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WELCOME TO UNICON

If this is your first convention - and if you're reading this now, instead of on the train home, chances are that it is - don't worry. You're in for a great weekend. But just at the moment you may be having doubts.

I remember my own first convention, just a few years ago, when it all seemed strange and wonderful. I tore open the package, pinned on the badge, and, like you, started skimming through the programme book to find out what was going on.

To be honest, it was a bit of a shock. I don't know what I'd expected, but it certainly wasn't this. I was surrounded by hundreds of people, all utterly indifferent to my existence, every single one of whom seemed to have known all the others since birth. Fragments of arcane dialogue drifted past my ears, full of words like *sercon*, *pork pies*, and *TAFF*. I decided then and there that all the stories I'd heard must be true - fandom was eliteist, snobbish and cliquy.

Nevertheless I was there, I'd booked a room, and I might as well make the most of it. So I gathered up my belongings and went off to look for a drink.

The next thing I knew I was talking to someone. Then to somebody else, and somebody else, and I had some more drinks, and saw some of the programme, and suddenly it was Sunday night and time to go home.

And that was my first convention. Most of it was strange and exciting, but I'd found out The Secret. *If I said hello to people they'd talk to me.* And I just couldn't wait for the next one.

And now years have passed, but not too many, and I'm one of the people surrounding you who seems to know everyone else. In fact that could be me next to you. Why not turn round, and say hello?

IAN WATSON

"What sort of books does he write?" I was asked recently. I thought long and hard.

"Rather like E.E. Smith," I said finally. "But with metaphysics instead of the spaceships."

I was being flippant, of course - you try and sum up the works of Ian Watson in a short, pithy phrase - but the more I think about it, the less silly it seems. For, although he's infinitely superior to the pulp hacks of old in every criterion by which good writing can be measured, he does share their most noticable characteristic; a zestful delight in speculation for its own sake. Reading a Watson novel is like taking a roller-coaster ride through the collective unconscious.

Ian started writing SF while living in Tokyo, where "...future shock is part of everyday life." After an epic journey home to England, which has formed the basis of previous convention talks, his unique blend of philosophical speculation and the traditional tropes of SF soon established him as a major writer.

His first novel, The Embedding, appeared in 1973 to immediate critical acclaim. It also found its way onto the final ballot of both the Nebula and the Campbell awards, eventually earning the recognition it deserved with the awarding of the Prix Apollo in 1975.

The Embedding prefigures many of his later works in several respects. Many of his recurring motifs are already evident - enigmatic aliens, the hero as outcast, the nature of language and perception, an ancient and "primitive" culture under threat from the modern world.

His years as a teacher of English in other cultures, in Japan and Tanzania, have contributed significantly to Ian's feel for time and place. This is an important element in many of his stories - the African setting of Alien Embassy, for instance, the Andean villages of The Martian Inca, or the Amazonian jungles of The Embedding. He's equally at home infusing a touch of the strange into a prosaic British setting, as in his 'Flying Saucer' novel Miracle Visitors. No turnip-headed phone freaks here, though, but a facinating voyage through the problems of Human perception and the nature of objective reality.

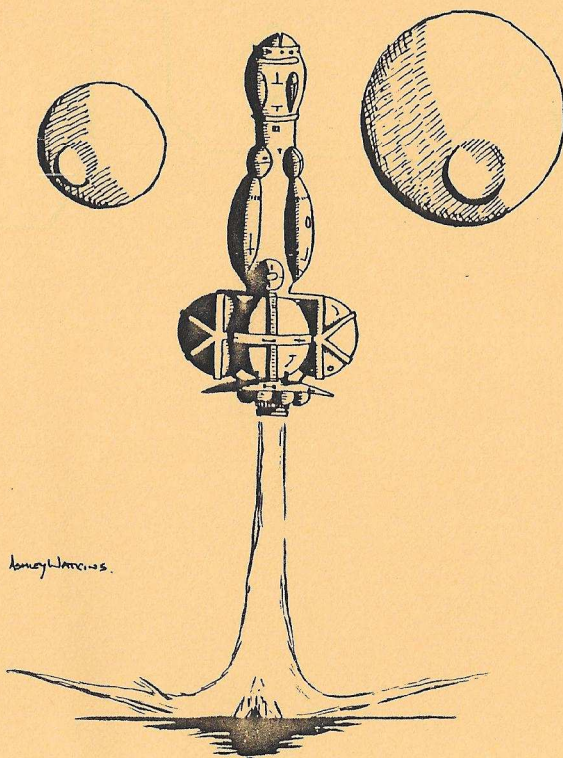
His only weakness, in the eyes of some critics, is in the creation of fully rounded characters. True the supporting cast are often sketched in in less detail than the principals, most noticeably in Miracle Visitors and God's World, but his leading characters are usually drawn with great subtlety and skill. After all, how many other white male writers in their mid-thirties could successfully narrate an entire novel from the first-person viewpoint of an adolescent black African girl?

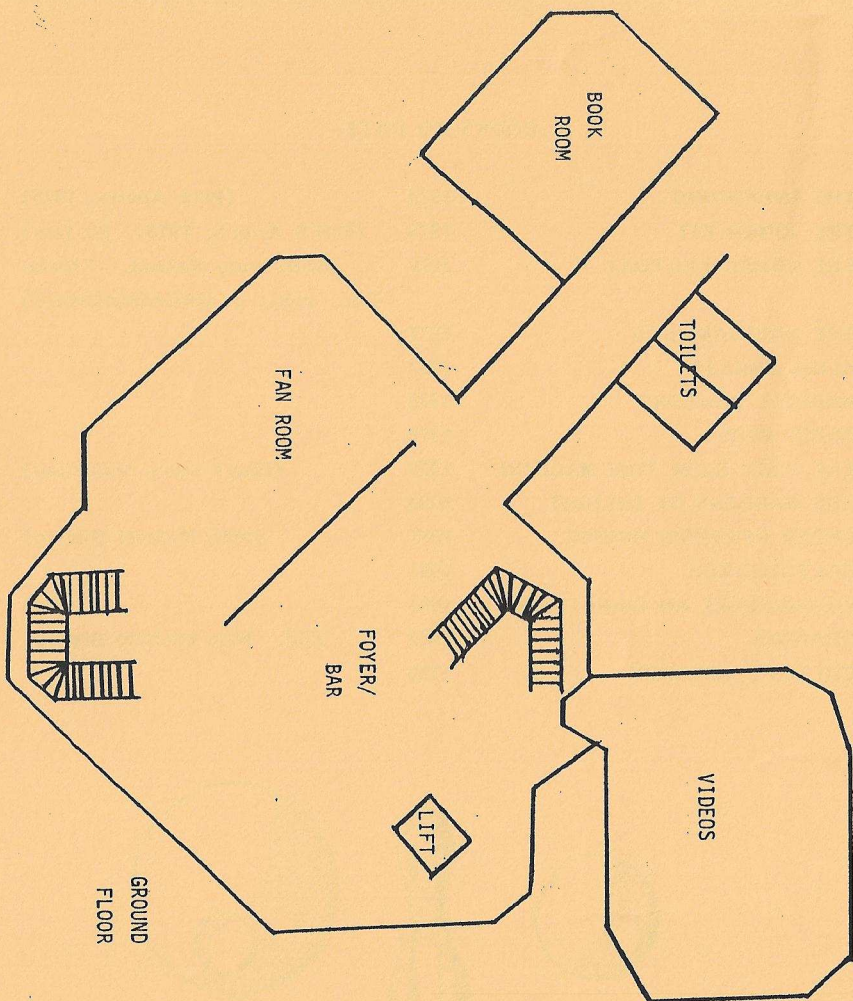
It's this rejection of cliché, and the outworn stereotypes, that make his work such a joy to read, and so challenging to the casual reader, wanting nothing more from SF than simple-minded escapism.

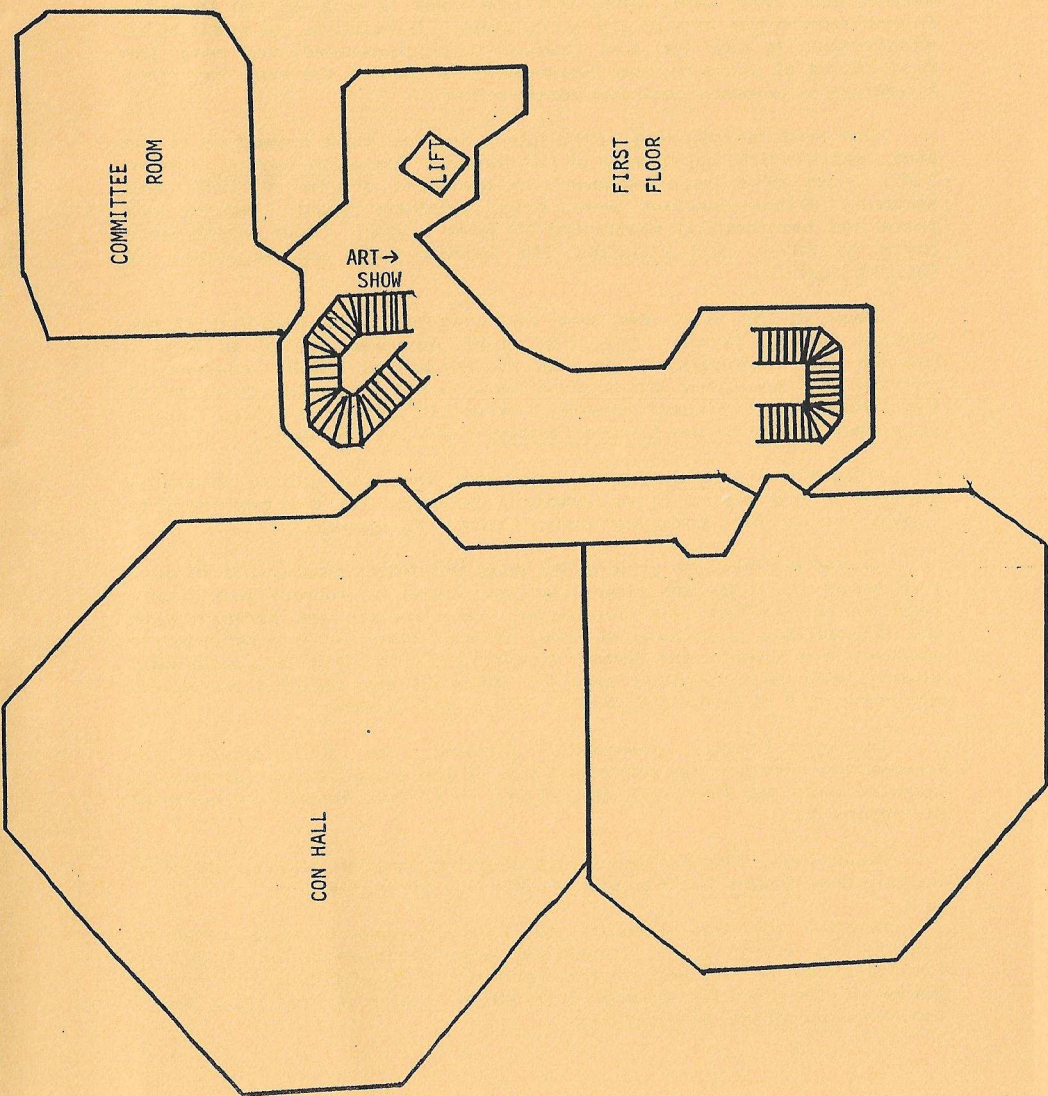
If you haven't read any of his books yet, believe me you're missing out. Go to the bookroom, now; you'll be glad that you did.

BOOKS TO DATE

THE EMBEDDING	1973	(Prix Apollo, 1975)
THE JONAH KIT	1975	(BSFA Award, 1978: Pb Edn)
THE WOMAN FACTORY	1976	(With Judy Watson. French Edn. only, as ORGASMACHINE)
THE MARTIAN INCA	1977	
ALIEN EMBASSY	1977	
MIRACLE VISITORS	1978	
GOD'S WORLD	1978	
THE VERY SLOW TIME MACHINE	1979	(Short story collection)
THE GARDENS OF DELIGHT	1980	
UNDER HEAVEN'S BRIDGE	1981	(With Michael Bishop)
DEATHHUNTER	1981	
PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION	1981	(Ed)
CHANGES	1982	(Ed. With Michael Bishop)
CHEKOV'S JOURNEY	1983	







KEN SLATER

As each new generation of fandom emerges, and sets energetically to work re-inventing the wheel, it's easy to overlook the debt we owe to our predecessors. British fandom is now flourishing in a way that the pioneers of First and Second Fandom could never have anticipated, when even Eastercons attracted lower numbers than this weekend.

Actifans come and go over the years, some briefly, some for a lifetime; but few have been so continuously active as Ken Slater.

Like most of First Fandom, Ken found his fanac disrupted by the second world war; and, when the time came to pick up the threads, British fandom was in a pretty sorry state. It would be too much of an exaggeration to say that Ken revived it single-handed, but over the next couple of years he was responsible for two of the most important initiatives in fandom's post-war resurrection.

The most far-reaching, although it may not have seemed so at the time, was the first appearance of his fanzine, Operation Fantast, late in 1947. Two more issues followed in the first quarter of 1948, and suddenly British fanzines were being produced again. Before this there had been nothing substantial for over a year. Other faneds were quick to follow, and suddenly the fanzine scene was beginning to flourish again.

Later in the year, Ken was instrumental in the founding of the Science Fantasy Society, the first major post-war attempt to form a national fan organisation. He was posted abroad shortly afterwards, but the SFS continued for another three years under the guidance of Ken Bulmer and Vincent Clarke. When it folded in 1951, Clarke continued to publish the Science Fantasy News independently.

Meanwhile Operation Fantast was going from strength to strength. By now it had ceased to be simply a fanzine, and was beginning to evolve into the first truly successful national fan grouping.

As the organisation grew to its peak mid-fifties membership of over five hundred, it became clear that the secret of success had finally been found. In fact, with hindsight, there are striking parallels with the present-day structure of the BSFA. Many of the services to members are exactly the same, including regular fanzines, a lending library, and an information service. Members also received an annual handbook, full of useful information on SF and fandom.

Operation Fantast eventually declined, as Ken decided to concentrate more on the dealership side of the organisation - eventually spun off into the FANTAST (MEDWAY) LTD. that absorbs so much of our money today.

Since then, Ken has been less active in fannish affairs, although he took over Vector for a couple of years in the mid-sixties.

One of the few members of First Fandom to have remained continuously active, he is universally known and respected in British Fandom. One of the last of the Knights of St. Fanthony, a worthy holder of the Doc Wier award, Kenneth F. Slater is more than just a fan; he's practically an institution.

It's easy to forget, as younger fen appear and make their mark, how much we owe to Ken. Modern fandom would still have developed without him - but it would have been a great deal poorer.

And this is our chance to thank him for all he's done.



GARRY KILWORTH: A FEW CHOICE WORDS

Here's a bit of Garry Kilworth that I particularly like. It's from his third novel, Split Second, which is set on Cyprus. An archaeologist, Levan, wants to dig in a certain spot for Neanderthal remains. Unfortunately there's a carob tree on the very spot and Kariyos, the owner of the land, won't let him dig up the tree. So Levan decides to approach the man's relatives:

Levan had a pocketful of notes which, under the light of a dim lamp, was soon transformed to another, grimmer pocket. Kariyos' relations were not above reproach. His cousins, who also had a part-share in the tree, followed their own separate philosophy.

Two nights later the tree was on fire.

A carob tree burns like a fleece dipped in wax. Its oily properties and the peculiarity of the hollow trunk, which forms a roaring furnace, make it an impossible job to quench the flame. Three times the fire department come out to douse the inferno and three times the smouldering trunk reached flash point shortly after they had left it. They gave up and left the giant torch to burn itself out. It was a talking point amongst passengers on passing liners afterwards, especially since it illuminated the white ruins of the church during the night, giving the building an unearthly appearance while the flames lasted.

"The burning bush," said Kariyos, when Levan dared to go up to the site to meet him again. "An old trick landgrabbers use. Don't think you thought of it first. Also Moses. He thought it was God, but it was the landgrabbers."

There are several reasons why I like this passage, and all of them are associated with Garry Kilworth's strengths as a writer. First, there's a conciseness to the writing which I find admirable and am envious of. Second, there's a real understanding of the way a society different from our own behaves. Third, there's the descriptive flourish about the carob tree burning like a torch: this is a bit of local colour, but it's more than just that; the image seems to me to have poetic qualities, and it's effective because it's not imposed on the story but is integral to it.

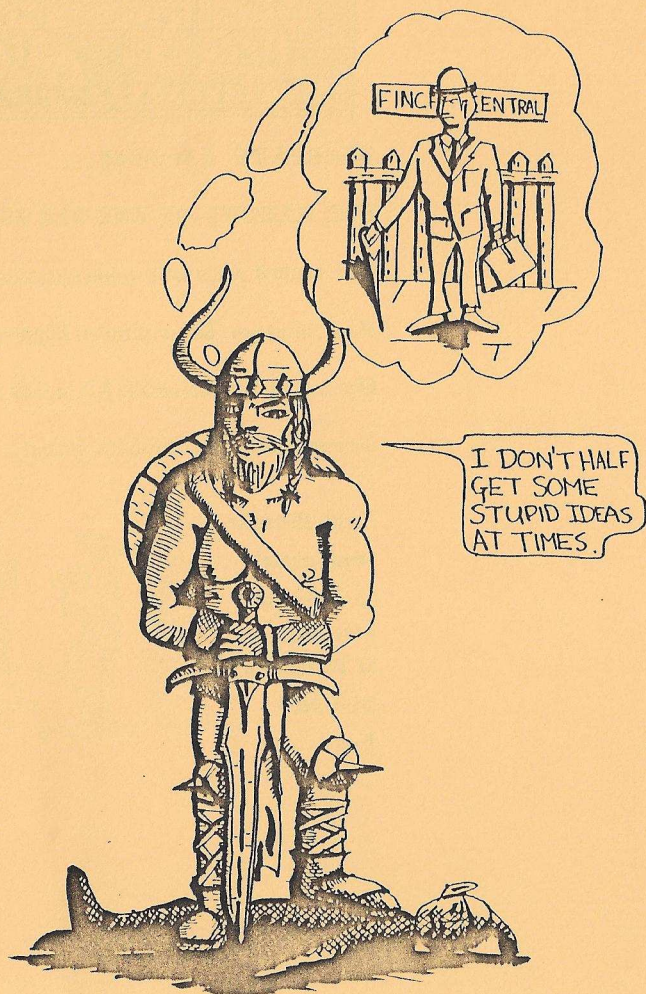
Garry has lived in the Middle and Far East, and much of his fiction arises out of his interest in other cultures. He's also very much a "What if..." man, which makes him eminently a writer of science fiction. His short stories (which I confess to liking the best) often contain lots of interesting snippets and reflections about other societies; they have a cosmopolitan feel to them in the best sense of the word. Culture clash has fertilized Garry's imagination, and this is also something I'm envious of since the only foreign country I've lived in is England.

Garry spent several years in the Army and has written one of the best stories ever about what it's like to be a soldier: "Sumi Dreams of a Paper Frog", which appeared in the March 1982 issue of Extro magazine. This is perhaps the best of numerous fine short stories he's

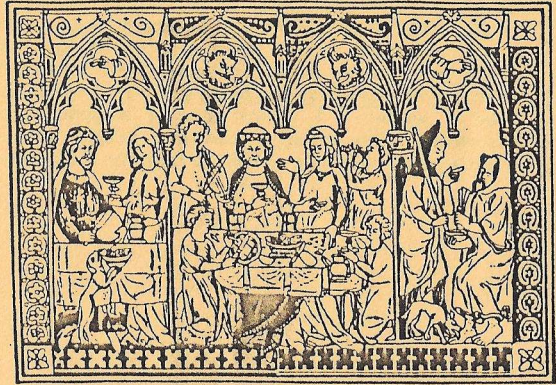
written so far. Gollancz will be publishing a collection of them in the near future which you should all look out for, and there's also a new novel forthcoming. And that brings me to another thing: he's prolific; no shortage of ideas in the Kilworth mental closet. At writers' workshops Gary always turns up with a meaty story, making laggards like Rob Holdstock and myself feel guilty.

Last of all, Garry's a nice bloke. I know appreciations like these are supposed to say this sort of thing, but with Garry it's true. No ego or bombast about the man; he's very approachable and has the rare knack of listening to others. This again is a virtue that helps him to be a writer. I count him as a good friend as well as a colleague, someone with whom I can get drunk and sort out the meaning of life with in an evening. His is usually a brandy, by the way...

Chris Evans



Ashley Watkins.



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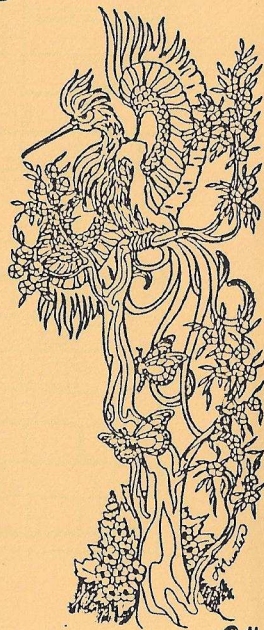
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THE LOKIAN SIRENS

The woman with the white hair was dying. She lay on an ornate bed in the centre of a large chamber, and had almost forgotten the fifty-odd people surrounding her. Their hushed whispers had long since blurred into unreality, and their faces were vague shadows, without identity.

Every so often her chest hurt, and a spasm of coughing would result, which lasted an age.. When it passed her surroundings seemed a little clearer. She imagined she saw her son leaning against her, his body racked with weeping... but no... her son never cried...

She tightened her hand around her husband's arm. There was something she had to say to him, but.. *the pain again!* She looked up into his face, and saw that his eyes were dry, his brow unfurrowed. She smiled briefly in pride *no other like...* Her thoughts drifted, and with a sense of horror she felt an enveloping, final darkness moving over her. She grasped his arm, pulling herself towards him as she tried to remember...

At last her intellect, which had been great, deserted her; and she was left only with the remains of a feeling.. As her eyes closed, she mouthed a single word to him...

..live..

Major Madhur Maheshta frowned slightly as her party were ushered into Kalda'hi's reception chamber. He walked beside her; something of a contradiction to her reports on the simpering males of the planet, this man radiated confidence... The Phoebus 5 team had reported Lokian men to be rarities in public life; yet the reception committee which followed, chattering nervously behind them was composed entirely of men.

She found her gaze held by a huge statue set in the centre of the chamber. It was an imposing looking Lokian woman, leaning casually against a truncated pillar; she wore a heavily decorated, military-looking outfit, and a rather scornful expression. Closer inspection revealed that one of her jacket sleeves appeared to be empty. She remarked on her to Kalda'hi...

He smiled, showing her to a seat. "Seril-tar: she was Rijah nearly two hundred years ago. Our greatest conqueror; she incorporated the outland provinces into Akharad..."

"At some cost, I see..." Maheshta glanced towards the statue's missing arm. He smiled, sadly.

"As I remember my history, she was proud of that... she was the last Rijah to be personally involved in battle."

She nodded politely. The Phoebus mission had reported the Lokians to be a very warlike race. She looked around her: still only the men... she wondered if the Artemis 7 party were being subjected to some kind of "softening up" procedure, before Akharad's ruling council got down to business. *Not that that seems to be bothering everyone*, she thought to herself, as she caught sight of Captain Kiku Sukida, her Second-in-Command, grinning happily as a dozen eager Lokians pressed her with assorted delicacies..

She accepted a glass of amber liquor from another Lokian. "Rijali: your hospitality is impressive, but will Rijah Sal-tar be joining us soon?"

Kalda'hi studied her face in a manner she found almost disconcerting. "I must tell you, Major, that Rijah Sal-tar is dead. As is every woman on this planet."

Hurriedly she glanced around; apparently none of the rest of her party had heard this; still intent on the entertainment provided by the Lokians...

"Dead...?"

His eyes closed briefly. "Major Maheshta... I realise you must be wondering why you have been put so long in the company of men. There is no insult: men are all that remain..." He paused, glancing up at the figure standing beside them.

The newcomer appeared to be about 18, a handsome youth with striking violet eyes; his snow-white hair bound tightly about his head, and falling from a high comb at the back, a style apparently popular with the younger Lokians... Bowing slightly in Maheshta's direction, he knelt beside Kalda'hi, who kissed him.

"My son, Shirar'hi." he remarked, before continuing. "For thirty-seven years, Major, we had peace between Sekkia and ourselves: but they pushed... always they pushed us..." His eyes clouded in remembrance of past strains.. "It seems such a small thing now, one territory too many... We had war, Major, and we ourselves released virus weapons. My wife, Sal-tar, may the gods forgive her, ordered this.."

"She had no choice, Father!" Shirar'hi broke in, his eyes alight with angry tears. "The Sekkians would have destroyed us... you know our army could never have held out..." He looked pleadingly at Maheshta "At the time it was the only civilised choice.. the virus was specific: it should have killed only the Sekkian women.. our only alternative would have been atomic weapons: killing not just the women but innocent men and children, whole cities..."

"Shirar'hi.." Kalda'hi glared reproachfully at his son. "I am endeavouring as best I can to explain the facts

of what happened to Major Maheshta. I know how you feel, but.."

"Do you? When like all the others, you pour blame on Mother, cursing her memory..." He sprang to his feet and flounced away, followed by his father's troubled eyes.

"Please forgive the outburst, Major... he took his mother's death very badly. And being the only boy..." Kalda'hi smiled apologetically. "Well, you know how it is... I think Sal-tar spoiled him a bit.. let him run wild with his sisters. He means well, though." He paused. "As he said, though, the virus was specific. It should have affected only adult Sekkian women, but something went wrong.. Perhaps it mutated, perhaps the Sekkians had similar weapons.. All I know is that within two months of the first release, every female on this planet was dead... all, Major, even the children... I remember Sal-tar's face when our daughters died... They were such strong, brilliant girls.. She was always so proud of them..." Again he paused. "Forgive my rambling, Major. The memory does not easily leave."

"Don't apologise, Rijali.."

"The point of my tale is this: that you have only a planet of men to treat with.. men without wives, or mothers, or protection of any kind. Do you know what the suicide rate has been since the war? So many have been unable to face life alone.. And our cities! Do you know how many men engineers there were before the war, in the whole of Akharad? Three hundred and fifty-seven, - compared with more than a hundred thousand women!"

Kalda'hi spread his arms despairingly. "We have male scientists, male doctors... but so few, Major.. so pitifully few. Our civilisation is breaking down.. this city here, our capital, is barely populated. We are dying, in our deeds as well as literally." He shook his head. "Sometimes I wish I'd listened more to the radical men in our society.. if we had ruled, this war might have been avoided. Our women's wars have destroyed us, and we are living fossils, waiting for the last of us to die."

Present in Maheshta's briefing room were Executive Officer Sukida and Captain Kelly Brooks-Marler, a specialist in alien biology. The two of them were arguing furiously about genetic engineering: a subject about which irritated the latter considerably. Brooks-Marler was herself a parthenogenic offshoot, a fact she was not particularly happy with. She was even less happy with Sukida's suggestions of using "...parthi or something similar.." to help the Lokians. *Sukida*, she thought to herself, *may be an excellent tactician, but I wish the hell she'd stay out of sciences she doesn't understand!*

She paused for breath. "Personally, Sir, I don't think biological help is our most immediately priority. What the Lokians need desperately are technicians.. people who can help them build, and feed themselves; these men are almost helpless on their own. I've studied Phoebus V's reports: the men have never been used to responsibility even for their own lives.. the women married them, cared for them, protected them... The average Lokian man has never had to worry about anything more serious than the evening's menu.."

Sukida grinned.

"Its not funny!" Marler continued, glaring indignantly at her. "We're dealing with a planet of almost billion and a half helpless children, for God's sake!"

"I'm not sure I agree with you, Kelly," Maheshta broke in. "The Lokians may have been a little sheltered, but they aren't all giggling sirens; although.." she glared at Sukida who looked back innocently "..there's a high enough proportion of them. They're not that different from Human men: the potential's there for development. Kalda'hi's shrewd enough, and he's ruled the Akharadians remarkably well in the past couple of years considering what he's up against."

Marler nodded. "The Akharadians have come off by far the best of the two major states. They're a much richer country than Sekkia, and the monarchy probably saved them.."

Maheshta raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Well, Major, the Sekkians were ruled by a council of three women, party hot-shots. When they died in the war there was nobody to lead them. The Akharadians at least had the Rijali, a figurehead they could turn to... and they've remained comparatively organised. Also, the Akharadian men were comparatively emancipated... giggling sirens or not, there were some with professions, and they had the vote. Sekkian men were kept virtually in purdah.. they're now leaderless, completely without technicians, or useful people of any kind: the Sekkians are starving, Major... I don't think we should be arguing about biological problems whilst we've that to contend with. We need emergency relief for these people."

Maheshta shook her head. "It'll take over two months to send a communications drone back to Space Command from here. I'm not wasting one on a single message. First we finish our report on the people. I'm not at all satisfied that we've even started to understand them yet..."

...And never truer words spoken.. Maheshta reflected, as she sat in her quarters nursing a large gin & tonic... we really don't understand them at all...

Maheshta still found the Lokians to be something of an enigma. They were handsome, friendly... too friendly, she thought to herself with a smile, remembering Sukida's dazzled expression; and yet there was something about them, a softness that she was unused to, especially in men; at least those she saw most of. Phoebus men were tough, capable types; chosen, like the women of the Artemis service, for their self-reliance: people who could function, perhaps for years at a time, away from the support structure of Earth, and the comforts of the opposite sex...

Hell, Madhur, don't be so bigotted... they've been used to a fairly predictable opposite sex themselves... think how "unfeminine" we must appear... She paused, thinking for a moment. Or do we? Artemis women are a pretty tough breed too... we could have given those Lokian harpies a run for their money if they hadn't destroyed themselves...

Don't judge! she reminded herself. We came near enough to wiping ourselves out on Earth a few centuries ago..." She found herself with an odd memory: If you remember your history properly, Madhur, there were those back in the 20th Century who thought the key to peace and love was to have women in charge.. she laughed to herself: its a good thing we got out of that idea before we achieved starflight... those peace people would have wet themselves if they'd seen what the "gentle sex" made of Loki... Gentle... She found herself reminded of a piece in Kipling's "Female of the Species"...

Man, a bear in most relations - worm & savage otherwise, -
Man propounds negotiations, Man accepts the compromise.
Very rarely will he squarely push the logic of a fact
To its ultimate conclusion in unmitigated act.

I wonder, she thought, if he somehow saw this place before us...

Dora'shin, the only man ever elected to Academy fellowship in Akharad, sat in Kalda'hi's private chamber, sipping wine. He was a small man in his early forties, with a composed expression and a face free of cosmetics. His hair was set in a simple knot at the back, and in all, he seemed a colourless figure compared to the elaborately painted and coiffured couple with him. Until, of course, one saw his eyes, huge and violet, they radiated an intelligence and humour which needed no other adornment.

Since the war, Dora'shin and Rijali Kalda'hi had become fast friends. Barely approved of before, despite his eminence, Dora'shin had never frequented Court circles: in the two years since, however, his genius in biochemistry had placed him second only to Kalda'hi in importance to Akharad. Also, Kalda'hi had found, to his surprise and pleasure, that Dora'shin was by no means the impotent womanhater that male

scientists had always been portrayed as. In short, they suited each other

There were times when Kalda'hi felt very much in need of a friend. Times like now...

Shirar'hi was pacing up and down the room, trying unsuccessfully to smother his impatience.

"Father, these women aren't going to help unless we make them... they see us as an interesting curiosity... museum pieces... They don't give the Demon's curse what happens to us!"

"Why should they, Shirar'hi? Did they put us in this position? Was it they who destroyed us?" Kalda'hi sighed. "The times are gone, my son, when we may expect help and protection as a right... they owe us nothing.."

"They're willing enough to help the Sekkians! I heard one of them talking about them... she even talked about organising food for them... for Sekkia! When we can barely feed ourselves..."

"They are perfectly correct in saying the Sekkians need more help..."

"If they're starving, its their own fault, Father! If they don't know how to plant a flower bulb..."

"Are we such experts, Shirar'hi?"

"We manage!" The boy glowered at his father.. "Besides," he added bitterly "they started this war, let them reap the rewards of it!"

"Shirar'hi!" He swung the boy around to face him.. "I am not content to allow you to bury yourself in hatred! Look around you, and see where our bitterness has brought us!.." He shook his head wearily. "It will avail you nothing, my son, to ape the ruthlessness of women when you haven't the strength or resolve to temper it. Try for a moment to feel a little compassion - even for the Sekkians. Feminine aggression won't help us now..."

Shirar'hi shook his head. "You're wrong, Father. Softness and fair play won't keep us alive... we need strength more than ever now... if we can't learn "feminine" aggression, as you call it, then we won't survive."

"If I might make an observation, Rijashi Shirar'hi," Dora'shin interrupted, "what we need most is not women's qualities, but women!"

Shirar'hi laughed sadly, and dropped down beside him. "With respect, Eili Dora'shin, you state the obvious!"

Kalda'hi seized his chance, and seating himself behind Shirar'hi put an arm around him. "Eili Dora'shin states

wisdom, my pretty princeling, And you won't catch yourself a woman by acting like one... It's useless to demand things of a woman, but persuasion works wonders, and you.." he tapped him on the nose "...are as persuasive as they come - when you want to be. You could twist your Mother round your little finger before you were out of nappies!"

"These women are different... Could you imagine trying to seduce that Major? The Artemis crew are in love with the stars... a pretty face isn't going to sway them.."

Dora'shin smiled enigmatically, and reaching into his bag, removed a small phial. He toyed with it a moment, and handed it to Kalda'hi.

"Rijali: many years ago, I attended a lecture by Ei Keru'sa, the eminent biologist.. I remember her expounding her theory that men, however intelligent, were basically incapable of pursuing demanding careers because of our mating cycle. Every five years, she said, a man is taken over by the need to mate, and remains in this condition for several months. It is obvious that he cannot concentrate on any complicated work whilst his hormones are insisting that he finds himself a woman. Not only is he incapable of doing his job properly during this time, he will be a positive nuisance to those working with him." He shook his head sadly before continuing. "She concluded by saying that although mundane work could easily be undertaken by men, as they could leave the job and come back to them; a high powered career simply couldn't stand the interruptions. I remember asking her why if women could take breaks for birthing without disrupting their work, a man couldn't cope with his mating needs.

She laughed, of course. *Birthing*, she said, rarely needs more than a week's break: a bad head-fever takes longer to get over, and affects the mind far more! *Birthing* is simply a physical operation, but men's mating cycles dominate them completely.

Gods, how that woman irritated me! Lecturing on men's mating cycles, as though she could know anything about them! I'm a man, Rijali, like any other, and I've gone through my mating cycles without any of the fuss she described. Do you know that I made my amino-base discovery during my mating cycle? No, nobody does. Oh, ruttings a nuisance all right, but you can live with it - the mind doesn't cease to function, but try telling a woman that!"

He stopped, and shifted nervously. "Forgive the outburst, Rijali. The point is, I found myself wondering: what if the biology was a little different. What if women were subject to the same need? What if they already are, but to a lesser extent? Nobody seems to find their hormonal condition quite so interesting. So I set out to study it myself.

I experimented for a long time. This" he pointed to the phial, "is the result. Its a simple chemical, Rijali:

safe, untraceable, and spreads like a virus. It causes the same mating urge in a woman as in a man."

Dora'shin's eyes glazed nostalgically. "The possibilities were extremely tempting. I used to have fantasies of giving it to Keru'sa, and see if she'd be so keen to do "mundane work"! But no. When it came to the crunch, I didn't believe in interfering with nature. I kept a single sample - securely - and destroyed the rest. It satisfied me just to know it could be done.

But now.."

Kalda'hi stared at him.

"Is such a thing possible?"

"I believe so. The Earthwomen are extremely similar to us biologically, and its introduction should pose no problems.."

Kalda'hi frowned. "Dora'shin.. do we have the right to do this? If they won't come of their own accord..."

"They won't."

"Do we have the right to make them?"

"Do we have any choice?" Dora'shin leant forward, taking Kalda'hi's hand in his own. "This is probably the only chance we'll ever have to save ourselves. The alternative is death: the death of our entire race.. Besides, the chemical is a very gentle form of force.."

Dora'shin smiled as he handed Marler a steaming cup. "Of course, Captain, you're welcome to any help I can give, but..." his voice trailed off expressively "...your science is far in advance of our own: I doubt that I could teach you a great deal."

He grinned at her warmly. "To tell the truth, Captain, as a scientist I would be fascinated to learn some more about you.. The last visit we had from your people was crewed by men.. your race is obviously quite emancipated."

"Men and women are considered equal, certainly."

He nodded happily. "Your world sounds idyllic.. well, to me at least. I remember many of the other men complaining that your previous crew were slovenly.. no offence, of course, Captain!" He broke off hurriedly. She grinned.

"That's OK, Eili Dora'shin. I know we must seem very different."

"Yes... We're often a very intolerant people, Captain.."

"Please, call me Kelly."

He bowed slightly. "I should be honoured. Well, Kelly, many people here attribute laziness to men who can't be bothered with fiddling with their hair and cosmetics all day. I often think we care too much about appearances.. I remember pointing out to my son, that these men were on their own in the spacecraft, and had no women to make up for... - I am right, aren't I, Kelly? There were no women on the Phoebus 5?"

She nodded. "That's right. Back in the 21st Century, they decided that single-sex crews worked more efficiently; and so they split the space service into separate missions. It caused quite a rumpus at the time, I can tell you! The crews hated the idea at first, but it worked out OK - the powers that be were right for once, we do work more efficiently with our own sex."

"I see. It must have been awkward for the men, though.. what happens if their mating cycle comes around on a long trip?"

"Our biology's different, Dora'shin. Our men are equally amenable to sex at any time - they're not subject to any cyclical heighting of the mating urge."

"Really?" Dora'shin gazed off into space. "No wonder they're equal, then.. there's no excuses to stop them.. Tell me, Kelly, what are your men like, as people. How did your own father, for instance, cope with children and a career?"

Kelly remained silent for a moment. "I don't actually have a father, Dora'shin.. my mother used a parthenogenic conception to have me."

Dora'shin stared at him, astonished. "I've heard of that idea in theory; but I never thought... Do all your Earthwomen breed in this way?"

She shook her head vehemently. "No. No, my Mother just liked the idea... Most people prefer the traditional method, thank God! To tell the truth.." she said ruefully, "...its a pain in the ass! Apart from having no father, parthenogenic children are the exact images of their mothers: it tends to make one stand out from the crowd - I remember I had a hellish time at school. No, give me traditional birds and bees any time!"

Dora'shin shivered. "I must confess, Kelly, that I'm glad the idea never caught on here. We'd have become no more than household pets had our women been able to produce unlimited daughters without us..."

"You, Dora'shin? A household pet?"

He smiled.

Sukida, meanwhile, was being given the grand tour by Shirar'hi. They were sitting on the parapet of the palace roof, looking down at the city below them.

The air was chill with frost, and yet she was feeling remarkably heated beneath her uniform. Whilst Shirar'hi had dragged her around the palace, excitedly showing her what appeared to be every Lokian art form ever created, she'd found herself consumed with a strange itch, which seemed to grow worse with time...

He sat next to her now, looking down at her bemusedly. He'd rather hoped that the Earthers' handsome Major would have been coming down with the party.. but Sukida would do. *Even if she is a bit small..* he thought to himself. Still, he reflected, this one did have her good points.. including a wicked glint to her eyes that would have done justice to someone twice her size.. *A bit like Mother, that way...*

Sukida fiddled with her collar. *Must be going down with something,* she thought to herself. *God! What if... no, surely not...* Biolab checked this place thoroughly, *there's no dangerous viruses..* She shook herself out of the thought. Apart from the heat, at least, she felt well enough; in fact she felt a remarkable sense of well-being... She smiled up at Shirar'hi.

"Its a beautiful city."

"Yes. Its a pity there's so few people here now.. I'd hate to see the old Temples fall apart.." He skipped up, and slipping an arm through Sukida's, pulled her up. Sukida swallowed.

"Lets walk some more. I wish you were staying.. a lifetime's not long enough to really explore this country.. Have you seen the old men's quarters?"

"The.. uh... what?"

"The old Rijahs used to keep concubines.. oh, hundreds of years ago, of course, but that part of the palace is still preserved. You wouldn't BELIEVE the things they've got there.."

She wondered whether she ought to be finding out. *Its all very well for Madhur talking about propriety... when she stays safely up on Artemis while we do all the work..*

The first thing that hit her as they reached their destination was the walls. Murals.. on the walls, on the ceilings... everywhere. All depicting Lokians engaged in assorted and generally physically impossible activities...

"Pretty, isn't it?"

"Umm. Very... artistic."

Shirar'hi threw himself down on a pile of apparently priceless rugs. He grinned up at Sukida, who shifted nervously.

"Is there anything else you want to show me?"

He reached up and pulled her down beside him.. "Later.. You look as though you need a rest, Ei Sukida.. you're sweating.."

"Oh, I'm OK." She lied.

"No you aren't." He shifted closer. "What's your first name?"

"Kiku." He was right, she was sweating. She decided to rest a little. She looked over at Shirar'hi. There was something eminently paintable about the boy.. he reminded her of a kind of Albino Samurai, with his wound-up hair and colourful clothes. He really was very attractive... *He's also very young, and incredibly innocent..* she told herself. He smiled again. *Well, perhaps not that innocent..*

What was it Madhur had said?

She sighed. *Oh, screw Madhur..*

It was the wrong thought.

Marler was working on her report when Maheshta strode in, a deep frown on her face.

"Something up, Major?"

Maheshta planted herself on the other side of Marler's desk. "Something, Kelly, is "up" with a vengeance. In the past 24 hours I've had six cases of gross insubordination, four cases of leaving posts without leave, and now Airman Pearson's gone missing entirely."

Marler looked at her, shocked. "Has there been some sort of row, or..?"

Maheshta sighed. "Nothing. Up to yesterday morning the crew were so disciplined we could've opened house for a General. I've sent the insubordination cases to Dr Meinhoff, but she can't find anything wrong with them. She says their edgy, irritable... but their psych profiles show up OK, and there's nothing wrong physically. I've been through everything medical and psych can offer.. I'm down to you, now. Is there something that makes these men so inordinately attractive, that a responsible crew have to be forcibly restrained from rushing headlong into their arms?"

"Madhur.." Marler spread her hands in puzzlement. "The Lokians are just men... they're a pretty enough bunch... I wouldn't mind one in my locker myself; but I haven't met any that are that magnetic."

"So I'm in charge of fifty delinquents? I can't credit that. The "7" crew are one of the best in the Service - and Artemis women just don't screw up that way anyhow."

Marler nibbled her pen thoughtfully. "Has Kiku any ideas?"

Maheshta was silent for a moment. "She's on report, Kelly, for leaving her post unattended. I found her myself, planetside with Kalda'hi's son, acting like she was on some kind of daytrip.."

"What?" Marler stared blankly at her. "Madhur - that's not possible! Kiku likes the fellas, I know, but she'd never just wonder off like that... she's as dedicated as they come, for God's sake.. her family's been Service for three generations!"

"I know.. I know.." Maheshta waved a hand tiredly. "I've served with her for eleven years myself.. she's one of the best officers I've known. But they're all good people, Kelly, that's the hell of it.. good, stable, cast-iron Service material - the kind you'd wager your life on. Even young Pearson.. she's a bit green behind the ears, but she's a basically sensible girl."

She looked carefully at Marler for a moment. "Forgive my paranoia, Kelly, but have you been getting any strange urges to throw away life's cares and sow some oats?"

Marler grinned. "No more than usual!"

Maheshta almost looked relieved. "Thank God for one sane person, then! Kelly, I'm convinced the trouble's got something to do with this planet - something in the air as it were. I'm going to see Kalda'hi.. and I want you along for moral support. There's damn few others left on this hulk who seem interested in work..."

Kalda'hi rose to greet Maheshta and Marler as they were shown into his chamber. Maheshta smiled politely at him, but stopped short as she caught sight of the couple behind him. Seated on a couch by the window of the room were Sukida and Shirar'hi, who were gazing into each other's eyes like a pair of love-sick puppies. Marler looked uncomfortably at Maheshta, who took a deep breath and strode over to them. She nodded to Shirar'hi and turned to Sukida with a face like thunder.

"Explain yourself, Captain."

There was something not quite right with the way Sukida looked up at her: a far away, but irritated expression, like someone who'd been woken in the middle of a particularly good dream.

"I.. didn't know you were coming here today, Major..."

"No doubt!" Maheshta tried, with partial success, to smother a rising tide of anger. "You were confined to quarters, Captain. Return to Artemis now - I'll see you about this later."

Sukida developed a rather injured expression... To Maheshta's surprise, her upper lip appeared to be trembling.. She stared, dazed, at Sukida: was it possible that the finest military tactician in the Service was about to burst into tears on her? She found her anger dissipating somewhat: *Kiku must be ill.. there's no way she'd behave like this...*

Shirar'hi piped up nervously. "Please, Major: it's not her fault.. I asked her to come and see me.."

"Please don't concern yourself about this, Rijashi.. it's a purely internal matter.."

"Don't pull that military crap on me, Madhur!" Sukida jumped up, glaring angrily at Maheshta. "I'm staying here with Shirar'hi.. if you don't like it you can spread yourself across Space for all I care!" She pulled Shirar'hi from the couch, and holding tight onto him, swept out of the room.

Maheshta closed her eyes for a moment, unable to believe what she'd just seen. She looked up as a large hand dropped gently onto her shoulder. Kalda'hi was looking down at her with an expression that spoke almost of pity.

"Why don't you sit down, Major?" She did so, feeling suddenly very weary. "You seem to be having a bad day.."

"That's an understatement, Rijali.."

"Please.. forget the title.. I prefer to be called plain Kalda'hi." He handed her a drink. "Would you object if I called you by name?"

"No.. go ahead." She gulped the drink down gratefully. She felt hot and confused.. *what the hell was it I was supposed to ask him..? It's pointless, blaming Kalda'hi because I can't control my crew.. he's offered nothing but help as long as we've been here...*

He ran a finger along Maheshta's cheek thoughtfully. "Madhur, perhaps it would be better if you left your crew alone for a while? They've been in Space a long time.. its only natural for them to get a little restless.. and some of the men here are dreadful flirts! Its harmless, I'm sure.."

She found herself suppressing a lump in the throat. "You may be right.. I don't know, Kalda'hi, really I don't. Nothing like this has ever happened before.. they'd never.. Kiku.. she'd never.."

Marler, sitting forgotten at the other side of the room, stared in amazement as her C.O. buried her face on Kalda'hi's shoulder, and started to cry.. She hesitated for a moment, and then walked nervously up to them, with a growing sense of alarm.

Kalda'hi looked up at her, a frown creeping onto his face. They stared at each other for a moment, in a silent challenge, then Marler pulled Maheshta up by the shoulders, speaking to her urgently.

"Madhur, we've got to go back to Artemis.." Maheshta looked dazedly at her..

"I'd rather stay..."

"No! Madhur - you're needed there..." She decided talking was a waste of time.. she had to act now, before the Major became outrightly defiant, like Sukida. She slipped an arm around her and steered her out of the room, as Kalda'hi's eyes followed them..

Back aboard Artemis, Marler headed Maheshta straight towards the medical section. There was nobody there.

She looked unsuccessfully for Dr Meinhoff. At length she pushed a dejected-looking Marler towards the diagnostic scanner.

"Get over there Madhur - perhaps I can work out what's wrong with you."

"There's nothing wrong with me, Kelly... anyhow, you're not a doctor."

Marler started to take readings. "Right now we don't have a doctor - I'm the next best thing.

"I'm not ill..."

"Of course you are. And so's everyone else on this crate. In case you didn't notice, I haven't seen so much as a third class airman on duty since we came on board... The Control Room is on automatic and Dr Meinhoff's gone walkabout..." She shook her head in puzzlement at the readings she was getting

"You seem to be healthy enough..."

Maheshta got to her feet. "Then I take it we've finished?"

Marler sat down, regarding her carefully. "Where are you going, Major? Back to Kalda'hi?"

Maheshta looked back at her. "Yes." She shook her head shocked. "Yes.. that's exactly where I'm going.." She walked over to Marler and sat down. "I'm going mad, Kelly.. I.. I honestly think I'm in love with him. Its as though I don't care any more.. about the crew.. the service.. just Kalda'hi."

Marler raised her eyebrows. "And your husband?"

Maheshta looked as though she'd had a bucketful of iced water poured over her. "Prakesh.. oh God.. I don't know.. I really don't know."

Their eyes met. "We're in trouble, Madhur: you realise that, don't you? Whatever we've got here, its more than a discipline problem. The Control Room's unmanned... and the engines. If we don't get help soon.."

"We'll be stranded here." Maheshta nodded and got to her feet. "Come on, Kelly. I'm going to launch a communications drone while I'm still capable of pressing a button."

As they reached the drone bay, Maheshta stopped short, looking about her in dismay. The navigational computers of all 22 drones had been removed from the casings, and were stacked in a neat pile in the middle of the bay. Whoever had done that, had then turned a heat blaster on them; and reduced them all to a semi-moulten pile of junk.

Maheshta looked at it silently. Marler looked at her.

"What's your guess, Madhur. The Lokians.. or one of us?"

Maheshta turned away. "I've got to see Kalda'hi."

"Is that a good idea?"

Maheshta looked back at her. "Don't worry about me, Kelly - I know what I'm fighting now. I can deal with it - and him."

Marler nodded. "I rather think you can, Major. But I still think you could do with company."

Maheshta smiled. "One thing puzzles me, Kelly. How come you're the only sane woman left on the craft?"

She shrugged. "No idea. According to the medical scanner you're as normal as I am."

Maheshta smiled sadly, and headed to the door. Marler went to follow her, but stopped.. there was something...

"Madhur!" She looked back. "You are normal, that's just it! Too damn normal!" She grabbed Maheshta by both arms. "Last year - before we left Earth - you went through all the normal procedures didn't you?"

Maheshta nodded, bewildered. "Of course.."

"You got a five year jab - the same as the rest of us?" She nodded again. Marler swung out of the room, dragging Maheshta behind her.

"What are you up to?"

"You're going under that scanner again."

Marler grinned down at her as she finished the second scan.

"You know something, Madhur - its just as well I dragged you away from Kalda'hi. You could have been well on the way to becoming the first Starcraft Commander to produce a baby in mid-voyage!"

"What?"

"You're ovulating, Madhur. Like a hyperactive rabbit. Your jab's stopped working for some reason. And that's not all..."

Maheshta shut her eyes despairingly. "What now?"

"Pretty easy, once I know what I'm looking for. Damn stupid of me, not to have noticed the first time..."

"Noticed what!"

"Your hormones are having a party, Madhur. If you were a cat, I'd say you were on heat."

Maheshta glared at her. "I'm not a cat."

"Nonsense. A cat's a very good analogy. What have you and the rest of the crew been doing for the past 24 hours, huh? Getting mad and irritable, and going to any lengths to get out where the local tomcats are?"

"Thanks, Captain, you're all flattery. Any recommendations?"

"Personally, I'd take great pleasure in castrating the chief Tom. On a more realistic level, I think we should go see him, like you said."

"Into the lion's den?"

"Miaow."

Maheshta shook her head in puzzlement as they headed towards the principal airlock on Artemis.

"It makes no sense, Kelly. How come Meinhoff didn't notice all this before?"

"I doubt if she had her mind on the job.."

Maheshta looked at her curiously. "You still haven't explained why you're exempt from all this. I take it you are?"

"According to the scanner, I'm A-OK normal, healthy and sterile. Perhaps its something unique to Parthi's.. perhaps its a by-product of the mumps I had when I was nine.. In other words, I don't know."

Maheshta stopped short. "Listen."

They were passing the engine maintenance section. Somewhere, inside, they could just make out what sounded like a girl, crying.

Maheshta unsealed the door and stepped through. Slumped against a control console was a young girl with short, ginger hair and close-packed freckles. She was weeping, seemingly in a state of collapse.

"Pearson!"

The girl stared at Maheshta with a glazed expression, and pulling a blaster from her belt, levelled it in her direction. She spoke disjointedly, her voice shaking and tearful.

"Get back! I've got to finish this.."

Maheshta stepped forward. "Listen to me, Airman.."

"Stay away from me!"

Marler stepped inside. "Sharon.. the Major just wants to help you.."

Maheshta frowned. "Pearson, you look ill. Come back with us to Medical.."

"You're not taking me away from him!" Pearson screamed hysterically at Maheshta. Suddenly she launched herself towards her, aiming a blow at her face. Maheshta stepped sideways, catching her as she went past, and pulling the blaster from her hand. Pearson sagged in her arms, still crying.

"Don't take me away... please.." Her shaking increased. Maheshta put a hand to the girl's face. She was burning up.

"Kelly, help me."

Together they carried Pearson back to the medical section, where Marler ran the scanner over her. She looked down at Maheshta, her face drawn.

"We've got trouble, Madhur. Her whole body chemistry has gone mad... Temperature's 104° and still rising..

Maheshta leant over the girl. "Pearson?"

Her eyes flickered open. "Sharon.. what happened?" Pearson looked up at her confused. "I'm sorry, Sir.. really.. but he kept asking.. I had to do it.." She subsided back into semi-consciousness. Maheshta stared down at her grimly.

"Can you help her, Kelly?"

"I don't know.. I'll cold-pack her.. that's all I can do until I know what's wrong with her."

"You do that, then. I'm going down."

"On your own? Madhur, you're affected too, you know. Down there, with Kalda'hi..."

"You're needed here, Captain. You'll just have to trust my self-control." She turned away.

"Madhur.. Its good to see you again.." Kalda'hi's face brightened as Maheshta entered. He got up, but paused as he saw her tightly drawn face. He noted, with unease, that she was wearing a blaster on her belt.

"Madhur..?" He stepped towards her.

"Cut it out, Kalda'hi. I don't know what you and your people are up to here, but I've come to get my crew back."

"As I said before, Madhur, they're simply a little restless..."

"Restless be damned! I've got a seventeen year old Airman on Artemis who's at death's door, she's so restless!"

"I'm sorry to hear that.."

"Never mind that - I want to know what you've been up to - and I want my crew back aboard. We can start with Captain Sukida." She glared at Shirar'hi, who was sitting at the end of the room, with Dora'shin. He stood up nervously.

"She can't come right now.. she's not feeling very well.."

A sharp chill ran along Maheshta's spine. She crossed over to Shirar'hi, and gripping his arm, glared up at him.

"Where is she?"

"She's resting..."

Kalda'hi stepped beside her. "Please, Major.."

Maheshta glared at him. "I want to see Captain Sukida - now!"

"Major, I can't.."

"Its all right, Father.." Shirar'hi spoke up. He looked warily at Maheshta. "Come with me: perhaps you can help.."

Maheshta followed him out of the room. Behind them, Kalda'hi and Dora'shin looked at each other. Kalda'hi sat down, heavily.

"What shall I do?"

Dora'shin shook his head. "Several of them are ill. There must be something in their chemistry.. I don't understand it, they initially reacted just as expected..."

Kalda'hi sighed. "When Major Maheshta realises what we've done, I don't know what will happen.."

"Rijali: she mustn't be allowed to realise.."

Kalda'hi looked at him sceptically. "She already suspects us.."

"But that's all. Whilst she's in the dark as to the true cause, we're reasonably safe. If she knows the full facts, I couldn't guess the reaction. Their spacecraft carries formidable weaponry, Rijali: we daren't take the risk. You said before that she seemed to be weakening.."

"She was. But now.."

"She'll come round, Rijali, just like the others.."

"And become ill, like them? What use are they to us dead, Dora'shin?" Kalda'hi shook his head despairingly. "I wish we had never tried this scheme.."

"It hasn't happened to them all, Rijali. It may just be a few: even so, we're committed now. We have to carry this through."

Maheshta looked down at Sukida, who was stretched out on a bed which dwarfed her. She was still and sweating with fever, and seemed unaware of the two beside her. Shirar'hi leant over her, touching her lightly on the cheek.

"Kiku.. can you hear me?" Sukida stirred restlessly, but appeared not to recognise him. Maheshta stared grimly at her, and lifting her arm, activated her communications bracelet.

"Kelly? I've found Kiku.. she's sick, just like Pearson. I'm bringing her back with me."

Marler was strangely silent. "Acknowledged, Major." She paused. "Madhur.. you might as well know now.. Pearson's dead."

She cut the connection quietly. *How many others are like this*, she wondered to herself. *And how long before I..* She shook of the thought, and looked at Shirar'hi. He gazed back at her tearfully.

"Can you help her?"

She looked at him carefully. "There might be a chance.. if I knew what was wrong with her."

Shirar'hi dropped his eyes. "I don't know.."

Maheshta shook her head. "I don't know why your lying, Rijashi. But unless you change your mind, she'll die, like young Pearson. As will we all."

Shirar'hi turned away.

"At least help me get her back to Artemis." He looked back, confused.

"Well, she's too heavy for me to carry." He stared at her.

"You don't expect me to.. I can't!"

Maheshta glanced at his tall frame contemptuously. "Just pick her up, will you?"

Gingerly, he slipped his arms around Sukida. To his surprise, she lifted up easily. *Like carrying a child..* he thought to himself. Rather surprised at his newly found strength, he turned and followed Maheshta.

"What did you tell the Major?" Dora'shin enquired anxiously of Shirar'hi, as he returned.

"Nothing." He turned away from him, and seated himself dejectedly by his father. Kalda'hi slipped a comforting arm around him.

"I know you were fond of her.."

"She's not dead yet!" He spat back. "She needn't die at all, if only Eili Dora'shin would help them.. Why do you still insist on saying nothing, Father? What difference does it make now?"

"It may mean the difference between survival and being wiped out in vengeance."

"No.." Shirar'hi shook his head, tears spilling down his face. "They aren't like us.. the Major wouldn't do that, I'm sure of it.."

"You cannot guarantee her actions, Shirar'hi." His son glared back at him.

"You've learnt 'women's ruthlessness' rather well, Father, for someone who doesn't agree with it!"

Kalda'hi looked pained. "I'm sorry, Shirar'hi. But there are good reasons.. We want to live..."

"So does she.."

The tiny medical section of Artemis 7 was unusually crowded: Maheshta had by now retrieved about a dozen of her errant crew, which was no mean feat. Two of them had physically fought her in order to try and stay with their Lokian lovers. Three more had been in a similar condition to Pearson and Sukida, and these were now occupying the narrow beds. One of the patients was Dr Meinhoff, and so Marler was now left alone to do what she could for them.

Maheshta was coping reasonably well. In fact the strange condition seemed to be affecting her more emotionally than sexually. The craving for male company she could contend with, but the urge to give up, and escape from seemingly unbearable circumstances into a pair of comforting

arms, was proving more difficult to suppress. Frequently she found herself crying, without reason. After a while she ceased trying to avoid such actions, and accepted the need. *If I can't do the job as befits a senior officer, she thought, perhaps I can just do the job..*

She tried to remember that now, as she looked down at Sukida's sweating face. She was quiet no longer, but becoming progressively hotter, and more restless.

She glanced silently over at Marler, who was re-adjusting the cold-pack around Sukida. She shook her head.

"She's not responding, Madhur. None of them are.. I'm sorry, but by this time tomorrow we're going to have several like Pearson.."

Maheshta stared at the bed, a dead sensation flooding the base of her stomach. "She'll be first, I suppose..."

Marler spread her hands. "I don't know. She's fighting it, whatever the hell it is.. perhaps she'll hang on a little longer. If I only knew what was wrong with them! I've run test after test.. I can't find any bacteria, or viruses.. All I can do is treat the symptoms, Madhur: and its not working." She paused. "Have you had any luck with Kalda'hi yet?"

She shook her head. "He pleads total ignorance."

Marler considered her words carefully. "Major.. I know its not the way you operate.. but have you considered being more forceful?"

"You mean threatening him?" Maheshta replied grimly. She sighed. "Of course I've thought about it. But its no use. I'd like to wring his pretty little neck for him.. but whatever the hell he and his people are up to, they're still civilians.."

"They're attacking us, Madhur.."

"Kelly. In the entire history of both services, we've only three times met beings hostile to Earth. Each time our very survival as a race was threatened, but even so we only used as much force as was absolutely necessary.. Do you really think I can go against all that because we suspect - that's all, Kelly - suspect, the Lokians of infecting us with something?"

Marler spoke quietly, gazing down at Sukida meanwhile. "You're right, of course, Madhur.. but we may all die. Its hard to accept that."

"I know. But at the last analysis, its what we signed on for.."

In Dora'shin's laboratory, Shirar'hi gazed thoughtfully at the sealed phial in his hand. He walked over to a window, from where he could the massive triangular frame of Artemis 7 dominating the skyline, far in the distance. Again, he considered his father's words.. *would they really take such retribution against us..* he wondered. He remembered Maheshta's face as she had faced his father, desperately trying to wring the secret of her affliction from him.. His father had told him that she had been affected like the others, and yet there had been sanity still in her eyes, a resolve that passion could not remove. Like his mother, she was strong; somehow he couldn't see her resorting to vengeance... *But Mother did.. no..* he shook off the unwilling thought. *..that wasn't vengeance.. that was war.*

Besides, he thought, Kiku would stop her.. She was always a gentle person.. His eyes clouded with tears as he recalled the last time he had seen her, lying limp and insensible as he had carried her to Maheshta's ground car. It was no good - whatever the outcome she had to live.. without her he might as well be dead..

Marler fixed a hostile glare on the boy standing before her. At this point, she had had about as much of the delicate Lokians as she could take.

"You can't come aboard.. "

"Please.." he swallowed, gazing up at Marler apprehensively. She was the only Earther he had seen who was as big as he was.. "I have to see Major Maheshta..."

"That's out of the question." she snapped.

"But I have to.."

"She's in the medical section, sick, like the rest of the crew."

He looked at her, shocked. "I'm sorry..." Marler glared at him contemptuously. Shirar'hi shrunk under her gaze.

"Who's in command.. can I see her?"

"You're looking at her." Shirar'hi's heart sunk. This one seemed as though she'd like to blow his head off with the blaster she was carrying, the moment he opened his mouth.

"Can you tell me.. how is Captain Sukida?"

"The condition of the crew is no concern of yours, Rijashi."

Shirar'hi could take no more. He started to cry. "You must save her, Captain Brooks-Marler.. please."

Marler frowned. "Rijashi.."

He handed the phial to her. "This is what we used.. if you analyse it you might be able to do something. It wasn't supposed to make you ill.. just make you want to stay with us."

Marler looked down at the phial. "This..? Are you sure?"

He nodded.

"Come with me. Perhaps we can still do something.."

Kalda'hi was interrupted during the mid-morning meal by an attendant who announced that two of the Earthwomen were demanding to see him.

Shirar'hi looked up, surprised. "Did you say two..?" His father looked at him curiously, but nodded to the attendant.

He returned a few moments later, followed by Maheshta and Sukida. Shirar'hi stared at them disbelievingly, and then launched himself at the latter, enfolding her in a vice-like embrace.

"Kiku!" He kissed her tearfully. "She did it - you're alive.."

Sukida at last managed to come up for breath, and looked up at Maheshta's disapproving glare..

"He.. ah... he's a bit excitable, Sir.."

Maheshta snorted, and turned to Kalda'hi, who returned her gaze uneasily.

"Why, Major.. I'm extremely glad to see that Captain Sukida has recovered..."

"You may thank Captain Brooks-Marler for that, Rijali.. and your son."

He stared, shocked at the boy. "Shirar'hi.. you didn't.."

"Yes, he did, Rijali.." Maheshta broke in. "And if he hadn't, we'd probably all be dead by now, like Airman

Pearson. I can only be grateful that at least one of your people has some sense.." She paused. "Rijali: it was a very foolish action.."

Kalda'hi took a deep breath. "We never intended you harm, Major; please believe that."

She regarded him carefully. "I do believe you, Rijali. But the point is, you did." She shook her head. "It's difficult to forget.. Pearson was little more than a child. However.. something has to be done for your people: if only to stop them trying to ensnare any other women that travel this way. With your agreement, Rijali, I intend to recommend open planet status for Loki.."

Kalda'hi looked puzzled. "I don't understand.."

"Loki is quite well situated on some major trading routes between Earth and its colonies. An open planet.. a port in effect.. would bring you out of isolation. The planet would attract a high turnover of people.. both male and female. Perhaps more importantly, it would give your own people the opportunity to travel, and move elsewhere, if you so wished.

Kalda'hi sat down, trying to take in the new development. "A port? But.. you're asking us to take on board technology we don't understand.. our culture has never changed quickly.."

"You have to adapt, Rijali. The alternative is to remain quarantined from the rest of the Galaxy.. At least in this way, your race, your culture will survive.. in some form...

It will be hard." She continued. "To begin with, all ports are controlled by Earth. Your planet is your own, of course.. but the port facilities will be run by us."

Kalda'hi looked up at her sceptically. "We have no choice, really, do we?"

She smiled, slightly. "There are no perfect options, Rijali. We make do."

Outside, Sukida and Shirar'hi were walking hand-in-hand across the gardens. The boy had only just come to terms with having his lover brought back almost from the dead; he was finding it difficult to accept that Sukida would be leaving the next morning.

"If you won't stay, can't you take me with you?"

She smiled sadly up at him, and hugged him. "We're not equipped for passengers, Shirar'hi.. besides, we're not supposed to have men on board except in real emergency.."

He looked down at her, crestfallen. "You don't care, do you.?"

"Hey.." she turned him around, lifting a hand to his face, stroking it softly. "...don't care about the man who saved my life?" She smiled. "You're a sweet person, Shirar'hi, and.." she reached up and whispered something in his ear. He blushed. "But Shirar'hi... Space has its own bond.. its not something you can break easily.."

"Besides.." she grinned.. "... we may see each other again.. your planet's going to be pretty busy in a few years. And wouldn't you like to see Earth, sometime?"

His face brightened. "Yes.. especially if you were there."

"Shirar'hi.. by the time you come to Earth you'll probably have forgotten all about me.."

"Never!"

She smiled. "You will. You'll probably be settled down with some girl nearer your own age.."

He looked away tearfully. "I'll miss you..."

"Me too, Shirar'hi... me too..."

Aboard Artemis 7, life was slowly starting to get back to normal. Marler and Sukida were sitting in Maheshta's quarters, catching a welcome drink.

"Madhur.." said Marler, fingering her glass thoughtfully.. "...do you really think it'll work out.. what you've proposed for the Lokians? They might have had some strange habits, but it was a beautiful place.. it'll never be quite the same, with a port.."

She smiled sadly. "They never could have stayed the same, Kelly. Half of what they were died two years ago. Kalda'hi was right you know.. what he said in the beginning, about being living fossils, just waiting to die. The more I think about it, the more I start to understand just how desperate they were..."

"They had their nice side, Madhur.." Sukida interrupted.

"You should know!" remarked Marler, acidly.

Maheshta coughed loudly. "Ladies, please.. right now all I want to do is sit back and enjoy the peace and quiet while it lasts.. The crew's happy.. I'm happy.. the Lokians will be happy.. Everyone's happy.. OK?"

Sukida looked meaningfully at Marler, trying vainly to keep her face straight. The latter choked suddenly on her drink, eventually coming up for air with an innocent expression. Maheshta looked warily from one to the other...

"Do either of you know something I don't..?"

"Us? No.. no.. Like you said, Madhur, everybody's absolutely happy.." Giving up the unequal struggle, she dissolved into fits of laughter.

"Ah.. sure. But.. ah.. the cat. Wasn't it a neuter?"

Maheshta glared at her darkly. "What do you mean.. was a neuter..?"

Marler slipped briefly out of the room, and returned moments later with a large box, from within which loud mewling sounds issued forth.

Maheshta stared at her in disbelief. "Kelly.. that's just not possible.. there aren't any cats on Loki.."

"I don't think Fang was particularly worried about little details like that, Madhur.." Marler giggled. She reached into the box, and extracted a large, noisy, tabby bundle of fur. With long ears.

"What do you reckon, Major? Kinda cute, huh?"

Kate Davies

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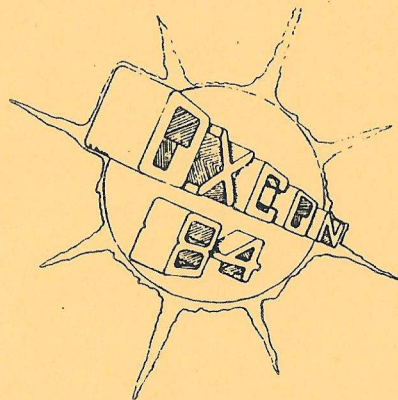
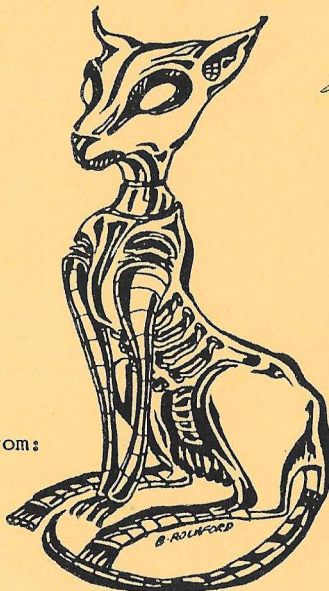
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