

Alba Krystal

by Bud Sparhawk

There were eight of us assigned to the station when the greenies brought her in half-dead with fear and cold, turned her over to Alice -- our station -- and left on their lizardy business.

Poor Alice hadn't been trained to be a nursemaid for an abandoned kid so all she did was get her in bed, heat up the chamber a few degrees, and send out a call on the distress band for us to hurry-hurry home.

Hurry-hurry was just one thing we couldn't do. The seven of us were working deep that day -- down to about twenty atmospheres -- and decompression back to station levels takes time, even for us modifieds.

Needless to say we were all roundly cursing the greenies the whole time we guided our 'scaphs back to the transport and stowed them in the recesses along each side of the monster ship. The stupid lizards, leaving some poor human child to the mercies of Alice. What a stupid stunt.. "Damn them," we cried as we sweated the transport up through the heavy atmosphere of the giant planet Grimm.

It was our own fault in a way, leaving the station alone. But what ever happens out here that requires a human attendant to stay behind? Certainly a space station orbiting an out of the way place such as Grimm wasn't likely to have many visitors, aside from the regularly-scheduled traders that worked this sector.

Usually Jack, our normal, would have been at the station since he couldn't get down to pressure like the rest of us. But right now Jack was on his way home with our last load of pyrads for the Federation markets and orders to fill for the station; food, of course, fuel, repair supplies and, most important to our sanity, whatever was new in the medical field.

As were most modifieds, we miners were all avowed hypochondriacs. We needed the constant reassurance of having a large amount of medical machinery right at our fingertips. They tell me it has to do with the trauma of modification -- when your brain wakes up to find that they've changed things around since its last check. How would you like to wake up and find your feet right there, three feet from your nose?

In the last twenty years of operation the biggest injury the station recorded was a sprained ankle. But, as I said before, statistics don't matter to a modified so we've got everything the medics would sell us.

The major item is a complete rejuvenation rig -- a big glass mother that's capable of rebuilding anything from a piece of torn skin to a complete torso. Old Sven, "Doc" we call him for he's always studying the medical equipment and astounding us with his knowledge of their capabilities, says if we have another sprain it'll be easier to cut off the leg, dump the patient into the unit and wait the twenty-five point six two days the regrowth would take. Be easier than putting up with the groaning and moaning of the victim.

He's a real joker, that Doc.

We've also got a broad spectrum analyzer for anything from a viral infection to an attack of Martian screw worms, a comprehensive pharmacopoeia of every drug known to man and the normal complement of sharp, pointed, and blunt instruments that can be found in any good surgery.

It wasn't until we were in the secondary locks, getting our five atmospheres of ship pressure squeezed out to one and complaining about the heat when Jock thought of telling Alice what to do for the kid.

I was too sick at the time to hear everything he said, being the slowest one when it comes time to decompress. The others are different from me: they've still got their throats and mouths through which they can blow out great gusts of air. Me, I'm stuck with a set of book gills around the throat that are a great asset as depth but terrible for degassing. I can't even cuss with the rest, my larynx having been sacrificed to make room for the gills. Nonetheless I manage to sign my feelings pretty well to everyone within finger sight.

By the time we were down to one-and-a-fraction atmospheres we'd even reconciled ourselves to accepting what the greenies had done. Shoot, it must have cost them a bundle in reaction mass just to divert and bring her to the station. I felt sorry for the next humans that had to deal with that crew. "Full accounting due: balance for delivery of human child to Federation station A-116, lost purchases Cr.20 per hour, fuel expenditures of, _etc . . . etc . . . etc_."

In their cockeyed way they'd be right; every human was responsible for his own kind. I'd be the last to say that their ledger-book morality was any worse than ours. At least they didn't war among their own kind.

Jorge was the first one through the lock and into the sleeping chamber where Alice had put the kid. The rest of us were just a little behind, me being the last, still sick with the cramps and aches of various sorts. I pushed my way through the strangely silent group surrounding the bunks to get a glimpse of the child the greenies had left.

You can't blame Alice for calling her a child. After all, the only humans she's seen since she was activated have been the normal station keepers such as Jack and us modified deep miners. I guess that's why she took the word of the lizards that this was a child. Since the lizards live about ten centuries each they're a little biased about things like age.

"Wow," James whistled. "What a set of legs!" A murmur of agreement swept the crew as their eyes gazed on the slumbering figure.

She was a woman the like of which we'd not seen since our modified service had begun. A normal girl from the delicately tapering toes up the smooth flesh to the crowning glory of her hair -- with all of the pleasant diversions along the way that mean the difference between average and normal. After all, even a real beast would have looked good to our horny crowd, but this beauty . . .

"She looks familiar somehow," Jim said and rubbed his chin. "I think I've seen her somewhere before."

The shuffling of our bodies and whispered admirations must have disturbed the girl for her eyes began to flutter and then flew open as she gazed dead level into our eyes. She gave a little stifled cry and jumped up from the bunks, a wild look in her eyes.

If we thought she was lovely laying down our opinions changed when she stood and we could see the muscle tone of her magnificent body. No sagging flesh or loose folds on her. Aside from a delightful little jiggle here and there she was as tight as a drum. Premodified memories came flooding back about girls looking that way. I let out a long sigh for what was past and the gills converted it to a flubbing gurgle. Oh, to be six feet tall again, I wished.

"Who . . . who are you?" she asked with a trembling voice as her eyes darted from face to face.

Doc reached out and patted her on the behind, which was about even with his chest, in a reassuring way. "Be calm," he said in a deep voice, as if he were ready to put the make on her. "You're among friends." Then he introduced each of us, leaving me to the last -- sort of getting her used to the idea of our differences from normals before springing that mass of wet flesh around my neck on her. To give her

credit she hid her reaction pretty well, just a slight widening of her eyes was all.

"And I am Krystal, Alba Krystal," she replied demurely. A Rottenhut wolf suddenly materializing in our midst couldn't have caused a greater shock than to hear that name.

Way back when, even before the old Empire split into the Federation, the Grand Alliance, and the AI (Associated Independents) the Krystal family had made its fortune. I think their first billion was made in securities; taking advantage of the fact that paper travels cheaper than gold the family had stripped the outer worlds of a good deal of their accumulated wealth before the laws were passed to stop them.

A second billion was received from the sale of the various offices, firms and businesses that had attached themselves to the security industry like barnacles to the old sailing ships. The Krystals had turned that money into land -- new planets that were developed to maximum profitability for the family. Then they went into shipping.

About that time the Empire split -- or should I say the government finally acknowledged its own ineptness and gave way to the creation of the Grand Alliance. The Federation and the AI had split off years before, but that wasn't officially recognized.

After the split the rivalry between the factions turned into open warfare and that gave rise to the Krystal family's latest venture -- weapons and mercenaries. It was said, but always in whispers, that the family supplied all three sides with the tools of war, and turned a profit no matter who the victor or what the cost.

And now we poor deep miners, out here as much for our aversion to war as for the tidy profit, were pulled into the middle of the whole mess: Alba Krystal indeed. Now that she said the name I could see the fine line of the chin and the regal bearing that were the mark of the family. Of course Jim had recognized her; we all should have from the news tapes that drifted our way.

After we got her bedded down properly in Jack's area, and had Alice raise that section of the station another notch, turn on the noise suppressors to mask the creaks and groans of the station and dim the lights so the girl could rest, we congregated in the galley for some serious discussion. I acted as recorder since my signing was too slow for participation.

James emptied the sack the greenies had left on the table top. There were a few items of torn clothing, a record pack, a silver case embossed with the letters "A.K." and various items of machinery we couldn't identify. "Alice," shouted Jorge. "Play back your memories of the delivery." There were a few clicks and peeps, a ping and then a slurred sibilant voice came from Alice's speaker on the wall.

"To the managers of this facility," it began. "I am Rhoday Thea-Capital. I deliver one human being, F.O.B. Station A-116. Subject cargo was received from Snart Apl-Drawing on consignment for delivery to nearest human outpost.

"Data on item as follows: discovered as found cargo following unexplained destruction of ship _Milady's Castle_ near Celphus III. Belongings in actual legal possession of subject delivered. Other items categorized for resale or distribution to cover marginal costs.

"Bills due will be receivable at next human encounter. Rhoday Thea-Capital closes his ledger." With that ritual close the tape hissed to an end.

"So she's the survivor of a ship breakup!" Jorge wondered and fiddled with his beard. "Maybe there's a reward -- enough to buy out of here."

"And maybe the reason the ship was destroyed is sleeping over there," Jerome said in a voice dripping with doom. "Did you consider that somebody as important as her would be a most inviting target. Hell, we might draw them here if they knew she was still alive!"

"Don't be such a damned pessimist," Doc chided. "Lots of ships get hulled in these skirmishes. Just because this one happened to be carrying a Krystal . . ."

"Who was the sole survivor," Jerome reminded him. "And Celphus is a long way from any known disputed area."

"Just the same, I think we ought to send word to her family. Let them know that she's all right," Jock said.

"Where's the address? We'll have the next freighter carry a letter," Jerome replied sarcastically. "Did you dodos forget that any word we send would have to be on broad band radio? And that would be heard by several million people, some of whom could be the ones that destroyed her ship."

"Hell, we're lucky to hit home with our broadcasts -- and our station's aimed right at it. We try to hit anyplace else and we'd probably miss by several light years. And who knows who would hear it then?"

Jorge spoke again. "Just the same, she can't stay here. Where'll she sleep? For that matter where will we sleep? Let's call the lizards back and have them deliver her somewhere else, someplace where her own kind can take care of her."

I was glad somebody finally said it: the thing we all felt and were hesitant to voice -- her own kind.

Don't get me wrong, I went into modification with both eyes, and my bank account, wide open. The pay was good. The company was congenial, not surprising since the entire group was psychologically designed to give diversity and an ever changing center of social balance. Finally, the tour was interesting and out of the combat zones. It was a quiet, interesting but monastic life.

But when we had a fully-bloomed young female thrust into our midst it was too much a reminder of the way things were and the long, long time before the tour was over and we could collect the millions accumulating in our accounts. Jorge was right; having her here would bring nothing but trouble. Her beauty was another trouble, one we hadn't had to consider until now.

"Yes, you're right," they all said and I nodded my head in agreement. She had to go. Doc started out to give her the news.

Then the door to the galley squealed open and there she stood, wrapped in one of our blankets -- it covered her to the waist. There was fear in those big wide eyes. "Please don't send me away," she pleaded. "Let me stay with you. I'll try to help you, just let me stay." Then she did the one thing that put us all on her side -- she cried.

Her story came out between choked sobs. Her branch of the family controlled business within the AI. Over the last few years the members of her immediate branch had been meeting with all sorts of misfortunes -- disease, hunting accidents, raiding parties of Federation ships, mysterious disappearances and finally, this shipwreck, which was to have destroyed her as well.

She'd been put on the ship for a vacation at Antheray where her depression over the loss of her father would have been cleansed by their skilled psychosurgeons and her mind restored to its normal clarity.

But along the way the ship's captain, a man whose family her father had saved from the organ banks of Gault, confided to her that he had been given instructions to deliver her to that same planet where her

body would be rendered down into a loose assembly of spare and miscellaneous parts. Rather than do that he shoved her into a rescue capsule, ejected it from the ship and then opened his engines full while within two radii of a large mass -- Celphus III. Needless to say, she was the only survivor. There is literally nothing left when a ship does that.

"It was my great-uncle who must have given those instructions. He's wanted me out of the way so he could have clear control over trade. He's the one that wanted us to go into weapons, but we wouldn't let him," she concluded and then lifted her tear-filled eyes to ours from her seat on the floor. "So you see, I can't leave here. Anywhere I'd go he'd find me and kill me. This is the only place of safety that I have. Please let me stay."

We made a little partition around Jack's section after carefully stripping away his pictures and souvenirs of his debaucheries in the capital. Jack sure had a way with the ladies, what with his six-foot frame of muscle and charm. I envy him. I used to look a little like that and didn't have half his success -- in premodified days, that is.

The weeks went by as Alba tried to fit herself into our cramped station life. She used some clothes from Jack's locker which were a slight bit large, but served well enough. She didn't ever have a word of complaint either, which was a sign of class, I suppose.

She tried to clean up the place, tidy it up, at first but dear Alice had our floor plan ingrained so deeply into her core that she wouldn't allow it to be changed in the slightest.

Next, our visitor tried her hand at cooking and promised us a gourmet feast we'd never forget. She was right about that; Jerome was sick for three days afterwards, our first honest medical emergency in the station. This pleased Doc no end for he finally had a patient on which to try the medical chest. Jerome was less than willing to put up with most of Doc's proposals but finally did take some antacid and an antidiuretic. We cautioned Alice to keep Krystal away from the food programmer in the future.

Still undaunted Alba kept trying to please. She even wanted to go diving with us but backed out when she saw the four-foot cubed compartment inside the 'scaphs. Somehow the thought of being hunched up for a week at a time at ten degrees Celsius under fifteen atmospheres didn't appeal to her. Hell, they didn't appeal much to us either and we're only half her size and used to them.

"There must be something I'm good for," she finally cried one night in the galley. "I feel so . . . useless around here. I don't want to be a parasite. I want to be of some use to you in return for letting me stay here." We patted her hand and sent her to bed. Poor kid.

It was Jock who finally voiced what we all needed and wanted and decided to settle the matter once and for all. He discussed it with the four of us in the galley and, when we agreed to try his proposal, called in Doc and Jim who were mapping the P20 layer for our next dive, to see what they thought.

Doc debated it for a long while before he finally agreed and that made the decision unanimous. It wasn't that old Doc was a prude, you see, it was just that he knew we'd all want him to talk it over with Alba. She was less likely to take it the wrong way coming from him -- being older and more mature. Shoot, he'll be thirty next month and that's mature!

Alba not only agreed to the idea but thought it was utterly fantastic. Seems that she thought that modification did something to a man and that our attempts at politeness, as she put it, were for physical reasons.

Did I say she thought it was a good idea? That very night she posted a schedule on her door. The walls of the monastery came tumbling down unheard around us in our eagerness to test this new relationship.

From that night on things really hummed around the place. Not only did

our production pick up but even the station seemed a brighter, more lovable home. Alice's occasional lapses of memory went unnoticed. Jerome stopped counting the days until his end of tour and James quit constructing the elaborate budget for spending his accumulated wealth when his own end of tour came. I stopped keeping my chronicle for a while and took a new interest in the others.

Looking back it seemed strange that we hadn't noticed how very dull and constricted our lives had been. It was less strange that after her arrival we should all be so happy and congenial. Courtesy and politeness, never our forte, became the watchword. Oh, those were the good times!

But with the happy life we grew careless and forgot the reason she'd come to the station, so much had she become a part of our lives.

Jack found a rich pyrad return on its way up through the P25 layer. It was a once in a lifetime find, if the radar map could be believed; chunks of high-grade ore reflecting stars of unbelievable brilliance. That night we all whooped and shouted. Even Doc got a little high, swearing that he was going to have the surgeons give him a Hanzeloid body, a hulking seven foot giant used more for soldiering than work. After that he was going to spend the rest of his life intimidating the shorter mortals.

James added a few dozen brothels to his growing list and the rest of us made glowing boasts about the grand lives we'd all lead. All we had to do was reach out and grab the fortune from Grimm before it returned to the surface. The intercepts showed we could hit it at P22 the next day, halfway around Grimm from our station. After that we could buy off our remaining time and return to the good life, we promised ourselves.

Rather than leave one of us behind we decided that we all should go; after all, one coordinator and three crews of two could cut operating time and increase our chances of collecting the maximum ore in the shortest time. That's a very big plus when you're working in twenty-two atmospheres.

Krystal was checked out on the station and could handle Alice without trouble. Besides, we reasoned, what could happen out here? We never learn, it seems.

The next morning as we hurtled toward Grimm we began compressing and brought the interior of the transport up to its normal fifteen atmospheres. Always better to hit the atmosphere with the interior at pressure -- keeps the mind clear with all that dissolved oxygen in the blood, I suppose.

Our dive was normal enough; two loops around the planet while its gravity hauled us down through the thin atmosphere -- where the pressure was a mere Earth normal, one atmosphere -- to the point where the real atmosphere of Grimm started to build up.

We like to think of the pressure regions around Grimm as if they were the layers of an onion. And since Grimm is such a huge giant of a planet, there were dozens of layers, each with its own peculiarities.

Since the force of gravity builds up as the inverse square of the distance from the core and the density of its atmosphere goes up proportionally, the pressure layers get thinner and thinner as we go down.

Which brings us conveniently to the place where our ship floats on the denser layer as a cork on the seas of Earth. That's about the P15 layer.

Jock guided us over the spot Alice predicted the upwelling would hit P22 and we all moved to the 'scaphs, strapped in, and sank down to the P22 layer. It was a piece of cake -- if you had the foresight to ballast your craft correctly, pressurize the interior to something you could stand and keep track of

about fifty tell-tales whose red glow on your instrument panel meant the difference between life and death down here.

That all taken care of, you just steered yourself to the glimmering specks on the scope, ignoring the false returns, praying you weren't going too deep or that you'd see the transponder mark of another 'scaph and be able to avoid ramming a crew mate.

Once you reached the proper place you squirt your little steering nozzles to guide the maw of the ore scoop hanging under you to the biggest chunks the volcanoes of Grimm have thrown up until the hold is filled and then toss out ballast and rise to where the transport awaits. Of course, you have to keep trim as you scoop ore, tossing off an equivalent amount of ballast to the ore you scoop so you don't sink down to the jet stream on the P23 layer.

The fact that you do all of the above while whipping around in a vertical blast of hot gas that would make mother Earth's typhoons seem gentle breezes by comparison is the reason we need two of us in the 'scaph; one pilots while the other operates the gathering process.

We're really not sure about the volcanoes of Grimm. That's just a theory since nobody's ever seen the surface of the place. Hell, we're barely in the stratosphere as far as Grimm is concerned! But whatever is blowing the ore our way blows us good fortune, for, in ascending on the rising thermal the molten magma cools, crystallizes and changes into a most fantastic gem -- the pyrad.

Fire it has, like the opal, and the stars of the finest ruby. Color? Any you want, except black. Hold one in your hand and you can see in its miniature depths the birth of a universe; fire and ice, stars and glory.

They are the gem any woman and most men would give anything to own. They are beauty, Alba wears seven, one from each of us.

We were all snug and happy on our way back up, despite the cold, the smell of each other's sweat, and the deadening feeling of all that poison around us -- we were happy. Stowed in the belly of the transport were at least billions in pyrad. We'd collected the purest, finest specimens any of us had ever seen. The transport was carrying its maximum load, no ballast but the ore itself. It was the weight of all that money that kept us from getting back to the station as fast as we wanted. And despite our common thoughts about lovely, lovely Alba waiting to greet us none wanted to drop so much as a grain of the precious cargo.

Alice called us when we were at the P18 layer. "Freighter ship Peddlar recognition signal received," she advised. "Requests to deliver medical supplies to station. All signals correspond as to registry," she finished.

The identification-friend was one of Alice's more endearing features. Should any ship dare approach without responding properly it would be torn to bits by our formidable defenses. Some day we'll figure out how the lizards get around it.

"Must be the cargo Jack ordered," Doc suggested. "I wonder why he didn't bring it with him?"

"Maybe it's a diverted cargo," James remarked, his voice sounding squeaky from the helium in our atmosphere. "Sometimes it's easier to divert than to haul it to the point of sale."

"All right, Alice," Doc instructed. "But tell Alba to stay out of sight when they board." I kicked myself for not thinking of that precaution.

The station popped into sight above the horizon, shining like a white jewel against the black background

of the sky. Beside it floated the ungainly hulk of the freighter. We could see their light ship parked next to the service hatch. The distance was too great to make out the figures of the unloading crew. There was a shimmering of radiance as the small boat moved back to the belly of the mothership.

"Delivery complete," Doc remarked. "Sure wish they could have stayed for a while." He reached for the mike to gab with the crew a little.

"Sure," hissed Jerome's voice. "And then have them blab about Alba to everyone within ten light years." It was Doc's turn to kick himself as he pulled his hand back.

We watched the freighter wheel and turn toward the mass of the planet in preparation for the brief surge that would put it in an elliptical path around our giant. It was common for ships of her size to use the massive planet to build up speed prior to going trans-light. After all, when a difference of ten kilometers per second velocity on entry makes a five day difference in arrival time you use whatever you can.

I could hear the pinging code cross-talking on the voice channel as Doc punched up the station. "Okay Alice, tell Alba she can come out now. The freighter's gone." There was a rush of static over the channel and then silence.

"Alice, this is Doc. Please acknowledge," he repeated angrily. "Station A-116, register and respond!" The radio crackled to itself. Something was wrong.

I looked up from the instrument panel at the station and wondered what could have gone wrong with Alice's radio when something caught my eye -- a silvery plume of pure flame was spewing from the air lock.

I hit the alarm button with one hand to put out an emergency squeal on all channels and pulled James to the port with the other. He saw the fire immediately and started yammering at the others while I turned the ship about and gave it a ten second burn to kill our relative motion and pointed to the locks.

To give the guys credit they were quick on the uptake. Like five little pistons they squeezed into the 'scaphs and squirted toward the station. I waited a full thirty seconds to make sure they were clear and then gave the engines a five second burst to put us into a higher orbit. We were going after the freighter.

I hoped the all-channel emergency had awakened some of Alice's functions as we pulled away. Otherwise I dreaded what they would find when they arrived.

I came around Grimm high up and then pointed the nose of the transport straight at the center of the planet. By my rough calculations were well behind the freighter in kilometers but nearly ten minutes closer in time than if we'd followed her directly, and it's time, not distance that matters in running intercepts.

James pointed a stubby finger at the horizon. Just above the sky-glow, where the planet's outer fringes dispersed the sun on the far side, was a bright glint that pointed our way. I gave the ship an extra kick and changed the angle of attack relative to the "horizon." I looked at the tell-tales from the transport's computer. The poor thing was never designed to run the plots I'd given it and was damned near having a breakdown.

We'd be on the higher, faster orbit while the other was trading time and going deep into the gravity well to gain the advantage of the boost to achieve critical speed. I signed a prayer we'd get to her probable exit point at the right time. If we didn't there was no way we could hope to catch her.

Forty minutes later I watched through a red haze as the other ship came to us. The crew had reported that Alice had been gutted and Alba, my priceless Alba was dead.

A few kilometers below us and falling quickly behind was the accelerating freighter. We let her drop out of sight behind the horizon before I hit the retros and dropped our speed down and we fell toward the dark form of the freighter, rushing on us like a meteor. I lifted our prow, waited a fraction of a second and then opened the cargo bay.

Consider the situation: You're a freighter captain whipping along at the top of an atmosphere of a world with a deep gravity gradient. In order to build your speed up as high as you can and get the maximum use out of that field you dropped down on a sharp angle as deep as possible because the deeper you go the higher your exit speed will be at breakaway. Simple, yes?

Now consider that having done so, having bottomed out as close as you dare -- for the tenuous outer reaches of the atmosphere would rip the unstreamlined spars and booms of your deep-space freighter to pieces -- you fire your engines to their maximum, flaring them for the extra bit of speed they give and suddenly you see a few tons of mass dropping toward the cobweb of struts and wires that hold the components of your ship together.

Choices: Shut off the power and pray that your tangential will carry you past without too much damage, fire an outrigger engine to change your line of flight, or topple the ship so the onrushing rocks hit some less vulnerable part. Quick now -- you've got less than five seconds to decide and about forty seconds to consider what you've done.

Too late. The rocks hit the port dorsal cargo spar and bend it back until it snaps in two. The cargo canister twists loose and wobbles crazily into the rear fuel segment as other rocks tear into the low cross-braces, the rear radio sail and the hundreds of control wires and cables connecting the parts of the ship to each other. Elapsed time -- three seconds.

The center of mass for the freighter was now somewhere to the starboard of center line and changing every minute as the damage spreads. The freighter began to slew around in a flat turn and assume a nose-down attitude to her track. The engines continued to fire as the disintegration of her structural integrity was compounded by the stresses being put on her.

At that point I stopped watching, hit the engines and began to climb into a higher orbit; dropping back from the exploding cloud of debris that had been the freighter as our own speed built up.

On the next pass around the planet we watched the last few pieces of the freighter burn an intense green as the friction of Grimm's atmosphere finished the job we'd started. James laid his hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

There was no feeling of victory, no exultation. Alba was dead in the hulled station and we had just balanced the score for her was all. The deep sadness we felt overbalanced the revenge by too much. I felt drained.

The station was operable by the time we returned. There was an emergency seal over the lock and a breathable, if underpressured, atmosphere restored. Three were repairing Alice's scarred face panels and bringing her back to operating levels and Jerome was cleaning a mess off the floor. With an ugly shock I realized it was part of a scorched leg -- Alba's.

"Where's Doc?" shouted James. Jock pointed a test probe toward the medical bay.

Doc was standing over the rejuvenation unit, staring at the ugly mass of black and red beneath the glass lid. I noticed that all of the controls were in the green; fluids being pumped in, analyzer running, the probes building up a picture of the task at hand.

"They put a bomb in the lock," Doc mumbled. "It was a bidirectional job and melted both lock doors at the same time." he paused. "Alba must have been standing right in line with it and got hit by the blast."

Jerome motioned us outside, away from Doc. "It's pretty useless," he said. "Doc insisted that we try the rejuvenation route but I think its hopeless. She must've had a good five minutes in vacuum before we reached her. And there wasn't enough of her left to be alive before that. The blast tore her up something awful. Hell," he spat, "half the torso was gone, along with the left arm and leg. Her face . . ."

James stopped him with a motion of his hand. Spare us the details the sign said. I agreed.

Two days later we'd gotten over the less damaging effects of the sudden decompression we'd undergone in entering the hulled station. Everyone had been so busy getting the place back together we'd not even noticed the bleeding noses, or gills in my case. Lord knows how we managed to ignore the pain of the bends.

Alice's memory told us that her cursory exam verified the voucher from the freighter as valid and had taken the loadmaster's ident. His picture was there, on the tape. How was she to know? A computer couldn't recognize Alba's uncle unless we told her to. But the rest of us instantly recognized the grim visage of Lys Krystal from our newstapes. So that was who we'd killed far below us, the head of the AI branch family.

Somehow word must have gotten back to him that Alba was alive and at our station. How? Had the lizards spoken of our guest to another? Could she have had the misfortune of their voucher for the delivery reaching the very man who wished her dead? Perhaps we'd never know. It didn't matter. Only the ache of her loss mattered now.

While most of us used the tasks of repairing the station to occupy our minds while time healed our wounds and shock. Doc hung over the rejuvenation coffin and monitored the flickering of the instruments as if he could read the condition of whatever was inside. The rest of us looked in occasionally, not having much hope. After all, there is only so much that a medical unit can do, even with a still living body. "Wait a month," Doc promised.

Twenty five point six days came and went. Doc swore that the beat of one meter indicated a pulse rate. Jerome said it was probably surge pressure from one of the recirculating pumps. You couldn't see anything through the milky haze of the fluids inside the glass lid.

At fifty-two days we were working the layers of Grimm once more. Each of us stayed longer and longer because we didn't want to return to the station and all of the reminders of Alba. Doc hardly checked the medical bay any more. He was caught, afraid to shut the unit down and afraid not to. We waited.

At seventy days the station was wakened by the transponder ping of a Federation supply ship and Jack's brusque voice demanding to know where all the dancing girls and brass bands were for his welcome home. "A bloody-be-damned profit this time gents. Your stay's been cut another three months because of the value of that last load I sold."

His voice went on. "And I have things for you. A new cap for Jerome's bald head. A stack of newstapes for Jim and a new menu tape for Alice's food programmer. Gentlemen, rejoice. I am here with tales of wild women and roaring feasts the like of which you've never seen. Break out the wine. We will celebrate my return from the places of sin and plenty."

Doc told Jack the reason for our dour faces as soon as he was through the lock. He detailed Rhoday Thea-Capital's delivery of Alba, how she came to be picked up by the lizards, the bomb the freighter had left and our destruction of the ship and crew.

"Well, where is this beauty?" Jack laughed. "I want to see with my own eyes this creature that seems to have you all so enchanted."

Mutely, Doc took him by the hand and led him to the medical bay as he explained the last gruesome detail.

"We left her remains in there," he told the normal. "It's been so long. We're sure that she's never coming back but just couldn't . . ."

"I understand, old timer," Jack remarked with surprising gentleness. "It's better someone who didn't know her to do this. Go on back. I'll call you when I'm finished cleaning up."

A tear glistened on Doc's cheek and I felt wetness run down my own. He was right; someone who didn't know her could do what we could not. I placed an arm over Doc's shoulder and started to lead him to the galley as Jack entered the medical bay.

"Hey!" A yell came from behind us. I spun about to see Jack leaning from the doorway. "Get the new med kit in here right away. Doc, I'm going to need your help fast!"

I ran for the common room, signed for two of the guys to fetch the med kit and headed back for the bay, dragging the others with me.

The lid was off the unit and Doc was leaning over the edge smashing Alba's chest with his fist while Jack had his mouth over hers and was slowly inflating and deflating her chest.

I couldn't believe it: Alba alive and whole again. Had we ever underestimated the rejuvenation unit's ability. I felt like shouting, laughing, and crying all at once. Alba was ours again. I looked lovingly on her glistening form.

Then the med kit was rushed in and Jack began to do mysterious things to her body with the probes until -- there! -- a leg twitched, then an arm and finally the eyelids fluttered and opened. She was back with us!

We all agreed that Jack should accompany Alba back to the Federation where she could contact her family and regain her rightful control of her part of the fortune. She made one promise to each of us that so far as her sector was concerned no Krystal trader would deal in weapons so long as she lived.

The second promise was made to the seven of us while Jack was making arrangements with the robot captain of the freighter that had brought him for a return trip. He was obviously relishing having luscious Alba all to himself on the long trip back. It was a situation that had him drooling in anticipation.

There were no worries there. The knowledge of the fantastic power at her disposal would be enough to keep Jack from trying anything foolish, but there was another reason why we knew Jack's thirst would go unslaked. It was for the same reason that Alba invited each of us to visit her when we finished our tour.

Doc's stopped dreaming of becoming a Hanzeloid and has determined that he will be reconstructed at a lively four foot ten, just as the rest of us have.

After all, if you knew that the richest, most beautiful girl in the universe had a sexual preference for short men would you want to be some strapping giant?

Someday we'll tell Jack about the arrangements we'd made. I hope he won't be too mad.

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