta Corvi, it dawned on Helva that she had allowed herself to be influenced too much by people who did not know Niall Parollan at all... who knew of him and about his reputation. She, Helva the 834, knew another side of the man "himself," without image or affectation, and that personality was very likable, too likable. She sighed as she watched, for the twelfth time, the Lyraen dances and let herself be soothed. She could carry her true love through the stars and never touch him. But she could be more to Parollan than any other female in the entire galaxy, and woe unto her who tried to part them now!

Beta Corvi pulsed a vivid orangered on the viewscreen as Helva picked up the first Corviki space buoy on her scanners. Instantly it colored, a microsun in the carpet of blackness.

She roused Niall, who was sleeping in eaglespread abandon. Simultaneously the psychetransfer circuit in her mind was activated and she felt the query of the alien mind.

In the time it took Niall to rise from his bunk, the Corviki had established the identity of their visitors, the reason for their return, the alterations in her hull and the inactive core of the new drive, and issued her orbital instructions.

"Hey," Niall protested as a surge of power, uninitiated by Helva, sent him lurching into the door frame.

"Sorry, pal, they just took over."

"Took over?" Niall padded into the main cabin, rubbing his right arm. "I thought you'd wake me when we reached their first buoy."

"I did." She turned on the rear screen, focused on the fastreceding marker. "The Corviki don't waste time, which they consider another form of energy."

"Hmmm. An interesting concept."

"We're approaching orbit," she told him.

He blinked in astonishment. "One thing sure: those modifications of yours can sure take speed."

"A point."

"Hey, will they give me time to eat? A cup of coffee, at least?" He gestured at his nakedness. "The head? Clothes?"

"We should have a few moments to spare," Helva said with a laugh. His expression was smallboyembarrassed.

"Ever the courteous hosts."

He had managed to get himself assembled by the time the glowing luminosity that was Beta Corvi's third planet filled the viewscreen. Somewhere down in that moiling envelope of methane, ammonia, and hydrogen were the Corviki. Or were Solar Prane and Kuria Ster, Chaddress or a vengeful Ansra Colmer rising in those spectacular flares to greet the visitors? If anything remained of those personalities. Helva preferred to share Dobrinon's optimistic view that those immigrants retained something of their former personalities.

Helva felt the change in the ship before it registered on the console before Niall.

"We're in orbit? We can transfer?"

The eagerness in his voice produced a perverse reluctance in Helva. Niall couldn't know, despite all she and Davo and the others had told him, how devastating that experience could be, how insidious. Now a new fear threatened her: what could that experience do to the fragile bond they'd been contriving?

"Yes, we can transfer," she said, trying to keep the growing apprehension out of her voice. And she'd thought, Dobrinon had assured her, that she'd made a good adjustment to this return. She'd fooled only herself.

Niall swung the chair round, helmet halfraised to his head.

"Is it still that bad, Helva? I can go alone if it's that hard."

"This we have to do together." "That's the operative phrase, m'girl, together." "Let's go—together."

"That's my Helva." The helmet masked his eyes but not the eager confident smile.

Helva fought/released herself to the experience, knowing an instant of fleeting terror at being outside her safe shell. But as the transfer occurred, she reminded herself that she had survived a worse terror of

complete sense deprivation on Borealis, survived it only because of the Corviki episode. And Niall was with her this time! The pressure enveloped her in a deceptive comfort. She shuddered and the streamers floated up from beneath her.

"Niall!" she exuded, anxious lest in that instant she might have transferred at a distance from him.

"I'm a bloody sea monster." Niall's reassuring dominance was just beyond the large frond. "There you are!" And he emerged, a creature like herself, already coloring the shell with his own personal intensity. A creature like herself!

"Helva! You're..." And they spun toward each other.

"Do not express energy in such a sequence!" A new dominance, dark, dense, powerful, overwhelmed them with its authority. "You have imperfect control of your shells."

By a force more potent than their pentup frustrations, they were held apart. The energies which they yearned intensely to combine were dampened by the dominance.

Deliberately, Helva now sought to bury her alltoohuman reactions into the Corviki ethos. "Conserve energy. Reduce spin. Lock suborbital speeds."

Niall's shell pulsed and shook with his effort to control his emotions in an alien context and because of the totally unfamiliar, for him, subjection to a supraauthority.

"The emanations are unusually rich," the Corviki emitted, withdrawing some of the repressive authority. "No similar wastage has been observed despite the variety now available for analysis." There was approval in the comment, but also a reinforcement of the initial warning.

With dark and awful despair, Helva forced her attention to the dominance, anything to distract herself from Niall's proximity. In doing so, she recognized a familiar aura in the dominance.

"Manager?"

"Of the same thermal core. There have been recombinations within the mutual group," and the entity turned such a lavenderpurple of Corvikian pleasure that Helva interpreted "smugness" in his tone.

Taking cowardly refuge in the mission, Helva immediately explained the purpose of their unsolicited return. As she got to the point, she recognized approval in the Manager's density.

"From such an extrapolation of the data for use in the parameters of your race's limitations, undesirable factors might indeed result from exposing irreconcilables to stability forms," the Manager commented, rippling with muddy blues. "The multiple interaction shows commendable concern for the proper conservation of mass energies. The hypothesis is being examined. Improper equations cause ineffectual results and perverse conclusions. Matter must be expended only in constructive quantities."

Simultaneously a host of other dominances was felt, compounding the authority about her and Niall. The newcomers were, to Helva's mind, dense with experiential energies, held in lease by immense controls.
29?

Helva had not encountered similar energy groupings in the first Beta Corvi mission, and began to emit tiny distressful losses which she was unable to contain.

"Why are you so afraid, Helva?" Niall asked. She came close to resenting his selfcontrol.

"These entities are so gross with power," she said. "But fear is not a component in my energy loss. On Corvi, we have nothing to fear..."

"But ourselves," Niall finished for her, his trailing tendrils floating gently beneath him.

She kept hers tightly entwined lest they stray without her volition... and touch him.

"Do not waste energy so," she was advised by one of the new power group. But the directive held no censure and Helva let the suborbitals begin to spin gently so that her tendrils drifted easily, if inevitably toward Niall's. The Corviki would protect her from herself.

She was distracted by a series of condensations and dissipations, expansions and contractions, darting, it sometimes seemed, through both her shell and Niall's, as their interrogators fused momentarily or attenuated in the discussion of the problem presented by the visitors. Apparently such a use of stabilized isotopes had never occurred to the Corviki. Helva thought that amusement dominated their discreet emissions. Dense as these ancient entities were, they had never considered the possibility of such a direction for familiar energies.

One entity reasoned that, of all the handicaps through which life forms must evolve, the adolescent vigor of this particular species was, at least, divertingly resourceful.

Helva and Niall drifted in this limbo, amused by an occasional storm of colorful discussion.

Suddenly the aura changed. With paternal forbearance, the Corviki approved the cv drive. However, there were modifications which would reduce the cuy particles imprudently released by such a clumsy process. An inhibiting feedback was required. Otherwise, although the envelope was unbelievably awkward and totally unnecessary, dictated as it was by the exigencies of protecting frail protein matter, they could deduce no annihilative perversion of the applied data.

They did stipulate that any further application must be accompanied by a similar inhibitor. They would know, by virtue of cuy particles in the galaxy, if that restriction had been ignored. Punitive action would instantly result.

As abruptly as the dominances had assembled, they dispersed, leaving Helva, Niall, and the Manager in a welter of loose fronds and burping ochre eruptions. Distant novae of emissions drifted back like the light laughter of the godly, seen and felt, rather than heard.

"Has the drive really been approved?" asked Niall, bewilderment apparent in the action of his tendrils.

"The emissions were favorable," Helva and the Manager agreed in chorus.

"Who are you now? Helva?" he demanded, swinging from one to the other, confusion making his tendrils rigid.

"I am Helva, here," she said, fighting with the desire to remain Helva for his sake and the need to remain Corvikan enough to control precarious excitations.

"Let's find out about the others and leave."

"I have," Helva said.

"Did you not feel that thermal group near you?" asked the Manager of Niall, shading to ochre neutrality.

"He had not previously encountered their dominances, Manager."

The Manager assumed more color and then, bleeding a little blue, he disappeared.

"You did have a chance to speak to Prane and—"

"I encountered them in one of the thermal groups. I'll tell you later when we're back on the ship."

"Then the mission's completed?" The triumph in Niall's tone colored his shell a brilliant orangered and he pressed toward her eagerly.

From behind a frond, first one, then another Corvikan appeared, but Helva was diverted from their arrival by Niall's rapidly changing color.

"We cannot combine!" she cried, and tried to keep her distance from him.

One of the Corviki brushed against her, pushing her back toward Niall.

"Don't play the professional virgin with me now, Helva!" His furiously human response was emphasized by the fiery glow of his shell as every particle became excited. The Corviki who had pushed her was now throwing power toward Niall, exciting him further. It flashed through Helva's awareness on two levels that the Corviki was familiar to her. She'd no time to identify it; she had to avoid Niall.

"You don't understand! Don't, Niall! We've got to get back to the ship!"

"Helva!"

"It's not safe for us. The energy levels are too hot... Integrity will be violated and—"

The outer edge of his shell touched hers. Sane thought, Corvikan or human, was impossible. Explosively they began to excite one another, each level in her seeking its equal in him, slowing, speeding, delicately adjusting, seeking the merger that would be the imposition of one pattern over the other, all levels matched, all energies mutual, all...

Other thermal groups were attracted by the emissions, attracted and held, transferring power so that Helva felt her Corvikan envelope engorge to incredible dimensions, giving her unlimited mass to energize at an even higher excitation level. Faster the particular forces spun, faster, to match speeds, to combine, neutronic shifts of dazzling force...

Fission... an incredible stoking of the available energy... the atmosphere splitting with thunder as immeasurable positive forces began to recombine...

Distance was where she was, some black, sensedeprieved consciousness, some tiny flicker of ego, lost, lost, lost. Unwilling to resume. A slow return to awareness. Exhaustion, deathdeep in an overstressed mind. A shuddering violent release to fall with an endless spinning grace into unawareness, comforting and kind.

Offensive odor, acrid, strong, staining the lungs, reviving the senses that must escape that burden.

To be aware and wish for deprivation! How strange!

Reality came into focus. And, sadly, identity.

Niall's body was sprawled by the console, the helmet upturned on the deck, his grasping hand a scant inch from it. His shipsuit was dark and damp with stain. Though he seemed motionless, she never questioned that he lived. She knew that, knew it as deeply as she knew her own vitality, low as it was.

It was comforting to look at him: the fatiguelined face unguarded and boyyoung, the dark hair tousled, the wiry body limp. Soon he would rouse and then that dear form would change, would vary and not be wholly hers.

No... Helva hesitated. No, an intangible difference impinged on her growing awareness. She was not wholly herself. There was a subtle alteration.

Curious, she began to explore her ship self. The critical difference was not in her systems or hull. She had full command of every area.

The steady vibration of power in her idling drive, however, resonated at a new frequency.

A long groan was wrenched from her, reverberating in the cabin and down the quiet corridors, humming through the deck plates to rouse Niall.

The cv drive was functioning. Beta Corvi! Helva's mind reeled, fighting to deny/accept the experience that surged back over her in a tsunami of emotions, abrading stunned sensibilities.

Niall crawled on his hands and knees, staggered to his feet, swaying as he took the two steps to the pilot's chair.

But they were here. They had been...

She hadn't the energy to transfer back. She hadn't the strength to tell Niall, who wouldn't have been strong enough to pick up the dislodged helmet anyway.

Instinct marshaled a response. She must break this disaster orbit, flee from Beta Corvi. Strange the Corvikans were silent. Humans must interdict that system to prevent the unwary from ever encountering those devastating sentients. Some progress was too costly in terms of human emotions. Who'd suggested that? She'd remember later. Right now, instinct and conditioning prevailed. She had to escape. She began to compute a flight pattern, and stopped. The ship was not in orbit around an invidious planet. They were drifting in space, far from the light of Beta Corvi.

Startled, Helva examined and identified star magnitudes, was relieved to find familiar ones about her, comfortable lightyears from Beta Corvi. Safe!

She'd already escaped. How? She couldn't remember. She scanned the recording banks and realized that three days. Galactic standard, had elapsed since they had initiated that fantastic transfer to Corviki III. And, judging by the distance they'd come, she must have used the cv drive. What had the Corvikans said about an inhibitor? Had they left a trail of cuy particles? Punitive action?

Niall was stirring, groggily seeking his face with hands that trembled. He leaned forward, elbows jabbing with awkward force into his knees as he held an aching head. His wiry body shook with an uncontrollable paroxysm and an oily sweat exuded from his pores.

"Drink something, Niall. It's partly lack of food," she heard herself say in a voice she scarcely recognized. "It's three days since we made that transfer."

As he lurched to his feet and stumbled to the galley, she checked her nutrients and adjusted the acid balance hastily. Niall clutched at the counter for support and fumbled for a restorative spray, gave himself a massive dose. He pulled open the first container he could reach, gulping its contents before they'd heated. He knocked down several more cans in an attempt to close his fingers around one. He finally opened a container of soup, drank it, and the shaking subsided. Still holding the restorative spray, he half staggered to his cabin, into the shower. He fumbled to turn the water on, alternating hot and cold sprays, unconcerned that he was still dressed. The treatment and liquid began to revive him and he stripped, carefully washing away the accumulated filth of three lost days.

Freshly dressed, he returned to the galley and found coffee. As the container was warming, he carried it into the lounge, dropping to the couch that faced Helva.

"Did you check yourself?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes. Acid!."

"Not surprising. What was that about an inhibitor?"

How did we get away from Beta Corvi? No, don't explain how. I know. Fardles! Did we leave a trail of those cuy particles?"

"I'm not certain I'd know a cuy particle if I met it," Helva replied drily. "But they've done something to the shielding about the drive. To the alloy itself. It's denser and light. And I feel light, if that makes sense."

"Nothing they do makes sense or no sense." Niall gave a rueful snort.

"We did use that drive. D'you realize how far we went in three days?"

"Not far enough." Niall spaced the words out. "And let us not speed home, cv drive operative or not. I'm in no shape to face debriefing. In fact, I'm going to avoid it if at all possible." But his grin was Niallnormal as he raised the hot coffee in a toast.

"That is good!" Helva said with mild surprise at the taste.

Niall blinked. "What did you say?" He leaned forward. "You tasted that?"

Inexplicably, she had savored the coffee taste in his mouth.

"Yes, that coffee tastes good," she said again after a very long thoughtful silence.

"Well!" Niall scratched his nose. "How d'you like them apples?"

"You haven't tasted me apples yet."

Niall took a deep breath that he exhaled in a long chuckle, all the while regarding the tendril of steam writhing up from the coffee container.

"Helva, we didn't complete the recombination?"

"I think," Helva spoke slowly, trying her thought out loud, "that the time limit flipped us back right at the critical moment." She felt reluctant to examine her reaction to that interference. She knew with that part of her which was Niall, just as he knew with his fractions of her how perilously close they'd come.

"I wonder—would we have withdrawn at all from Beta Corvi had the fusion been complete?" Niall laughed softly, his eyes brimming with amusement. "Hey gal, into which one of us would we both go? Hell, you're pint-sized and so am I, but who'd've been us? Or would we have been stuck in the shell? Say, what was going on down there with that character who kept pushing you? And pulling me? Oh, that was them? Fardles, did we damned near get stuck with that Colmer bitch?" His dismay dissolved in a weak laugh of relief, and then he sat, a long time, while the coffee cooled, just staring contentedly at her panel. She knew that he, too, was mentally probing to estimate the extent of their meshing.

"I suspect it will take all our lifetimes to figure it out."

"Quite likely."

The prospect daunted neither.

"Hell, we can't wander off like this," Niall said after a long, long period of mutual introspection. He shoved himself out of the couch, lobbed the old coffee into the disposal chute, and went for another.

"So they altered the shielding?" he asked, leaning against the counter. "Is there a separate inhibitor? Or is that the alternation in the shielding? And did you grasp what the crot are cuy particles? Breslaw is going to want to know something more specific than that they're dangerous."

"He suspects that..."

"And inconvenient if the Corviki catch us making/ exhaling them?"

"I think their warning should be deterrent enough. There is a black core within the drive isotope that didn't previously exist. There is more of that same black stuff in a specially shielded container in the supply bay. It's radiating a purple shade."

"Hey, Helva, did you actually sort out the personalities of Kuria, Prane, and Chaddress. What'n'ell do we tell Dobrinon?"

"As little as possible. No, they were there. At least I was aware of a KurlaPrane core, but only because it was a strong combination."

She saw Niall wince with a regret that she shared.

"We don't, do we, tell him about that in us?"

"Never! I shouldn't like to have to explain something that is so personally subjective."

"Like tasting coffee?"

"Among other things. Dobrinon would take us apart to find out which facets of you got into me in the reassembly."

"Gal, we are together!" He enunciated each syllable with a jab of his finger. "But no one, not any one, gets any chance to dissect our feelings. Right?"

"Right!"

Then his face dissolved into a smile, part malice, part pure selfdelight, part utter triumph.

"Yeah, gal, have we got a thing going together!" He shook his head and slapped his thigh. "Hell, yes! By anything that's been left holy, Helva, there's nothing we can't do now. C'mon, gal, pour on that power. Cycle that crotty drive to get us back to Regulus yesterday. Scatter us cuy particles where we may. We're going to buy the body corporate forever free of dear Railyly."

If stars had ears, they'd have heard the vast halelujahs ringing from the partnered ship.

The End

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