

Pirates of the Carob Bean

By Gary Jordan

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Captain Indigo shouted at the Communications Officer, “Any response from anyone at all?”

“No Ma’am,” came the quick response. “Just another message from the bogey telling us to cut our acceleration and prepare for boarding.” She turned to the Skipper. “They sounded a little angry, Ma’am. I think the chase is cutting into their sack time.”

Captain Christina Indigo smiled at her Communicator. The situation was desperate, and getting more so. The *Anne* had more legs than the average merchant ship, but not as many as the pirate overhauling her. Nobody had bothered uttering the old bromide, “A stern chase is a long chase,” but unless *Anne* could contact armed help, she’d run out of time when the bogey got into effective energy weapons range. At least the pirate wouldn’t try to destroy her with missiles - they wanted to take her cargo intact.

They weren’t out of hope yet, wouldn’t be for hours. And messages, even her SOS, travelled at the speed of light. So there was still hope. Hope that dwindled as the clock ticked.

“Time to intercept?”

“All parameters constant, we can make zero-zero in about 40 hours, Captain,” the Tactical Officer replied. She was updating her plot constantly, taking into account the target’s little zigs and zags and adjusting immediately.

“Any sign of patrols?”

“None, Ma’am.”

Celia B hurtled nimbly through normal space in pursuit of her ungainly prey. It was too much to hope that the merchant skipper would see the futility of flight and allow her to come alongside without a protracted struggle. And that damned merchie was faster than they’d anticipated.

Damn it! Captain Gyra Geordon cursed to herself. *We don’t even know, at this range, if she’s the right ship.* She calmed herself. All the data matched what intelligence they’d been able to gather. Arrival time, size, approximate locus of arrival... She snorted, earning a glance from her Executive Officer. *If our intelligence had been just a little better, we’d have been sitting light-minutes closer to her emergence locus, and we’d have her ass by now.*

It wasn't really a failure of intelligence, she knew. Space is vast. Without instantaneous hyperdrives, ships would spend centuries in the voids between the stars. But hyperdrives only worked from one Siefert Limit to the next. And the Siefert Limit for any given system was far beyond that system's outermost planets, out in the Oort Cloud. But the Siefert Limit is a sphere; theoretically, a ship could emerge anywhere on the hemisphere facing the point of departure. Practically, though, ships never arrived outside a locus best described as a circle inscribed inside the pentagram of a face of a soccer ball.

A soccer ball of truly cosmic proportions.

Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, science fiction writers in the late twentieth century, had it *almost* right. In their epic *The Mote in God's Eye*, they postulated "tramlines" between stars at singular "points of equipotential flux." Their "jump drive" moved a ship instantaneously from one "Alderson jump point" to the next. In actuality, every star had a Siefert Limit, rather than individual "Alderson Points." As long as you engaged the hyperdrive within that limit, and aimed the extremely directional drive at the anticipated location of your destination (stars move), you would arrive somewhere on that destination's Siefert Limit.

What those imaginative writers had correct is that the majority of interstellar travel is consumed in the traverse of normal space from the Siefert Limit to the habitable planet or station near the star. They postulated starship engines capable of multiple gravities of acceleration, usually limited only by the frail humans who had to endure them. In actuality, Spaceship drives developed only fractional gravity thrusts - the smallest ship capable of mounting the more powerful plants could sustain at best five gravities - but could carry no weapons, minimum crew and life support, and no cargo.

Ships do exist that can accelerate at high gees. After all, they have to escape a planet's gravity well. But they can't *sustain* it, not for the distance required for interstellar travel.

None of this was more than peripherally in Captain Geordon's mind. She simply knew it, like a groundcar driver knows that water makes a road slippery.

Captain Indigo forced herself off the bridge periodically, despite the situation. She insisted her bridge crew rotate to keep them fresh; they expected no less of her. She wished she'd had the comfort of her husband's arms, but he was in cold sleep. He tolerated jump shock no better than any other male. That was the main reason women crewed interstellar ships. Whatever the physical and psychological difference between the genders, it was simply a fact that women shook off in ninety minutes what incapacitated their men for ninety hours. Now, a single day after jump, he'd be more of a hindrance than a comfort. Waking him would be worthless - cold sleep avoided jump shock only by stretching the recovery period over weeks instead of days.

No. She was the Captain; *Anne* was her responsibility. Asleep or awake, she couldn't and wouldn't share the burden. But she could have used the comfort.

Still no response from the Home Defense Forces. Christina had had the Communications Officer run systems diagnostics on both transmitters and receivers, even though they'd received periodic demands from the pirates behind them to cease accelerating. *Anne* continued accelerating at her top rate of 6.86m/sec². Unimpeded, she'd turn over and decelerate at the same rate after 24 days, making a travel time of 48 days from the Siefert Limit to Desdmona, this star's nearest habitable planet and her home port. Given the distances and times involved, no help sent from Desdmona would arrive in time no matter what. That wasn't what Christina was hoping for.

Outbound merchants were frequently convoyed most of the way to the Siefert Limit. Even if there was no convoy currently outbound, a recent convoy might have left an escort in position to assist. And there were independent long range patrols.

Christina snorted in frustration and a little anger. On the face of it, piracy was ludicrous. A pirate must be fast enough to overtake a victim before assistance could arrive, armed well enough to fend off any defensive armament, manned with extra people to permit boarding a prize crew (with all the extra life support that entails), and long-ranged (more life support) enough to sit idle while waiting for said victim. Just the armament alone was non-trivial. Any potential victim would be trying to kill the pirate - the pirate had to take her victim intact.

Or at least take the ship and cargo intact, Christina corrected herself. Pirates often considered crew expendable. Not at all a comforting thought, and she again wished her husband was awake and holding her.

Gyra refused to count her profits before they were safely banked, particularly since profit was only a minor aspect of this mission. She was well aware that this voyage could set her up for life, and she pressed every advantage. So much of this mission was blind-ass luck, she had to optimize the factors over which she had any control.

Luck: At this time of this year in this system, none of the gas giants was in a particularly advantageous position. There were always refueling stations around gas giants, and refueling stations were always guarded.

Advantage: *Celia B* was faster than the merchie. She could sustain a steady acceleration of 9.98m/sec² and a burst acceleration of 2 full gees.

Luck: *Celia B* was on the inbound leg of a quartering pattern Gyra had set up with her Tactical Officer. That meant she already had a side vector to bring her onto the merchant's track and most of her superior acceleration could be applied to the in-system vector.

Advantage: *Celia B* was a tough little bitch. She had started her life as a convoy escort, preventing others from doing to her convoy what she planned to do unto the merchie. Although she had sacrificed most of her offensive missile batteries and storage

for increased fuel bunkering and life support, she still sported her full offensive energy suite, defensive batteries and anti-missile missiles, and very importantly, her military-grade sensors and electronic counter-measures. She'd found the merchant long before the merchant had known she was looking.

Luck: The merchant couldn't know it, but a pirate attack on the system periphery 130° around the plane of the ecliptic had drawn off some of her potential defenders. If the signals *Celia B* had intercepted this far out had been accurate, the other... pirate - no sense mincing words - had chased her target just a bit too slowly and too long to escape.

Advantage: *Celia B* had begun accelerating in system for 30 minutes before the merchant had recovered from jump shock, and had coasted to avoid detection until the merchant committed to an in-system course. Getting detected while the merchant was still inside the boundaries of the Siefert Limit would have allowed an immediate escape as soon as they could recharge their accumulators for the jump. With the merchant going all-out in-system, no energy was being diverted to the accumulators, and turning back was not an option.

The biggest piece of luck was also her greatest advantage. *Celia B* was still acting with the approval of her government, however covert, and her crew was still disciplined and sharp. From interrogation of the officers and crew of commerce raiders... pirates... during *CB's* own pirate chasing days, Gyra understood all too well how such a crew gradually wore down into undisciplined sociopaths. The process would begin with the capture of their first prize...

Once again on the command deck, Captain Indigo reflected that the pirates held every advantage save two; first, *Anne* had a well-disciplined crew. She knew every one of her girls well, and could count on their unquestioned loyalty and obedience, whatever the situation brought. Right now, she was examining the manifests to determine what could safely be jettisoned without hope of recovery, what might be jettisoned with precautions in hope of eventual recovery by her people, and what must not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands either way.

The choices were limited in every respect. Just now, the pirate was tracking the *Anne* via an Optically Oscillating Scintillation Heliograph, or OOSH array, just as *Anne* had detected the pirate. The ion drives reacted with interstellar hydrogen, causing their electrons to either be stripped or kicked to a higher energy state, either way resulting in release of photons. Any jettison would have to be done well before radar or optical range, or the pirate could simply decelerate along *Anne's* trajectory until the mass was detected and retrieved. They could still do that, if they suspected a jettison.

Her stevedores were already working on several choices. And in those choices was the second advantage. *Desdmonan Merchant Ship Anne, DMS-747*, was a modular container vessel. Rather than hauling Cargo inside holds of a set size, internal to the ship, cylindrical cargo modules were stacked like poker chips above a propulsion module. At

the top of this stack of cargo modules were an auxiliary life support module, an auxiliary power plant module, a passenger module, and the control module.

What this meant was that given sufficient time, the Anne could detach from any or all of the cargo modules. Her two million ton nominal mass could be reduced to a mere 350,000 tons; her maximum acceleration could be raised by a factor of six to over three gees. In fact, if she left the auxiliary power plant with the passenger and life support modules, she could attain half again that.

What would the pirates do? To pay for the cost of a pirate vessel and its minimum upkeep, the pirate needed to take the merchant sufficiently intact to maneuver to the Siefert Limit and escape to wherever the cargo could be disposed of. Failing that, it must be "hidden" until other cargo vessels could salvage the cargo. The least viable alternative was to strip the most valuable cargo and take it aboard the extremely limited storage space of the pirate vessel.

Frustrated from failure of the first two, would the pirate vessel leave the remaining cargo intact? Or would they vent their frustration by obliterating the remaining pods? It wasn't a decision Christina wanted the pirates to have an opportunity to make, but it was the decision she faced.

First Officer Urquhart maintained a running plot with shaded zones. Green indicated the time period in which Anne could afford to do nothing while waiting for a response to their SOS, and that plot was almost used up. Amber indicated the time wherein Anne could cease acceleration to permit the stevedores and engineers to reconfigure the ship, and it was a brief window. Beyond that was another brief period which indicated that the Propulsion Module, with its canned life support and rudimentary astrogational controls, could nonetheless escape alone, leaving all else behind. Finally there was a black region, wherein the pirates had her. All of her.

Christina laid a hand on Jane's shoulder and squeezed. As with so many of her crew, Jane's husband and children were aboard. Her sons, Jan and August, were in cold sleep with their father, April. Her daughters, June and July, were in their quarters, no doubt huddling together and worrying more about mom than themselves. "Bearing up?"

"Of course, ma'am," Jane sounded mildly offended. "Takes more than a shipload of pirates to rattle my cage. Besides, until pirates start arriving with their own haulers, this modular design is going to give them fits. You'll get the people away safely, and with luck we'll recover the bulk of the cargo."

"I worry that they'll be frustrated enough to take it out on the cargo modules."

"If they do, they do. We'll salvage what they miss, and insurance will cover part of the rest. Besides, I think your little plan for dispersing the pods has a good chance of preventing too much damage."

"It'll also frustrate our own salvage efforts later."

"Some things must be endured, my child."

Christina laughed, which raised the level of cheer on the command deck. Then she got serious again. "Come time to deploy this crazy idea, you'll be here on the command deck. I'm taking charge of the cargo disassembly."

Jane opened her mouth to protest, but Christina held up her hand. "That was a statement of fact, not an invitation for discussion. We both know you're the better pilot. You need to be here, to reassemble the propulsion and command modules. But the dispersion will take command authority, and that means me."

Jane glared stubbornly at her Captain. "That should be **me**, then. You..."

"Better pilot, remember? If I stayed aboard, I'd *still* need you here. Jane, *I can't pull this off if you argue!*" She left unspoken that Jane had a husband and lots of kids. She was trusting her to take care of her *own* husband, if it hit the fan. "That's it. Don't argue."

There was a ragged cheer on the bridge when the tactical officer announced that the target had ceased acceleration. Gyra didn't join in the cheer, though she did smile, thinly. The Executive Officer, Vera Bleu, noticed.

"What's wrong, Skipper? We've *got* 'em."

"The timing is all wrong," Gyra said. "If they were going to let us overtake, they would have chopped their drive long ago. Boosting as long as they did, then quitting the race before we are in targeting range doesn't make sense. They're up to something," she concluded.

Vera's smile was only slightly diminished. "Who knows what was going through their minds? The important thing is that they can't escape now, even if they start accelerating again."

Gyra shook her head. "The important thing is that we don't relax our guard. Maybe they got a tight beam reply from some random patrol. Maybe they're jettisoning cargo. Maybe they're preparing to repel boarders." She frowned. "The point is, we don't know, and I don't like not knowing." She made a decision. "Have tactical plot a zero-zero intercept for 10,000 kilometers *beyond* the target, just in case. We'll creep back to them."

Vera issued the appropriate orders, which were acknowledged and implemented. Then she drew the Captain aside. "Daddy Geault would have approved the suspenders-and-belt approach, but I'm more concerned with the extra time added. What if they *did* contact a patrol? Overshooting leaves us that much deeper in the well and further from the Siefert Limit."

Gyra let herself be talked out of the overshoot, with a provision for coasting by if first optical and radar scans warranted it. But she had Vera beef up the tracking party, and increased scans ahead of the target. Gyra was a firm believer of the old military

axiom, ‘Plans go to hell when you make contact with the enemy. That’s why they’re called the enemy.’”

She also ordered the male crewmembers of the crew awakened from cold sleep. Women might make the best starship crews, but a boarding party full of men had its uses, both physical and psychological. And they were more expendable.

The ‘jettisoning’ plan was simple in theory and painfully difficult in practice, and owed its conception to the modularity of *Anne* and her sister ships. *Anne* cut her acceleration, then used reaction thrusters to align her long axis perpendicular to the direction of flight. She also rotated on her axis to bring a particular transverse cargo hatch in line with that direction.

Next, the propulsion module was detached, as were the modules forward of auxiliary life support, which included passengers, auxiliary power, and the command module. Then those sections maneuvered “forward” in line of travel and rejoined, as a much smaller ship.

Meanwhile, the Captain and a volunteer crew of her deck department, stevedores and pursers, and a few engineers set the rest of the modules rotating around the axis of that transverse cargo hatch. Thirteen modules in all, and once the temporary engineering controls were in place, all the volunteers were at the central shaft, awaiting pickup. Reaction thrusters in the farthest modules from the center gave the entire assembly its rotation, like the propeller of an ancient aeroplane. By the time a much-reduced *Anne* was reassembled and its two shuttles free to lift the remaining volunteers from the spinning cargo modules, they were up to over thirty revolutions per minute.

The idea really *was* simple. The rotation gave each module a certain angular momentum. The breakaways had been prepared so that each module would be detached from the rest in matched pairs, and that angular momentum would be converted to velocity perpendicular to line of travel. Twelve of the thirteen modules would go haring off in twelve directions away from the center. Only the thirteenth module would continue on the base course, still spinning.

Anne herself was moved laterally, so her drive wouldn’t light off aimed directly at the last module. The rest of the crew had been transferred; only the Captain, the Third Engineer and her assistant, and two deck officers remained aboard. A shuttle and its pilot kept station 500 meters from the cargo hatch. That’s when time ran out.

Per the Captain’s orders, a constant plot had been kept. Assuming a zero-zero intercept, when was the last point where *Anne*, at maximum estimated acceleration, could stay out of weapons range of the pirate, also assuming the pirate stopped decelerating and resumed accelerating in pursuit? It was a small window, and it had closed.

‘First Officer, execute plan Sierra, **NOW!**’ Captain Indigo transmitted. ‘That’s an order, lady, and I want no argument.’ She was entering the final command codes

which would begin the dismantling of the remaining modules. “The shuttle has enough overtake to catch up. Now **move that ship!**”

Anne moved. Her drive lit off at 3.13 gees, washing over the outermost modules momentarily as each rotated in turn, in a coruscating display of ionization.

The Captain entered the final code, and executed plan Pinwheel. Simultaneously, the two outermost modules detached from the rest, and angular momentum sent them away. The other pairs would follow at thirty second intervals. “All right, Ladies, let’s **move**. We’ve got a ride to catch!”

The shuttle was “tethered” to the center module by a monofilament wire connected to a swivel. The first of the deck officers, Sue Zephyr, snapped a hook on the line and launched herself across on leg power alone. The coriolis forces and angular momentum she retained from the module she kicked off from made her twist in arcs about the tether, so the others waited while she drifted across.

The second deck officer snapped on just as the second pair of modules released. The tremor made her lose her footing just as she kicked off, so her transit was somewhat slower. She was halfway across when the next firing sequence occurred.

The third module detached from one end. The eighth module, as well as the eleventh, detached from the other end. Modules four through seven took off in one direction, spinning on a new center of gravity between modules five and six; eight through ten and eleven went the other way, the former spinning about their new center of gravity in module nine. The taut line snapped; the recoil missed the deck officer by inches but spun her about like a top before her hook broke.

Seeing this, the module pilot first maneuvered to retrieve the deck officer, complicated by her spinning. She also notified *Anne*.

“What the fuck?”

Captain Gyra moved quickly to Tactical. “Report!” she barked.

“Ma’am, the OOSH array reports an ion trail again, same strength but moving at a much higher acceleration.”

“How high?” They couldn’t possibly have had enough time to jettison a significant amount of cargo, could they?

“It’s... it seems high, I’m double-checking, but initial estimate is three gees, Ma’am.” The Tactical Officer hurriedly refined her results while Captain Gyra chewed her lip worriedly. “Refined data indicate 3.13 gees, plus or minus 0.02 gees.” Her fingers moved over her console, querying the computer. “At that rate, point of closest approach is out of weapons range, Ma’am. They’re getting away.” That last was spoken in a tone of disappointment and failure.

Gyra put her hand on the Tac Officer's shoulder. "That's why they're the enemy. Continue present deceleration plan. At least we'll see what they left behind for us." She kept her voice light, hoping to raise the TO's spirits while her own plummeted.

"Captain, can you hear me?"

Christina came slowly out of her fog. How long had she been out? Why was she so dizzy? She couldn't think straight. She tried to move a hand to her belly, but couldn't reach it through the vacuum suit. She opened her eyes.

"Don't try to move." That was the engineering technician. Technician First Class Vienna? Viennes? "We couldn't check you out through your suit. There may be internal injuries."

Christina nodded, and regretted the motion. She swallowed bile. "What happened?" she managed to croak out.

"Ma'am, as near as I can reconstruct, the ionization from Anne's exhaust caused a spike in the firing circuit, and caused the disconnects to blow out of sequence. We got slammed to the deck because we were at one end of the new assembly. I think the rest of the modules detached on schedule, until we were singular again, and the corridor became the center again. Once the gees were off, I managed to take most of the spin off, but we're adrift."

"Who else is still with us? And call me Christina. Under the circumstances, formality seems a bit..." she trailed off, resisting the urge to shake her head to clear it.

"Yes Ma'am... Christina. Third Engineer Mackenne... Kate... broke her tibia and both arms. She stayed conscious, though, and talked me through getting the spin off and running lights and salvage beacon set. The shuttle stayed behind - they picked up Ilf and they're homing on us for rendezvous."

Ilf Stormborg was the deck officer outside when the central module became a fan blade, Christina thought. "Was Ilf okay?"

"She... wasn't good, ma... Christina." She hesitated. "Susie said she got spun so hard, she almost drowned in her own puke. They have her sedated." It was worse than that, with blood pooling in extremities and ruptured capillaries, and almost psychotic dementia. But she didn't want to worry the Captain too much. She'd know, soon enough.

"What about *Anne*?"

"They got away, Ma'am," Susan said proudly. "Clean away. We got a relay from the shuttle. They say the pirate continued decelerating toward where they expect the cargo to be. There's nothing there, now, not even *this* module." Christina couldn't quite tell through her faceplate, but Susan was either flushed or blushing, she thought. "The First sent you a message, too. The Shuttle pilot - that's Chris Draco - says First knows a lot of dirty words."

Christina laughed, despite the spike of pain and nausea that brought. At least my husband is safe. Janey can be as pissed at me as she wants to. I just hope Sven can forgive me. She closed her eyes in thanks.

What else can go wrong? Gyra asked herself. If she hadn't seen the plot herself, she would have thought the target had blown itself up. But *something* had fled at better than three gravities. *Was the merchie nothing more than a tug, pushing a barge? That didn't make sense; there needed to be hyperspace generators near both ends to enclose the ship. And how would they see ahead of the cargo?* She shook her head slowly.

The take from Tactical was holographically displayed in the center of the bridge. Ship's sensors - radar, optical, laser ranging - plotted what might be a debris field of rapidly separating objects... except the objects were all radiating outward in the same plane, and at different velocities. One of the objects at least carried a salvage transponder, and Celia B was matching with that, allowing for a kilometer of separation. Enhanced optical showed it to be a disk-shaped object. The TO was refining dimension estimates.

At the Exec's request, the optical display for the object with the transponder was sent to the holograph. At maximum resolution, the object appeared to be a closed cross-section of a ship's hull with a central cavity - a flat donut - not obviously damaged. Both flat surfaces came into view over a five minute period; it was rotating at a rate of seven revolutions per hour, more or less. The axis of revolution paralleled the course of the escaped merchant vessel.

The Chief Engineer was on the bridge. She said, "What we're seeing is an enclosed prefab cargo hold. Sort of like the old sea-going container ships in the 21st century." She pointed out various connectors and reinforcement points. "I suspect that all our radio contacts are similar, if not identical. Cut a ship in half, stick 10 to fifteen of these in the middle... voila. Huge, slow, freighter."

Gyra was absorbing the idea, glancing around to see others nodding, or grimacing, or skeptical. The Chief Engineer continued.

"Built to take compression well, from what I see. Not as strong against sheer stress, but what ship is? Tack? You want to put up the main plot again?" The tactical plot reappeared in the holo. "It's obvious. Spun it on the main axis and disassembled it. The drive and piloting sections reassembled and left." Heads nodded. "We need to take one apart and record it. Reverse engineer it. Stick in a couple weapons modules instead of cargo, it'd make a fine pirate ship. Turn it into a cargo ship again, one module at a time."

"That would avoid the current problem, wouldn't it?" Gyra observed. "All these modules..." she counted eleven in range "... hurtling sunward, and us with time limits and no way to determine the most valuable. At least that one indicates they thought it valuable enough to put a beacon on it," she pointed.

‘Unless it’s a trap. Or a malfunction of a delay circuit,’ observed the Tactical Officer. ‘Sorry, ma’am. Didn’t mean to rain on the parade.’

Gyra shook her head once. ‘Don’t worry about it. The parade’s been rained out. At this point, I only hope we can take something valuable enough to cut our losses.’ She thought it obvious that their ullage wouldn’t empty the module they were closing on. *And the primary mission was a complete and utter failure*, she didn’t say aloud.

Christina held onto Ilf. Ilf had a death grip on Christina’s ribcage, tight enough to interfere with breathing. Rather than peel Ilf away, Christina took shorter breaths and held onto Ilf. At least here, in the shuttle, they could embrace without vacuum suits. She murmured reassurance whenever she had the breath to do so.

For Kate, the best they could do was to splint and immobilize her broken limbs inside her suit. To get the suit off, they’d have to cut it apart - they might need it again, soon. Chris saw to her with painkillers and water, and...

Chocolate.

Fully twenty tons of the cargo in module seven had been bricks of dark chocolate, and perhaps another ton of prepared chocolate confections. Still more was powdered cocoa and carob. Before coming across to the shuttle, Sue had pilfered from the stocks. They wouldn’t starve; they might even gain weight before the air ran out.

Christina got Sue’s attention. ‘Give her some,’ she gasped. Sue forced a sliver of dark chocolate past Ilf’s lips. After a bit, Ilf’s hold lessened, at least enough for Christina to breathe easily again. She stroked Ilf’s hair. In her ear, Ilf whispered hoarsely, ‘More?’ At Christina’s request, Ilf was given more. Eventually, Ilf shuddered and fell asleep.

When Sue noticed, she sighed. ‘She needed to sleep. Are you okay, Christina?’

‘I’ve been better,’ Christina admitted. ‘You were right about the First. She *does* know a lot of dirty words.’

Most of the women laughed or giggled. Ilf whimpered, and Christina held a finger to her own lips. They’d listened to the message aloud together. The First Officer had called the Captain everything *but* a nice woman, with tears and anguish in every curse, for making her leave the jettison crew behind. She’d ended with a promise to track her down and kick her ass all the way to Desdmona, whatever happened. When they’d listened together, there had been no laughter; only tears.

With Kate, Ilf and Christina unable to assist, Susie (the other deck officer - she was Sue Zephyr and answered to Sue Zee to avoid confusion), Sue and Chris took inventory. The shuttle normally had canned life support for three days for eight, and rations to match. Six could add another day to that, and the chocolate would more than stretch the rations. Kate was certain they could mate the shuttle to the module and repressurize with stored air, tripling that duration at least. Water would eventually be the limiting factor, and although bulk goods shipped over interstellar distances were usually

dehydrated, or concentrated, to avoid the penalty of shipping mere water, there might well be something they could filter or distill.

Once they were assured of another day of survival, Christina ordered them all to sleep, with tranquilizers if needed. While they slept, life support became the least of their problems.

Captain Gyra watched the remote feed from the Captain's chair. When the shuttle that had been concealed from their notice in the radar shadow of the module did not react to their proximity, Gyra had sent both boarding shuttles to investigate. A hand-held camera against the viewshield of the shuttle had let them see the six sleeping women within. Shaped charges were placed on the shield and elsewhere, to ensure the good behavior of the captives, and Celia B had maneuvered closer.

Other screens showed the helmet cams of the boarding party inside the module, taking inventory of the "booty." The enormous cargo of chocolate and carob had already been noticed with wry amusement and muttering. Chocolate is a valuable luxury item; the cacao plant breeds true only on one planet in the known universe.

Gyra had overheard some of the muttering. "Pirates of the carob bean" indeed! Now *there* was a name to strike terror into a Merchant Skipper's heart! Besides, Gyra had never tasted chocolate.

By definition, any cargo worth the expense of hauling out to the Siefert Limit and back was... *had* to be valuable. Knowledge was the most valuable, and most easily shipped, but that had escaped with the ship's data banks. Luxury goods, like the chocolate, liquors, spices. Medicines which were too difficult to produce locally, or derived from natural sources not available elsewhere. Vitamins in which locally produced foods were deficient.

Machinery was valuable as working models to demonstrate a process, unless it exceeded the technology of the buyer to reproduce. Seeds for crops not available otherwise, or genetically engineered to resist local factors.

Heavy metals might be shipped to a metal-poor planet with no easily accessible asteroid belt, or to one with too low a tech base as yet to exploit them, but more often a corporation would move in to provide asteroid industries as a service, training local labor to eventually take over and buy back the original investment. Equipment and support for such corporations might be commercially shipped as well. That seemed to be the case here; a significant portion of the cargo was vacuum suits in all sizes, with spare parts. Also vacuum sealing equipment and sealing materials.

People; immigrants to provide manual labor where needed, or even just to enlarge the gene pool. Skilled professionals or technicians were nearly always welcome. Those had escaped with the merchant as well. And with them, Gyra's real target.

Christina hadn't heard the banging on the hull until Sue's hand shook her awake. The brief elation she felt quickly dissipated when she realized that the vacuum-suited figure outside the viewport was not one of her people - the suit's design was subtly different - and was making easily recognized gestures for *get on the phone*.

Complying was complicated by the fact that Ilf was still wrapped around her. Christina instructed Susie to find their radio frequency and put it on speaker with a pickup aimed toward her. Finding the frequency was simple - it was the universal hailing frequency.

"...chant party in shuttle, please acknowledge.... Merchant party in shuttle, please acknowledge...."

"This is C... Christina Indigo, commanding the shuttle *Tenyari*. We are conducting salvage operations. Do you wish to assist us.?"

There was a long pause while the voice at the other end of the radio link digested her outrageous statement. Then a different voice came back with, *"Affirmative, Tenyari, we are standing by to assist in rescue and salvage operations as requested. How may we assist you?"*

It was Christina's turn to pause. *The sheer audacity*, she thought. But her people had needs. That came first. "Our most immediate need is for medical attention to two of my crew. Do you have a medical officer aboard?"

"Affirmative, Tenyari. Are you able to maneuver?"

"That's affirmative also," Christina said. They would *allow* her to maneuver? In any after-action report of piracy in which survivors could be debriefed, the first thing the pirates had done was to separate the crew from the controls of any vehicle, and especially the ship's controls, as well as weapons. She was certain the person outside her view shield could see the holster on each of their hips (although Ilf's was empty). But that individual was *removing* the shaped charge on the shield!

"Roger, Tenyari. If you will please come around... 160 degrees and up 10 from your present attitude, you will find CNS Celia B standing by. If you can take station 50 meters from the open shuttle bay, we will bring you in for docking."

"Aye, aye, Celia B. Request you clear shuttle *Tenyari* of all personnel for maneuvering on thrusters." The suited figure in the view shield gave a thumbs up and pushed off gently. The tension level in the shuttle noticeably decreased. Christina told the pilot, "Chris, can you take it very easy? Sue, help Kate to the after bulkhead; strap both of you to it and take care of her." She whispered at the form clutching her, "Ilf, Chris is going to turn the shuttle now, very slowly. You'll be okay, sweetheart. I've got you." Ilf clung tighter, and Christina secured them as best she could to a seat.

Ilf whimpered again when *Tenyari* rotated in place, but Chris was very gentle, using microbursts of thrust and counterthrust. Once oriented on *Celia B*, they could see another shuttle, larger than their own, just disappearing into the shuttle bay.

Chris used barely one meter per second squared of thrust to make the kilometer journey; even so, there was groaning from both casualties.

Gyra had never been so grateful to hear a smart-ass response in her life. Whoever Christina Indigo might be in her ship's company, Gyra fully intended to formally and munificently praise her to her captain, in person if possible. With her primary mission completely blown, Captain Geordon could only look forward to being disavowed by her government and forced to actually become the pirate that appearances made her and *Celia B* out to be.

With her answer, Ms. Indigo had allowed *Celia B* to reclaim her honor and her self-respect; to be the friendly vessel rendering aid and succor to distressed spacemen. She and they could return home with pride. If the officer in the shuttle could convince her captain to go along, at any rate. More, the Distressed Sailors clause of the Standard Rules of Spacefaring permitted the disbursement of shares of salvage and rescue fees...

Gyra practically bounced out of her hook-and-eye slippers in anticipation as the shuttle bay repressurized. Doctor Driadde and her Physician's Assistants could barely conceal grins at the sight. Like most of the crew, they were already enormously pleased and relieved that their military status was reconfirmed and outlaw status avoided. Some feigned otherwise, particularly those whose senses of humor had run to the uttered "Arrrr" or "shiver me timbers," but none of those was in this corridor.

The lock indicator finally turned blue. Captain Gyra led the medical team through to greet their... guests.

The boat bay party was busily shucking and storing vacuum suits when the shuttle door opened. Like most, it displaced inwards and slid aside. First out was a young woman in uniform with no officer's markings, gently pulling a tethered space suit. The arms and legs of the space suit had been splinted. Gyra waved the doctor forward.

The doctor's assistants carefully and expertly secured the suited figure to a backboard while the doctor checked pulse, respiration, eyes, and began gathering a medical history and recent medications. As the assistants guided the backboard toward sick bay, the physician gave her attention over to a young woman carried in an older woman's arms, her face hidden in that woman's neck.

One of the nicest things about Doctor Driadde, besides her competence, was her motherly bedside manner. Gyra smiled as the Doctor coaxed the young woman - 'her name is Ilf' - from the older woman's arms into her own. Ilf latched onto the Doctor's neck as tightly as she had her other bearer, and the doctor murmured soothingly as she carried her off to follow the others.

Once Ilf's hair cleared the older woman's arms, Gyra's eyes widened as *four* gold cuff rings came into view. They widened further as the woman stripped the holstered sidearm from her side and offered it to her. She cleared her throat. 'No, thank you,

Captain Indigo. I already have one of my own. Unless an exchange of gifts is appropriate in your culture?"

Christina felt her own eyes widen, even as she recognized the second voice from the radio. Then she returned her sidearm unchecked to her side. *Curiouser and curiouser*. "Not necessary," she replied. "But in that case," she straightened, "request permission to come aboard." Her hand raised in a salute.

The other woman returned her salute and responded, "Permission granted. Would you and your party," she indicated the others, "care to accompany me to the wardroom? Or would you prefer sick bay first?"

"Actually," Christina turned to her crew. "Pilot Draco, secure the shuttle. Deck officers Zephyr and Viennes, assist the pilot, then report to sick bay for check-up. I'm sure Captain... " "Geordon." "Captain Geordon will provide an escort. Take along the chocolate - Ms. Mackenne and Ilf need the comfort food. And give me the assortment tin."

With the tin under one arm, Christina turned back to Captain Geordon. "After you, Captain."

Christina followed the Captain of the Celia B into a lift, and followed her lead to brace against movement as the lift first moved to one side, then up. A warning tone alerted them to brace above and to the opposite side as the lift arrived. They were disgorged into a passageway which ran transversely from port to starboard. A door led into a room with a table and ten comfortable-looking chairs.

Christina was about to speak but Captain Geordon held up a finger. She turned to a console and did something, then turned back. "Conversations in this room are normally recorded; now we can speak freely."

"Very well," acknowledged Christina. "Speaking freely, then - what the bloody hell are you up to?"

"Just now, I'm trying to save my ship and crew from wasting their lives and careers by *not* turning them from a fairly decent military unit into pirates. And I'm hoping to enlist your help."

"You..." Audacity was too mild a word! This woman had brass balls. Big ones! "You actually mean to tell me, that you expect me to go *along* with this charade? You order my ship to halt or 'be halted' I think was the phrase, for 'boarding and inspection,' the usual phrasing used by pirates - and you expect me to help you cover it *up*?" Christina felt the heat in her face. "Where in **bloody hell** did you get an **idea** like that!?"

"From you."

"From *me*?" Christina couldn't help it. She sputtered. She *hated* it when she sputtered. This woman was turning her into a gibbering idiot.

“You said, ‘We are conducting salvage operations. Do you wish to assist us?’ **That** statement we got on record, plus the ones following it.” Captain Geordon spread her hands. “Every action from that point on has been *strictly in response to that statement*. We **are** providing assistance, as well as ‘aid and succor to distressed spacemen,’ under the interstellar doctrines.”

Christina felt herself on the edge of losing control. She sat. She ripped open the tin of assorted chocolate confections, and speared one at random. She popped it into her mouth.

She was aware of the ‘mythical’ properties of chocolate, but equally aware that nothing in the chocolate could instantly transform her emotions into calm, rational thoughts. She knew that the act of sitting and chewing, her eyes closed, merely bought time for her to compose herself. Nevertheless, the taste was heavenly; a sigh escaped.

Gyra knew she was no diplomat, but somehow she must convince this Captain Indigo to... if not *embrace* her course of action, at least accept it. And from the redness of her face, the pulsing of that vein in her throat, the merchant captain was *not* predisposed to agree.

Still... When Captain Indigo opened the tin of confections, Gyra had half expected a concealed weapon. She had not expected the nearly instant calming effect the treat had caused in the merchant skipper’s demeanor. And that half moan-half sigh had sounded - and looked - almost sexual.

Curiosity overcame her. “May I...”

Indigo opened her eyes, startled. “Oh, of course! I should have offered. Let me...” She looked at Gyra, head cocked slightly, considering. “What’s your favorite chocolate?”

“I’ve never had the pleasure,” Gyra replied. Until she’d seen the look on Captain Indigo’s face, she’d never noticed its absence, either.

Captain Indigo smiled back at her. “A chocolate virgin, eh? In that case, I think...” she looked through the top layer of the tin, then chose a foil-wrapped bite-sized selection. “This seems appropriate, although your first introduction to chocolate should really be undiluted by other things. Later, when my crewmen are brought to join us, they have bricks of pure dark chocolate. But these cordials are quite good.”

This diversion into epicurian delights was welcome only insofar as it dissolved the tension of just minutes before, and Gyra dreaded returning to that discussion. But she knew she had to, or her crew’s fate was sealed. She’d politely taste the candy, then carefully steer the conversation back. She bit into the unwrapped dark brown sphere...

She hadn’t realized she’d closed her eyes, until Captain Indigo giggled. And she supposed the moan *could* have come from the other woman, but she suspected it hadn’t. She glanced at the other half in her fingers, a creamy scarlet center surrounded by that

sinfully delicious coating. She popped it in her mouth and licked her fingers. Belatedly, she realized that she might have breached etiquette...

"You have a little cherry cream..." Indigo said, trailing her own fingernail from just off-center on her own smiling lip downward.

Gyra pushed the errant filling into her mouth with her index finger and sucked it again. Captain Indigo laughed.

"Any woman who truly appreciates chocolate can't be *all* bad," she said. "Shall we return to the issue of piracy?"

Gyra held up a finger. "First, what was that? Have you drugged me?"

Indigo laughed again. "I suppose I have, and addicted you for life." Gyra's eyes widened. "No-no, not in the sense that you mean," she quickly corrected. "Chocolate isn't a narcotic, or any sort of controlled substance. Back on Earth, they sell it in most stores, in some form or another, and the people take it for granted. The only thing that restricts access to the populace as a whole is that its status as a highly coveted export item has driven the price up."

Gyra breathed a sigh of relief. The merchant continued, "The addicting part is just that it's so sensuous to the palate, like a taste of sex."

Gyra laughed now. "I had that thought myself! There's no *direct* comparison, but..." She blushed. "I think I understand some of the humor some of my crew was displaying when we were examining the cargo in your module."

"Which was...?"

"Some of them used the expression, 'pirates of the carob bean'."

"To be terribly technical, that should be 'pirates of the cacao bean'," the Merchant Skipper said with a bemused expression. "But that brings us back on topic." She clasped her hands before her on the table. "Whatever face you want to put on it now, attempting to stop a ship in space for the purpose of seizing her or her cargo *is* piracy."

"We did not want your ship or your cargo."

"No?" The lifted eyebrow, steely glint, twisted smile on Captain Indigo's face all told how truly she believed that statement.

"No." Gyra looked at her own hands. "I will not lie. It's too important that you believe me." She paused for several heartbeats. What she would say next would constitute a breach of security, and might well lead to either an interstellar incident or her own court martial.

"Had we been forced to actually fire on your ship; had we employed deadly force to achieve our goal, we would be guilty of piracy, and we would have behaved as pirates. We would have seized the ship and crew, taken it to a 'neutral' system, sold the cargo and arranged to ransom the crew and passengers. My government and my navy would have disowned me and my people, perhaps hunted us down as renegades and destroyed us... afterwards."

“But that was not our *mission*, and only failure of the mission could have made us outlaws. We were prepared for that outcome; every one of us, from myself to the lowliest able spacer aboard volunteered for this mission.

“Technically, the mission *has* failed, but your words, sarcastic as they may have been intended, may yet permit me to save my ship and my crew. I fully expect to be cashiered; my government would need a scapegoat to offer yours. I’m as prepared for that as I was to perform the mission itself.”

“Mission, mission, mission!” Christina scowled. “Just what *was* your bloody mission?” Hearing of this Captain’s willingness to turn pirate had not swayed her over to the woman’s cause; quite the opposite. And she still retained a loaded sidearm.

Gyra’s face was stone. “Our mission, to be accomplished without bloodshed if possible, but at any cost if not, was to stop your vessel, board, and remove the four escaped bio-terrorists Adel Johansen, Robert Nacon, Darwyl Carruthers, and Eva Saint-John.”

Christina blinked. “Bio-terrorists?”

Gyra nodded. “Those four were the leaders of an extremist faction of a dissident element of our people. They formulated and carried out a biological attack on the entire populace of our planet. Altered our genome. Changed our chromosomes....

“They were captured, tried, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment” she continued, “but other members of their conspiracy managed to free them and smuggle them aboard a departing merchant vessel.

“We want them back.”

“I see.” Christina pondered the sincerity of Captain Geordon’s words. She needed to think. To buy time, she asked Gyra to tell her about the nature of the biological attack.

There aren’t many garden planets in the galaxy, not for organisms bred on mankind’s home planet. Some, yes; Lipton’s Refuge was hailed as the Eden of biblical legend. There, man could grow whatever was planted and eat most of what was native.

Tesla’s Challenge was **not** such a world. Part of that was the levro-dextrorotary differences in the DNA of native life versus imported. Part of it was the relative abundance of feral life forms both microscopic and macroscopic which, though they could derive no sustenance from humans or their domesticated animals, persisted in trying. Part of it was the higher gravity, half again that of Earth, and the higher sea-level pressures that drove man to the higher elevations. Part of it was the extreme nature of the

weather induced by a thirty-degree axial tilt and a slightly more eccentric orbit than Earth's.

Despite all that, over a million people called Tesla's Challenge home. It was a home with a garrison feel, armed against a hostile world, but there are always some who relish the challenge as much as the achievement.

Not all; even on Challenge (locals tend to shorten the name) there are those who prefer a more mundane existence. Challenge was the home of Genie Gengineering, Inc., a respected corporation famous for the development of terraforming plants and bacteria provided to any world who asked, and was Challenge's main employer and exporter. Fully a fourth of Challenge's population lived in Wheeler City, the capital and central headquarters for GGI. Many of that city's populace never ventured from the enclave.

All, even the rugged individualists peopling the outlying enclaves, agreed that Challenge needed more people. There was always *some* immigration; not enough. Like any pioneer society, Challengers tended to larger families; but Challenge forced a higher infant mortality rate. Population growth was gradual.

It would seem obvious that the people and their government would turn to their scientists at GGI. They did.

GGI was, at its core, an ethical company. They cautioned against excessive tampering with nature's handiwork. Excesses during the infancy of genetic engineering back on Earth had pounded caution into the consciousness of every scientist or engineer in the profession. Their motto was, "*Non Sarcire Nisi Fractum*: Don't fix it if it ain't broke."

Certainly some tried-and-true methods were employed. Challengers tended to have higher metabolisms and denser muscle mass than most of humanity. That reduced their life expectancies nearly 10% from the normal ten-score-and-eight. Their immune systems were more aggressive than the norm. Average gestation for a Challenger female was 47 weeks instead of 40. That last improved the survivability of the fetus, but slowed the birth rate.

GGI also introduced a strain of Kudzu which aggressively choked out native vegetation. Unfortunately, it also choked out Terran vegetation, and had to be controlled by a rust engineered to affect no other plant. Seeded in locations distant from and lower than any human habitation, it had the unintended effect of driving predators closer to humans as their prey moved away from the inedible vegetation. An entire sub-continent had been depopulated of native flora and fauna this way and reseeded with Terran stock. No one as yet lived there, but plans had been made.

Despite GGI's corporate integrity and "Do No Harm" approach, a corporation consists of people. Some people are more active in politics than others, particularly where it concerns their own lives. And some people think they know better what's good for the people than the people do.

The factions divided up over the debate of how to increase Challenge's population more rapidly. More people would mean more security; more people to fight off scavengers, grow crops, reclaim land, manufacture goods and provide services.

One faction favored increasing the immigration subsidy and providing larger plots of un-reclaimed land to the immigrants. This of course was opposed by the older, established agricultural families who would see their influence diminished over time. Increase the subsidy, yes; the land allowance, no.

Another faction favored easing the immigration restrictions rather than increasing the subsidy. Ignore the genetic and social barriers completely. "Give us your tired, your poor, et cetera." The weakest would succumb to the planet's depredations, the rest would intermarry and inherit the genetic variations that made Challenge easier to live on. The "root, hog or die" approach was opposed by those who were certain the less hardy would become city dwellers of questionable contribution.

Still another faction wanted to convince GGI to provide a genetic strain which would improve the viability of the fetus and shorten the gestation period. GGI insisted that such a goal *might* be possible, but might *also* result in unforeseen and undesirable side-effects that would damage the people in the long term. The longer gestation period itself was an unexpected effect of the alterations which produced the beneficial musculature genome, as were the metabolism and lifespan changes. Those changes were accepted on dozens of planets as necessary to deal with higher gravity; eventually, they might be spread through interbreeding to all humanity.

There were a dozen other factions on this issue alone, and this issue was not the only issue facing Challengers, but it was from this faction that the bio-terrorists sprang.

The Splicers, as the four called themselves, were leaders of a small radical wing of the Gene Manipulation faction. Employees of GGI, they were also citizens of Challenge and independently researched the feasibility of their faction's position. What they found was that ultimately, the proposed manipulation was rife with dangerous "mutations." Undaunted, they looked into alternatives. They found one.

If the problem was long gestation periods per birth, why not have more births per gestation period? The predisposition for twins had been charted and mapped back on Earth, long ago. Why not manipulate that to a dominant effect?

The four modeled the effect to locate any potential drawbacks. Unfortunately, while they were very good at their jobs, they weren't the best. Moreover, in their zeal to "fix" the "deficiency", they overlooked some research. They determined that the effect could be spread via a strain of influenza which would, at worst, produce cold-like symptoms, and would breed true. The effect would be inherited. They began to breed the manipulated flu for distribution.

Had they done more and better research; had they constructed better models and extended them for a generation; had they tried the models themselves, they would have discovered the drawback. By itself, the engineered gene would have produced a predisposition in all women of Challenge for multiple births. The incidence of twins

would have risen to exceed the incidence of single births, and one in a hundred women might deliver triplets.

But the people of Challenge were *already* genetically engineered to improve their survivability in heavy gravity environments and to fight off infection from hostile microorganisms. The combination of these manipulations...

Gyra watched the Captain's face. If shock was too strong a word, surprise was too mild.

"You're always fertile?" she asked.

"Unless we're pregnant, yes," Gyra replied. "Menses is a word I learned in school, not a personal experience."

"You've never had a period?"

"A period of what?" Gyra asked. It annoyed her that Captain Indigo laughed rather than answering.

The woman looked beyond the room, her eyes unfocused. "It might almost be worth it to never have another period."

Gyra bristled. "Are you being deliberately insulting? Are you really that insensitive?"

The merchant rushed to apologize. "I meant no offense; as someone intimately acquainted with the phenomenon of menses, which for time out of mind has been called 'a woman's period,' let me assure you that *that* aspect of decreased fertility is highly overrated." She elaborated, "It's three to six days of discomfort and mess and emotional swings. On the other hand, perhaps you're perpetually pre-menstrual," she continued drolly, waving a hand at over a dozen foil wrappers in front of Gyra. "That would explain your sudden craving for chocolate."

Gyra was startled. She couldn't remember unwrapping a second of the candies, let alone the number represented by empty wrappers. There was one in her fingers. She carefully set it on a wrapper and pushed it away. Then she reached for it, placed it in her mouth and chewed. Some kind of nutmeat inside, this time. What had been in the others? "Perhaps you'd better close the tin and place it out of my reach for a while."

She did. And she seemed to reach a decision. "Captain Geordon, may I call you Gyra? I think first names are appropriate for a discussion as intimate as we're having. I'm Christina... or my friends call me Chrissy."

Gyra nodded. "Thank you, Christina. I hope we can be friends. I'd definitely prefer that to enemies."

"Gyra, I can understand that... increased fertility could be an annoyance, but..." she hesitated. "Is there some cultural or religious reason you can't use contraceptives?"

“Chrissy, we use contraception. Multiple forms, in fact. The typical subcutaneous injections that work for the rest of the human race are no more than 90% effective for us. Our bodies tend to neutralize or counteract the hormones which those methods use - it’s that increased immune system. Our bodies see the excess hormone as unnatural and act to limit them.

“I’m told that the amount of semen produced by our males is unusually high compared to the baseline, that it contains proportionally more sperm, and that the individual sperm is more energetic and hardier.”

“Was that an intentional effect of the *gengineering*?” Christina asked.

“They claimed not,” Gyra answered, “and their recovered notes seemed to support their claims. There’s another peculiarity with the sperm...” It was Gyra’s turn to look into the beyond.

“Well?” Christina asked after a reasonable delay.

“Oh! Sorry... I was thinking about my daughters.”

“You have daughters?”

Gyra nodded. “Four of them. Two are ten, two turn seven today.”

“And you had to be here,” Christina said softly. More briskly she asked, “Two sets of twins?”

“Yes.” She smiled, but it was a pale smile. “I love my girls. I wouldn’t trade them for all your chocolate. But the other peculiarity - and this one was intentional - well, ask yourself how you could more rapidly increase a population, given the childbearing roles of men and women.”

Christina saw it immediately. “Either the majority of the ‘extra’ sperm carry the ‘X’ chromosome, or those were selected to benefit most from the *gengineering*.”

“The latter.” Gyra sighed. The female sperm were already hardier; making them just a little faster than the males tilted the odds significantly toward female children. Nearly 90% of my generation is female.”

Christina’s jaw dropped. “This happened a *generation* ago?” Her mouth worked, but nothing came out.

“You want to ask how it was kept secret,” Gyra supplied. Christina only nodded. “I don’t know.”

Christina glared. Gyra waved a hand. “Everyone knows some of it. There was a five year stretch where Challenge was quarantined. I mean, even today we don’t get a visit from a freighter every month - maybe four a year. Back then, less often. Most ships visiting Challenge belong to GGI, and they would not permit their own ships access without draconian sterilization procedures. The original strain of influenza was eradicated. Not merely cured, but hunted down to the last virus and destroyed.”

“That’s a relief. If I sneezed now,” Christina observed darkly, “I’d be *very* suspicious.”

‘Please don’t sneeze.’

‘I’ll try not to. So, GGI killed the genetic plague. Have they been able to reverse it in any way?’

‘No, and I have no idea how close they are to a cure.’ Gyra said. ‘It isn’t something that’s public knowledge. At the trial, part of the condemnation was that the sites the four criminals chose for modification had the potential to cause any number of lethal mutations. It was extremely reckless.’ She looked at Christina, unsure. ‘My understanding is that GGI can’t tailor a virus to simply remove the mutation; they have to find an alternate location that counteracts it safely.’

‘You don’t seem very certain.’

‘It’s not my field of expertise,’ Gyra admitted. ‘I’ve occasionally speculated that the higher ups are willing to put up with the mutation until the population reaches ‘satisfactory’ levels.’ She looked disgusted. ‘I’m not the only person who’s noticed that it has gotten much easier to recruit male immigrants.’

‘I bet.’ A grin would not have been unexpected. Instead, Gyra saw a frown on Christina’s face. ‘What’s your population growth rate like, since the mutation?’

‘High.’ Gyra looked thoughtful. ‘There were over a million people on Challenge when the plague was released. There are twenty-two million now. Perhaps half a million were immigrants.’

‘Take my own case. I’m a career woman; I had no intention of having children any time soon. But I’ve gotten pregnant twice, despite precautions. My sister shares a husband with four other women. She’s delivered twenty-three children to term in fifteen years.’

‘Good lord!’

Gyra nodded. ‘Last time I was home, she was talking about adding a sixth wife. Homer is apparently a decent lover, and sex twice a night makes eventual pregnancy a certainty.’

‘Your sister has sex with her husband twice a night *every* night?’ Christina was astonished. ‘**Every** night?’

‘Of course,’ Gyra replied, puzzled by Christina’s astonishment. ‘You know how *men* are. Sometimes it goes soft before her second turn - he needs his sleep, and sometimes he’s just too tired for a second time with all of his wives.’

Christina’s voice seemed strangled. ‘He has at least five, and as many as ten orgasms every night.’

Gyra scoffed. ‘He’s a *man*, remember? They have orgasms if the wind blows right. No, Homer doesn’t move on to the next wife until the one he’s with has an orgasm. I said she claims he’s a decent lover. It’s just that sometimes his erection subsides before her second turn. Adding a sixth or seventh wife will reduce all their chances of becoming pregnant somewhat.’

Captain Christina Indigo held up a hand to forestall further conversation while she digested what she'd heard. Then she thought about dear, sweet Sven still asleep aboard *Anne*. Sven would love her whatever happened.

She suspected that the plague had not been as completely wiped out as Gyra believed, or no native Challenger woman would ever settle for marriage to an immigrant. No, it was probably administered as an inoculation. Gyra's suspicions about the cure were probably dead on, though.

She made a decision. She'd support Gyra's version of events. She'd even work toward extraditing the renegade geneticists. Claiming that her own over-reaction had been the reason for abandonment of her cargo would undoubtedly cost her her command and her status as ship's master, though. She'd be fined and fired, at the very least. What the hell - she'd made enough money for one lifetime. Rather than live on Desdmona in shame, she and Sven would emigrate.

She knew just where they'd go.

The end.