

MARGIN OF PROFIT

Poul Anderson

It was an anachronism to have a human receptionist in this hall of lucent plastic, among the machines that winked and talked between jade columns soaring up into vaulted dimness—but a remarkably pleasant one when she was as long-legged and red-headed a shin-blast as the girl behind the desk. Captain Torres drew to a crisp halt, and a gauntleted hand went to his gilt helmet. Traveling down sumptuous curves, his eye was jarred by the small needler at her waist.

"Good day, sir," she smiled. "One moment, please, I'll see if Freeman van Rijn is ready for you." She switched on the intercom and a three-megavolt oath bounced out. "No, he's still conferring on the vid. Won't you be seated?"

Before she turned it off, Torres caught a few words: " By damn, he'll give us the exclusive franchise or do without our business. Who do these little emperors think they are? All right, so he has a million soldiers under arms. You can tell him to take those soldiers, with field artillery and hobnailed boots, by damn, and—" *Click*.

Torres wrapped his cape about the deep-blue tunic and sat down, laying one polished boot across the other knee of his white culottes. He felt out of his depth, simultaneously overdressed and naked. The regalia of a Lodgemaster in the Federated Brotherhood of Spacemen was stiff with gold braid, medals, and jewelry, far removed from the gray coverall he wore on deck or the loungers of planet leave. Worse, the guards in the tower entrance, a kilometer below, had not only checked his credentials and retinal patterns, but had unloaded his sidearm.

Blast Nicholas van Rijn and the whole Polesotechnic League! Good saints, drop him on Pluto without his underwear!

Of course, a merchant prince did have to be wary of assassins—and most of them went to great lengths to avoid formal duels, though Van Rijn himself was supposed to be murderously fast with a handgun. Nevertheless, arming your receptionist was not a high-born thing to do.

Torres wondered, rather wistfully, if she was one of the old devil's

mistresses. Perhaps not; but with the trouble between the Company—no, the whole League—and the Brotherhood, she'd have no time for him, being doubtless bound by a contract of personal fealty. His gaze went to the League emblem on the wall, a golden sunburst afire with opals, surrounding an ancient-style rocketship of the Caravel model, and the motto: *All the traffic will bear*. That could be taken two ways, he reflected sourly. Beneath it was the trademark of Van Rijn's own outfit, the Solar Spice & Liquors Company.

The girl turned on the intercom again and heard the vidophone being switched off; there followed a steady rumble of obscenities. "Go on in now, sir," she said, and into the speaker: "Captain Rafael Torres, representing the Brotherhood."

The spaceman straightened himself and went through the inner door. His lean dark face clamped into careful lines. It would be a new experience, meeting his ultimate boss; for ten years, as captain of a ship and Lodgemaster of the union local, he had not called anyone "sir."

The office was big, with an entire side transparent, overlooking a precipitous vista of Batavia's towers, green landscape, hot with tropical gardens, and the molten glitter of the Java Sea. The other walls were lined with the biggest referobot Torres had ever seen, with shelves of extraterrestrial curios, and—astonishingly—a thousand or more old-type folio books, exquisitely bound in tooled leather and looking well-worn. The room and the desk were littered, close to maximum entropy, and the ventilators could not quite dismiss a tobacco haze. The most noticeable object on the desk was a small image of St. Dismas, carved from sandroot in the Martian style. The precise and perfect patron for Nicholas van Rijn, thought Torres.

He clicked his heels and bowed till the helmet plume swept his nose. "Lodgemaster-Captain Torres speaking for the Brotherhood, sir."

Van Rijn grunted. He was a huge man, two meters high, and the triple chin and swag belly did not make him appear soft. Rings glittered on the hairy hands and bracelets on the thick wrists, under snuff-soiled lace. Small gray eyes, set close to the great hook nose under a sloping forehead, blinked at the spaceman. He went back to filling his churchwarden, and said nothing until he had a good head of steam up.

"So, by damn," he muttered then. "You speak for the whole louse-bound union, I hope." The long handlebar mustaches and goatee waggled over a

gorgeously embroidered waistcoat. Beneath it was only a sarong, columnar legs and bare splay feet.

Torres checked his temper. "Yes, sir. For all the locals in the Solar Federation, and every other lodge within ten light-years. We understood that you would represent the League."

"Only tentatively. I will convey your demands to my colleagues, such of them as I can drag out of their offices and harems. Sit."

Torres did not give the chair an opportunity to mold itself to him; he sat on the edge and said harshly: "It's simple enough, sir. You already know our decision. We aren't calling a real strike . . . yet. We just refuse to take any more ships through the Kossaluth of Borthu till the menace there has been stopped. If you insist that we do so, we will strike."

"By damn, you cut your own throats," replied Van Rijn with surprising mildness. "Not alone the loss of pay and commissions. No, but if Antares is not kept steady supplied, she loses taste maybe for cinnamon and London dry gin. Not to speak of products offered by other companies. Like if Jo-Boy Technical Services bring in no more indentured scientists, Antares builds her own academies. Hell and lawyers! In a few years, no more market at Antares and all fifteen planets. You lose, I lose, we all lose."

"The answer is simple enough, sir. We just detour around the Kossaluth. I know that'll take us through more hazardous regions, we'll have more wrecks, but the brothers don't mind that risk."

"What?" Somehow, Van Rijn managed a basso scream. "Pest and cannon balls! Double the length of the voyage! Double the fuel bills, salaries, ship and cargo losses . . . halve the deliveries per year! We are ruined! Better we give up Antares at once!"

It was already an expensive route, Torres knew; whether or not the companies could actually afford the extra cost, he didn't know, for by the standard treaty which Sol had also signed, the League's books were its own secret. He waited out the dramatics, then said patiently:

"The Borthudian press gangs have been operating for two years now, sir. We've tried to fight them, and can't. We didn't make this decision overnight; if it had been up to the brothers at large, we'd have voted right at the start not to go through that hellhole. But the Lodgemasters held back, hoping something could be worked out. Apparently it can't."

"See here," growled van Rijn. "I don't like this losing of men and ships any better than you. Worse, maybe. A million credits a year or more it

costs this company alone. But we can afford it. Only fifteen per cent of our ships are captured. We would lose more, detouring through the Gamma Mist or the Stonefields. Crewfolk should be men, not jellyfish."

"Easy enough for you to say!" snapped Torres. "We'll face meteors and dust clouds, rogue planets and hostile natives, warped space and hard radiation . . . but I've *seen* one of those pressed men. That's what decided me. I'm not going to risk it happening to me, and neither is anyone else."

"Ah, so?" Van Rijn leaned over the desk. "By damn, you tell me."

"Met him on *Arkan III*, autonomous planet on the fringe of the Kossaluth, where we put in to deliver some tea. One of their ships was in, too, and you can bet your brain we went around in armed parties and were ready to shoot anyone who even looked like a crimp. I saw him, this man they'd kidnaped, going on some errand, spoke to him, we even tried to snatch him back so we could bring him to Earth for deconditioning— He fought us and got away. God! He wasn't human any more, not inside. And still you could tell he wanted out, he wanted to break the conditioning, and he couldn't, *and he couldn't go crazy either—*"

Torres grew aware that Van Rijn was thrusting a full goblet into his hand. "Here, you drink this." It burned all the way down. "I have seen conditioned men. I was a rough-and-tumbler myself in younger days." The merchant went back behind his desk and rekindled his pipe. "It is a fiendish thing to do, *ja*."

"If you want to outfit a punitive expedition, sir," said Torres savagely, "I guarantee you can get full crews."

"No." The curled, shoulder-length black locks swished greasily as Van Rijn shook his head. "The League does not have many capital ships. It is unprofitable. The cost of a war with Borthu would wipe out ten years' gains. And then we will have trouble with the milksop governments of a hundred planets. No."

"Isn't there some kind of pressure you can put on the Kossalu himself?"

"Hah! You think maybe we have not tried? Economic sanctions do not work; they are not interested in trade outside their own empire. Threats they laugh at. They know that they have more navy than we will ever build. Assassins never get close to the big potatoes." Van Rijn cursed for two straight minutes without repeating himself. "And there they sit, fat and greedy-gut, across the route to Antares and all stars beyond! It is not to be stood!"

He had been prowling the floor; now he whirled about with surprising

speed for so large and clumsy a man. "This strike of yours brings it to a head. And speaking of heads, it is getting time for a tall cold beer. I shall have to confer with my fellows. Tell your men there will be steps taken if it is financially possible. Now get out!"

It is a truism that the structure of a society is basically determined by its technology. Not in an absolute sense—there may be totally different cultures using identical tools—but the tools settle the possibilities: you can't have interstellar trade without spaceships. A race limited to one planet, possessing a high knowledge of mechanics but with all its basic machines of commerce and war requiring a large capital investment, will inevitably tend toward collectivism under one name or another. Free enterprise needs elbow room.

Automation made manufacturing cheap, and the cost of energy nose-dived when the proton converter was invented. Gravity control and the hyperdrive opened a galaxy to exploitation. They also provided a safety valve: a citizen who found his government oppressive could usually emigrate elsewhere, which strengthened the libertarian planets; their influence in turn loosened the bonds of the older world.

Interstellar distances being what they are, and intelligent races all having their own ideas of culture, there was no union of planetary systems. Neither was there much war: too destructive, with small chance for either side to escape ruin, and there was little to fight about. A race doesn't get to be intelligent without an undue share of built-in ruthlessness, so all was not sweetness and brotherhood—but the balance of power remained fairly stable. And there was a brisk demand for trade goods. Not only did colonies want the luxuries of home, and the home planets want colonial produce, but the old worlds had much to swap.

Under such conditions, an exuberant capitalism was bound to strike root. It was also bound to find mutual interest, to form alliances and settle spheres of influence. The powerful companies joined together to squeeze out competitors, jack up prices, and generally make the best of a good thing. Governments were limited to a few planetary systems at most; they could do little to control their cosmopolitan merchants. One by one, through bribery, coercion, or sheer despair, they gave up the struggle.

Selfishness is a potent force. Governments, officially dedicated to altruism, remained divided; the Polesotechnic League became a super-government, sprawling from Canopus to Polaris, drawing its membership from a thousand species. It was a horizontal society, cutting

across all political and cultural boundaries. It set its own policies, made its own treaties, established its own bases, fought its own minor wars—and, in the course of milking the Milky Way, did more to spread a truly universal civilization and enforce a lasting *Pax* than all the diplomats in the galaxy.

But it had its own troubles.

One of Nicholas van Rijn's mansions lay on the peak of Kilimanjaro, up among the undying snows. It was an easy spot to defend, and a favorite for conferences.

His gravcar slanted down through a night of needle-sharp stars, toward the high turrets and glowing lanterns. Looking through the roof, he picked out the cold sprawl of Scorpio. Antares flashed a red promise, and he shook his fist at the suns between. "So! Monkey business with Van Rijn, by damn. The whole Sagittarius clusters waiting to be opened, and you in the way. This will cost you money, my friends, gut and kipper me if it don't."

He thought back to days when he had ridden a bucketing ruin of a ship through the great hollow spaces, bargaining under green skies, and in poisonous winds for jewels Earth had never seen before; and a moment's wistfulness tugged at him. A long time now since he had been any farther than the Moon . . . poor old fat man, chained to one miserable planet and unable to turn an honest credit. The Antares route was more important than he dared admit; if he lost it, he lost his chance at the Sagittarian developments to corporations with offices on the other side of the Kossaluth. In today's pitiless competition, you either went on expanding or you went under. And he had made too many enemies, they were waiting for the day of his weakness.

The car landed itself, and the guards jumped out to flank him. He wheezed the thin chill air into sooty lungs, drew his cloak of phosphorescent onthar skin tightly about him, and scrunched across frosty paving to the house. There was a new maid at the door, pretty little baggage . . . Venusian French, was she? He tossed his plumed hat at her as the butler said the Freemen were already here. He sat down and told the chair "Conference Room" and went along corridors darkly paneled in the wood of a hundred planets.

There were four colleagues around the table when he entered. Kraaknach of the Martian Transport Company was glowing his yellow eyes at a Frans Hals on the wall. Firmage of North American Engineering

puffed an impatient cigar. Mjambo, who owned Jo-Boy Technical Services—which supplied indentured labor to colonial planets—was talking into his wristphone. Gornas-Kiew happened to be on Earth and was authorized to speak for the Centaurians; he sat quietly waiting, hunched into his shell, only the delicate antennae moving.

Van Rijn plumped himself into the armchair at the head of the table. Waiters appeared with trays of drinks, smokes, and snacks. He took a large bite from a ham sandwich and looked inquiringly at the others.

Kraaknach's owl-face turned to him. "Well, Freeman host, I understand we are met on account of this Borthudian *brokna*. Did the spacemen make their ultimatum?"

"Ja." Van Rijn picked up a cigar and rolled it between his fingers. "It grows serious. They will not take ships through the Kossaluth, except to get revenge, while this shanghai business goes on."

"So why not blast the Borthudian home planet?" asked Mjambo.

"Death and damnation!" Van Rijn tugged at his goatee. "I had a little computation run off today. Assuming we lost no ships—and Borthu has good defenses—but allowing for salaries; risk bonus, fuel, ammunition, maintenance, depreciation, estimated loss due to lack of protection elsewhere, lawsuits by governments afraid the Kossaluth may strike back, bribes, and loss of profits to be had if the cost were invested peaceably—the bill for that little operation would come to about thirty trillion credits. In a nutshell, we cannot afford it. Simmons, a bowl of Brazils!"

"You will pardon my ignorance, good sirs," clicked Gornas Kiew's artificial vocalizer. "My main interests lie elsewhere, and I have been only marginally aware of this trouble. Why are the Borthudians impressing our men?"

Van Rijn cracked a nut between his teeth and reached for a glass of brandy. "The gruntbrains have not enough of their own," he replied shortly.

"Perhaps I can make it clear," said Kraaknach. Like most Martians of the SIRRUCH Horde, he had a mind orderly to the point of boredom. He ran a clawlike hand through his gray feathers and lit a rinn-tube. "Borthu is a backward planet terrestroid to eight points, with humanoid natives. They were in the early stage of nuclear energy when explorers visited them seventy-eight years ago, and their reaction to the presence of a superior

culture was paranoid. They soon learned how to make modern engines of all types, and then set out to conquer themselves an empire. They now hold a volume of space about forty light-years across, though they only occupy a few Soltype systems within it. They want nothing to do with the outside universe, and are quite able to supply all their needs within their own boundaries—with the one exception of efficient spacemen."

"Hm-m-m," said Firmage. "Their commoners might see things differently, if we could get a few trading ships in there. I've already suggested we use subversive agents—get the Kossalu and his whole bloody government overthrown from within."

"Of course, of course," said Van Rijn. "But that takes more time than we have got, unless we want Spica and Canopus to sew up the Sagittarius frontier while we are stopped dead here."

"To continue," said Kraaknach, "the Borthudians can produce as many spaceships as they want, which is a great many since their economy is expanding. In fact, its structure—capitalism not unlike ours—requires constant expansion if the whole society is not to collapse. But they cannot produce trained crews fast enough. Pride, and a not unjustified fear of our gradually taking them over, will not let them send students to us any more, or hire from us, and they have only one understaffed academy of their own."

"I know," said Mjambo. "It'd be a hell of a good market for indentures if we could change their minds for them."

"Accordingly, they have in the past two years taken to waylaying our ships—in defiance of us and of all interstellar law. They capture the men, hypnocondition them, and assign them to their own merchant fleet. It takes two years to train a spaceman; we are losing an important asset in this alone."

"Can't we improve our evasive action?" wondered Firmage. "Interstellar space is so big. Why can't we avoid their patrols altogether?"

"Eighty-five percent of our ships do precisely that," Van Rijn told him. "But the hyperdrive vibrations can be detected a light-year away if you have sensitive instruments—pseudogravitational pulses of infinite velocity. Then they close in, using naval vessels, which are faster and more maneuverable than merchantmen. It will not be possible to cut our losses much by evasion tactics. Satan and small pox! You think maybe I have not considered it?"

"Well, then, how about convoying our ships through?"

"At what cost? I have been with the figures. It would mean operating the Antares run at a loss—quite apart from all the extra naval units we would have to build."

"Then how about our arming our merchantmen?"

"Bah! A frigate-class ship needs twenty men for all the guns and instruments. A merchant ship needs only four. Consider the salaries paid to spacemen. And sixteen extra men on every ship would mean cutting down all our operations elsewhere, for lack of crews. Same pestiferous result: we cannot afford it, we would lose money in big fat gobs. What is worse, the Kossalu knows we would. He needs only wait, holding back his fig-plucking patrols, till we were too broke to continue. Then he would be able to start conquering systems like Antares."

Firmage tapped the inlaid table with a restless finger. "Bribery, assassination, war, political and economic pressure, all seem to be ruled out," he said. "The meeting is now open to suggestions."

There was a silence, under the radiant ceiling.

Gornas-Kiew broke it: "Just how is this shanghaiing done? It is impossible to exchange shots while in hyperdrive."

"Well, good sir, statistically impossible," amended Kraaknach. "The shells have to be hypered themselves, of course, or they would revert to sublight velocity and be left behind as soon as they emerged from the drive field. Furthermore, to make a hit, they would have to be precisely in phase with the target. A good pilot can phase in on another ship, but the operation is too complex, it involves too many factors, for any artificial brain of useful size."

"I tell you how," snarled Van Rijn. "The pest-bedamned Borthudian ships detect the vibration-wake from afar. They compute the target course and intercept. Coming close, they phase in and slap on a tractor beam. Then they haul themselves up alongside, burn through the hull or the air lock, and board."

"Why, the answer looks simple enough," said Mjambo. "Equip our boats with pressor beams. Keep the enemy ships at arm's length."

"You forget, esteemed colleague, that beams of either positive or negative sign are powered from the engines," said Kraaknach. "And a naval ship has larger engines than a merchantman."

"Well, then, why not arm our crews? Give 'em heavy blasters and let 'em blow the boarding parties to hell."

"The illegitimate-offspring-of-interspecies-crosses Borthudians have

just such weapons already," snorted Van Rijn. "Sulfur and acid! Do you think that four men can stand off twenty?"

"Mm-m-m . . . yes, I see your point," agreed Firmage. "But look here, we can't do anything about this without laying out *some* cash. I'm not sure offhand what our margin of profit is—"

"On the average, for all our combined Antarean voyages, about thirty per cent on each voyage," said Van Rijn promptly.

Mjambo started. "How the devil do you get the figures for my company?"

Van Rijn grinned and drew on his cigar.

"That gives us a margin to use," said Gornas-Kiew. "We can invest in fighting equipment to such an extent that our profit is less—though I agree that there must still be a final result in the black—for the duration of the emergency."

"Ja," said Van Rijn, "only I have just told you we have not the men available to handle such fighting equipment."

"It'd be worth it," said Mjambo viciously. "I'd take a fair-sized loss just to teach them a lesson."

"No, no." Van Rijn lifted a hand which, after forty years of offices, was still the broad muscular paw of a working spaceman. "Revenge and destruction are un-Christian thoughts. Also, they will not pay very well, since it is hard to sell anything to a corpse. The problem is to find some means within our resources which will make it *unprofitable* for Borthu to raid us. Not being stupid heads, they will then stop raiding and we can maybe later do business."

"You're a cold-blooded one," said Firmage.

Van Rijn drooped his eyes and covered a shiver by pouring himself another glass. He had suddenly had an idea.

He let the others argue for a fruitless hour, then said: "Freemen, this gets us nowhere, *nie?* Perhaps we are not stimulated enough to think clear."

"What would you suggest?" asked Mjambo wearily.

"Oh . . . an agreement. A pool, or prize, or reward for whoever solves this problem. For example, ten per cent of all the others' Antarean profits for the next ten years."

"Hoy there!" cried Firmage. "If I know you, you robber, you've just come up with the answer."

"Oh, no, no, no. By good St. Dismas I swear it. I have some beginning thoughts, maybe, but I am only a poor rough old space walloper without the fine education all you Freemen had. I could so easy be wrong."

"What is your idea?"

"Best I not say, just yet, until it is more clear in my thick head. But please to note, he who tries solving this problem takes on all the risk, and it may well be some small expense. Also, without his solution nobody has any more profits. Does not a little return on his investment sound fair and proper?"

There was more argument. Van Rijn smiled with infinite benevolence.

He was satisfied with an agreement in principle, sworn to by mercantile honor, the details to be computed later. Beaming, he clapped his hands. "Freemen, we have worked hard tonight and soon comes much harder work. By damn, I think we deserve a little celebration. Simmons, prepare an orgy."

Captain Torres was shocked. "Are you seriously asking us to risk that?"

Van Rijn stared out through the office wall. "In all secrecy," he answered. "I must have a crew I can trust."

"But—"

"We will not be stingy with the bonuses."

Torres shook his head. "Sir, I'm afraid it's impossible. The Brotherhood has voted absolute refusal of any trips into the Kossaluth except punitive expeditions—which this one is not. Under the constitution, we can't change that policy without another vote, which would have to be a public matter."

"It can be publicly voted on after we see if it works," urged Van Rijn. "The first trip will have to be secret."

"Then the first trip will have to do without a crew."

"Rot and pestilence!" Van Rijn's fist crashed down on the desk and he surged to his feet. "What sort of cowards do I deal with? In my day we were men! We would have sailed through Hell's open gates if you paid us enough!"

Torres sucked hard on his cigarette. "I'm stuck with the rules, sir," he declared. "Only a Lodgemaster can . . . well, all right, let me say it!" His temper flared up. "You're asking us to take an untried ship into enemy sky

and cruise around till we're attacked. If we succeed, we win a few measly kilo-credits of bonus. If we lose, we're condemned to a lifetime of purgatory, locked up in our own skulls and unable to will anything but obedience and *knowing* how our brains have been chained. Win, lose, or draw for us, you sit back here plump and safe and rake in the money. *No.*"

Van Rijn sat quiet for a while. This was something he had not foreseen.

His eyes wandered forth again; to the narrow sea. There was a yacht out there, a lovely thing of white sails and gleaming brass. Really, he ought to spend more time on his own ketch—money wasn't as important as all that. It was not such a bad world, this Earth, even for a lonely old fat man, it was full of blossoms and good wine, clean winds and beautiful women and fine books. In his forebrain, he knew how much his memories of earlier-days were colored by nostalgia—space is big and cruel, not meant for humankind. Let's face it, here on Earth we belong.

He turned around. "You say a Lodgemaster can legally come on such a trip without telling anyone," he remarked quietly. "You think you can raise two more like yourself, hah?"

"I told you, we won't! And you're only making it worse. Asking an officer to serve as a common crewhand is grounds for a duel."

"Even if I myself am the skipper?"

The *Mercury* did not, outwardly, look different after the engineers were finished with her. And the cargo was the same as usual: cinnamon, ginger, pepper, cloves, tea, whiskey, gin. If he was going to Antares, Van Rijn did not intend to waste the voyage. Only wines were omitted from the list, for he doubted if they could stand a trip as rough as this one was likely to be.

The alteration was internal, extra hull bracing and a new and monstrously powerful engine. The actuarial computers gave the cost of such an outfitting—averaged over many ships and voyages—as equal to three times the total profit from all the vessel's Antarean journeys during her estimated lifetime. Van Rijn had winced, but ordered his shipyards to work.

It was, in all truth, a very slim margin he had, and he had gambled more on it than he could afford. But if the Kossalu of Borthu had statistical experts of his own—always *assuming*, of course, that the idea worked in the first place.

Well, if it didn't, Nicholas van Rijn would die in battle or be executed as

useless; or end his days as a brain-churned slave on a filthy Borthudian freighter; or be held for a ruinous ransom. The alternatives all looked equally bad.

He installed himself, the dark-haired and multiply curved Dorothea McIntyre, and a good supply of brandy, tobacco, and ripe cheese, in the captain's cabin. One might as well be comfortable. Torres was his mate, Captains Petrovich and Seichi his engineers. The *Mercury* lifted from Quito Spaceport without fanfare, hung unpretentiously in orbit till clearance was given, and accelerated on gravity beams away from the sun. At the required half-billion kilometers' distance, she went on hyperdrive and outpaced light.

Van Rijn sat back on the bridge and stuffed his churchwarden. "Now is a month's voyage to Antares," he said piously. "Good St. Dismas watch over us."

"I'll stick by St. Nicholas," murmured Torres. "Even if you do bear the same name."

Van Rijn looked hurt. "Do you not respect my integrity?"

Torres grinned. "I admire your courage—nobody can say you lack guts and you may very well be able to pull this off. Set a pirate to catch a pirate."

"You younger generations have a loud mouth and no courtesy." The merchant lit his pipe and blew reeking clouds. "In my day we said 'sir' to the captain even when we mutinied."

"I'm worrying about one thing," said Torres. "I realize that the enemy probably doesn't know about the strike yet, and so they won't be suspicious of us—and I realize that by passing within one light-year of Borthu itself we're certain to be attacked—but suppose half a dozen of them jump us at once?"

"On the basis of what we know about their patrol patterns, the estimated probability of more than one ship finding us is only ten per cent, plus or minus three." Van Rijn heaved his bulk onto his feet. One good thing about spacefaring, you could set the artificial gravity low and feel almost young again. "What you do not know so well yet, my young friend, is that there are very few certainties in life. Always we must go on probabilities. The secret of success is to arrange things so the odds favor you—then in the long run you are sure to come out ahead. It is your watch now, and I recommend to you a book on statistical theory to pass the time. As for me, I will be in conference with Freelady McIntyre and a liter of brandy."

"I wish I could arrange my own captain's chores the way you do," said Torres mournfully.

Van Rijn waved an expansive hand. "Why not, my boy, why not? So long as you make money and no trouble for the Company, the Company does not interfere with your private life. The trouble with you younger generations is you lack initiative. When you are a poor old feeble fat man like me you will look back and regret so many lost opportunities."

Even in low-gee, the deck vibrated under his tread as he left.

Here there was darkness and cold and a blazing glory of suns. The viewscreens held the spilling silver of the Milky Way, the ruby spark of Antares among distorted constellations, the curling edge of a nebula limned by the blue glare of a dwarf star. Brightest among the suns was Borthu's, yellow as minted gold.

The ship drove on through night, pulsing in and out of four-dimensional reality and filled with waiting.

Dorothea sat on a wardroom couch, posing long legs and high prow with a care so practiced as to be unconscious. She could not get her eyes from the screen.

"It's beautiful," she said in a small voice. "And horrible." Nicholas van Rijn sprawled beside her, his majestic nose aimed at the ceiling. "What is so bad, my little sinusoid?"

"Them . . . lying out there to pounce on us and— Why did I come? Why did I let you talk me into it?"

"I believe there was mention of a tygron coat and Santorian flamedrop earrings."

"But suppose they catch us?" Her fingers fell cold on his wrist. "What will happen to me?"

"I told you I have set up a ransom fund for you. I also warned you maybe they would not bother to collect, and maybe we get broken to bits in this fight and all die. Satan's horns and the devil who gave them to him! Be still, will you?"

The intraship speaker burped and Torres' voice said: "Wake of highpowered ship detected, approaching from direction of Borthu."

"All hands to posts!" roared Van Rijn.

Dorothea screamed. He picked her up under one arm, carried her down

the hall—collecting a few scratches and bruises en route—tossed her into his cabin, and locked the door. Puffing, he arrived on the bridge. The visual intercom showed Petrovich and Seichi, radiation-armored, the engines gigantic behind them. Their faces were drawn tight and glistening with sweat. Torres was gnawing his lip, fingers shaking as he tuned in the hypervid.

"All right," said van Rijn, "this is the thing we have come for. I hope you each remember what you have to do, because if not we will soon be very dead." He dropped into the main control chair and buckled on the harness. His fingers tickled the keys, feeling the sensitive response of the ship. So far they had been using only normal power, the great converter had been almost idling; it was good to know how many wild horses he could call up.

The hypervid chimed. Torres pressed the *Accept* button and the screen came to life.

It was a Borthudian officer who looked out at them. Skintight garments were dead black on the cat-lithe frame. The face was almost human, but hairless and tinged with blue; yellow eyes smoldered under the narrow forehead. Behind him could be seen the bridge, a crouching gunnery officer, and the usual six-armed bassalt idol.

"Terran ship ahoy!" He ripped out crisp, fluent Anglic, only subtly accented by a larynx and palate of different shape. "This is Captain Rentharik of the Kossalu's frigate *Gantok*. By the law, most sacred, of the Kossaluth of Borthu, you are guilty of trespass on the dominions of His Frightfulness. Stand by to be boarded."

"By double-damn, you out-from-under-wet-logs-crawling poppycock!" Van Rijn flushed turkey red. "Not bad enough you pirate my men and ships, with all their good expensive cargoes, but you have the copperbound nerve to call it legal!"

Rentharik fingered the ceremonial dagger hung about his neck. "Old man, the writ of the Kossalu runs through this entire volume of space. You can save yourself punishment—nerve-pulsing, to be exact—by surrendering peacefully and submitting to judgment."

"By treaty, open space is free to ships of all planets," said Van Rijn. "And it is understood by all *civilized* races that treaties override any local law."

Rentharik smiled bleakly. "Force is the basis of law, captain."

"Ja, it is, and now you make the mistake of using force on Van Rijn! I

shall have a surprise for your strutting little slime mold of a king."

Rentharik turned to a recorder tube and spoke into it. "I have just made a note to have you assigned to the Ilyan run after conditioning. We have never found any way to prevent seepage of the Ilyan air into the crewman's helmets; and it holds chlorine."

Van Rijn's face lit up. "That is a horrible waste of trained personnel, captain. Now it so happens that on Earth we can make absolutely impervious air systems, and I would gladly act as middleman if you wish to purchase them—at a small fee, of course."

"There has been enough discussion," said Rentharik. "You will now be grappled and boarded. There is a fixed scale of punishments for captured men, depending on the extent of their resistance."

The screen blanked.

Torres licked sandy lips. Tuning the nearest viewscreen, he got the phase of the Borthudian frigate. She was a black shark-form, longer and slimmer than the dumpy merchantman, of only half the tonnage but with armor and gun turrets etched against remote star-clouds. She came riding in along a curve that would have been impossible without gravitic acceleration compensators, matching velocities in practiced grace, until she loomed huge a bare kilometer away.

The intercom broke into a scream. Van Rijn swore as he saw Dorothea having hysterics in the cabin. He cut her out of the circuit and thought with anguish that she would probably smash all the bottles—and Antares still eleven days off!

There was a small, pulsing jar. The *Gantok* was in phase and the gravity-fingers of a tractor beam had reached across to lay hold of the *Mercury*.

"Torres," said Van Rijn. "You stand by, boy, and take over if anything happens to me. I may want your help anyway, if it gets too rough. Petrovich, Seichi, you got to maintain our beams and hold 'em tight, no matter what the enemy does. O.K.? We go!"

The *Gantok* was pulling herself in, hulls almost touching now. Petrovich kicked in the full power of his converter. Arcs blazed blue with million-volt discharges, the engine bawled, and ozone was spat forth sharp and smelling of thunder.

A pressor beam lashed out, an invisible hammerblow of repulsion, five

times the strength of the enemy tractor. Van Rijn heard the *Mercury's* ribs groan with the stress. The *Gantok* shot away, turning end over end. Ten kilometers removed, she was lost to vision among the stars.

"Ha, ha!" bellowed van Rijn. "We spill all their apples, eh? By damn! Now we show them some fun!"

The Borthudian hove back into sight. She clamped on again, full strength attraction. Despite the pressor, the *Mercury* was yanked toward her with a brutal surge of acceleration. Seichi cursed and threw in all the pressor power he had.

For a moment Van Rijn thought his ship would burst open. He saw the deckplates buckle under his feet and heard steel shear. Fifty million tons of force were not to be handled lightly. The *Gantok* was batted away as if by a troll's fist.

"No so far! Not so far, you dumbhead! Let me control the beams." Van Rijn's hands danced over the pilot board. "We want to keep him for a souvenir!"

He used a spurt of drive to overhaul the *Gantok*. His right hand steered the *Mercury* while his left wielded the tractor and the pressor, seeking a balance. The engine thunder rolled and boomed in his skull. The acceleration compensator could not handle all the fury now loosed, and straps creaked as his weight was hurled against them. Torres, Petrovich, and Seichi were forgotten, part of the machinery, implementing the commands his fingers gave.

Now thoroughly scared, the Borthudian opened her drive to get away. Van Rijn equalized positive and negative forces, in effect welding himself to her hull by a three-kilometer bar. Grinning, he threw his superpowered engine into reverse. The *Gantok* strained to a halt and went backwards with him.

Lightning cracked and crashed over his engineers' heads. The hull shuddered as the enemy fought to break free. Her own drive was added to the frantic repulsion of her pressors, and the gap widened. Van Rijn stepped down his own pressor. When she was slammed to a dead stop, the blow echoed back at him.

"Ha, like a fish we play him! Good St. Peter the Fisherman, help us not let him get away!"

It was a bleak and savage battle, nine and a half trillion empty

kilometers from anyone's home, with no one to watch but the stars. Rentharik was a good pilot, and a desperate one. He had less power and less mass than the *Mercury*, but he knew how to use them, lunging, bucking, wheeling about in an attempt to ram. Live flesh could only take so much, thought Van Rijn while the thunders clattered around him. The question was, who would have to give up first?

Something snapped, loud and tortured, and he felt a rush of stinging electrified air. Petrovich cried it for him: "Burst plate—Section Four. I'll throw a patch on, but someone's got to weld it back or we'll break in two."

Van Rijn signaled curtly to Torres. "Can you play our fish? I think he is getting tired. Where are the bedamned spacesuits?"

He reeled from his chair and across the pitching deck. The *Gantok* was making full-powered leaps, trying to stress the *Mercury* into ruin. By varying their own velocity and beam-force, the humans could nullify most of the effect, but it took skill and nerve. God, but it took nerve! Van Rijn felt his clothes drenched on his body.

He found the lockers and climbed awkwardly into his specially built suit. Hadn't worn armor in a long time—forgotten how it stank. Where was that beblistered torch, anyhow? When he got out on the hull, surrounded by the blaze of all the universe, fear was cold within him.

One of those shocks that rolled and yawed the ship underfoot could break the gravitic hold of his boots. Pitched out beyond the hyperdrive field and reverting to normal state, he would be forever lost in a microsecond as the craft flashed by at translight speeds. It would be a long fall through eternity.

Electric fire crawled over the hull. He saw the flash of the *Gantok's* guns—she was firing wildly, on the one-in-a-billion chance that some shell would happen to be in phase with the *Mercury*. Good—let her use up her ammunition. Even so, it was a heart-bumping eerie thing when a nuclear missile passed through Van Rijn's own body. No, by damn, through the space where they coexisted with different frequencies—must be precise—now here is that fit-for-damnation hull plate. Clamp on the jack, bend it back toward shape. Ah, heave ho, even with hydraulics it takes a strong man to do this, maybe some muscle remains under all that goose grease. Slap down your glace filter, weld the plate, handle a flame and remember the brave old days when you went hell-roaring halfway across this arm of the galaxy. Whoops, that lunge nearly tossed him off into God's great icebox!

He finished his job, reflected that there would have to be still heavier

bracing on the next ship of this model, and crept back to the air lock, trying to ignore the ache which was his body. As he entered, the rolling and plunging and racketing stopped. For a moment he thought he had been stricken deaf.

Then Torres' face swam into the intercom, wet and haggard, and said hoarsely: "They've quit. I don't think they expect their own boat can take any more of this—"

Van Rijn straightened his bruised back and whooped. "Excellent! Wonderful! But pull us up alongside quick, you lardhead, before—"

There was the twisting sensation of reversion to normal state, and the hyperdrive noise spun into silence. Van Rijn lost his footing as the *Mercury* sprang forward and banged against the enemy.

It had been an obvious tactic for Rentharik to use: Switching off his interstellar drive, in the hope that the Terran ship would remain hyper and flash so far away he could never be found again. The answer was equally simple—a detector coupled to an automatic cutoff, so that the *Mercury* would instantly do likewise. And now the League ship was immediately alongside the *Gantok*, snuggled beneath the very guns the frigate could no longer bring to bear and held by a tractor force she could not break.

Van Rijn struggled back to his feet and removed his helmet. The intercom blushed at his language.

"Captain!" Petrovich yelped the realization. "*They're going to board us!*"

"Name of Judas!" van Rijn's breastplate clashed on the deck. "Must I do all your thinking for you? What use is our pressor if not to swat off unwelcome guests?" He threw back his head and bellowed with laughter. "Let them try, let them try! Our drive field envelops theirs, so it does not matter whether they use their engines or not—and we are stronger, *nie?* We can drag them with us even if they fight it. All my life I have been a deep-sea fisherman. And now, full speed ahead to Antares with this little minnow that thought it was a shark!"

A hypervid call to Antares as soon as they were in range brought a League carrier out to meet them. Van Rijn turned the *Gantok* over to her and let Torres pilot the battered *Mercury* in. Himself, he wanted only to sleep.

Not that the Borthudians had tried any further stunts, after their boarding party was so cold-bloodedly shoved into deep space. Rentharik was sensible enough to know when he was beaten, and had passively let his ship be hauled away. But the strain of waiting for any possible resistance had been considerable.

Torres had wanted to communicate with the prisoned crew, but Van Rijn would not allow it. "No, no, my boy, we demoralize them more by refusing the light of our eyes. I want the good Captain Rentharik's fingernails chewed down to the elbow when I see him."

That was, in the governor's mansion, in Redsun City. Van Rijn had appropriated it for his own use, complete with wine cellar and concubines. Between banquets he had found time to check on local prices and raise the tag on pepper a milli-credit per gram. The colonists would grumble, but they could afford it; if it weren't for him, their meals would be drab affairs, so didn't he deserve an honest profit?

After three days of this, he decided it was time to see Rentharik. He lounged on the governor's throne, pipe in one hand.

Rentharik advanced across the parquet floor, gaunt and bitter under the guns of two League gentlemen. He halted before the throne.

"Ah, so there you are!" Van Rijn beamed and waved the bottle. "I trust you have had the pleasant stay? Redsun City jails are much recommended, I am told."

"My government will take measures," spat the Borthudian. "You will not escape the consequences of this piracy."

"Your maggoty little kinglet will do nothing of the sort," declared Van Rijn. "If the civilized planets did not dare fight when he was playing buccaneer, he will not when it is the other way around. He will accept the facts and learn to love them."

"What do you plan to do with us?"

"Well, now, it may be we can collect a little ransom for you, perhaps, eh? If not, the local iron mines are always short of labor. But out of the great goodness of my heart, I let you choose one man who may go home freely and report what has happened. After that we negotiate."

Rentharik narrowed his lids. "See here, I know how your filthy trading system works. You won't do anything that doesn't pay you. And to equip a vessel like yours—one able to capture a warship—costs more than the vessel could ever hope to earn."

"Quite so. It costs just about three times as much."

"So . . . we'll ruin the Antares route for you! Don't think we'll give up our patrols in our own sovereign territory. We can outlast you, if you want a struggle of attrition."

"Ah!" Van Rijn waggled his pipestem. "That is what you cannot do, my friend. You can reduce our profit considerably, but you cannot eliminate it; therefore, we can continue the route indefinitely under present conditions. You see, each voyage nets a thirty per cent profit."

"And it costs three hundred per cent of your profit to outfit a ship—"

"Indeed. But we are only so equipping every *fourth* ship. That means we operate on a smaller margin, yes, but a little arithmetic should show you we can still scrape by in the black ink."

"Every fourth—?" Rentharik shook his head, frankly puzzled. "But what will you gain? Out of every four encounters, we will win three."

"Just so. And by those three victories,, you will capture twelve slaves. The fourth time, we rope in twenty Borthudian spacemen. Naturally, you will never know beforehand which ship is going to be the one that can fight back. You will either have to give up your press gangs or see them whittled away." Van Rijn rubbed his horny palms together. "So you see, by damn, always I operate on the statistics, and always I load the statistics. My friend, you have had it edgewise."

Rentharik crouched where he stood and blazed at his captor: "I learned, here, that your union will not travel through the Kossaluth. Do you think reducing the number of impressed men by one fourth will change their minds?"

Van Rijn grinned. "If I know my spacemen—why, of course. Because if you do continue to raid us, you will soon reduce yourselves to so few crews as to be helpless. Then you will *have* to deal with us, and our terms will include freeing of all the slaves, deconditioning, and good fat indemnities. Any man worth his salt can stand a couple years' service, even on your moldy rustbuckets, if he knows he will then be freed and paid enough to retire on."

He cleared his throat, buttered his tone, and went on: "So is it not wise that you make terms at once? We will be very lenient if you do. You will have to release and indemnify all your present captives, and stop raiding, but you can send students to our academies at not much more than the usual fees. We will want a few minor trade concessions as well, of course—"

"And in a hundred years you'll own us!" It was a snarl.

"If you do not agree, by damn, in three years we will own you. The choice is yours. You must have a continuously expanding supply of spacemen or your economy collapses. You can either let us train them in civilized fashion, and give us a wedge by which we ruin you in three generations, or you can impress them and be ruined inside this decade. Pick your man; we will let him report to your king-pig. And never forget that I, Nicholas van Rijn of the Polesotechnic League, do nothing without very good reason. Even the name of my ship could have warned you."

"The name—?" whispered Rentharik.

"Mercury," explained van Rijn, "was the god of commerce, gambling—and thieves."