

OG's Speculative Fiction

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Poetry by Ree Young

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The Pirates of Panjandrum

by Jack Ryan

Jack Ryan began writing and illustrating short adventure stories in seventh grade. He taught Chemistry at El Paso Community College and Chemistry, Physics, and Physical Sciences at South Arkansas Community College until retiring in 2010. He is working on several science fiction novels: Silver Threads, The Centaurian Bud Vase, and Beyond the Windward Sea. He has won honorable mention in the Writers of the Future Contest as well as being published in places like Between the Lines and Good Reading. In this fun caper, a young woman is looking to get even.

“Sinead, I’m pregnant.”

“Sinead? Are you there?” Sheila says after the silence becomes unbearable.

“Yes, it’s really me. I’m sorry that I’ve got to call collect by vocofone, but I need help.”

“No, not exactly—I’m not married. But yes, he did leave me. In my profession they all leave me.”

Sheila Cash, wearing a skimpy black leather halter and mini skirt, her red hair tumbling over her shoulders, holds the vocofone to her ear. She stands next to the counter of the *Bordeaux Antiquities* shop waiting for the cascade of questions from her sister to at least slow down. Sheila looks at the proprietor, a silvery skink in a gray robe. Signaling the skink, she pulls the vocofone from her ear and holds up her other hand, touching her fingers to her thumb several times, indicating “Yak, yak, yak.”

The skink just looks at her and nods. *Attractive, for a human, I suppose.*

“Sinead, I don’t *know* which one it was! And yes, I know *exactly* what Father will say. And Mother too, and the rest of the family. They’ll stomp aframboise!” she says, stamping the floor with her own foot.

“Sinead, I need 30,000 SECredits. Right away.

“Sinead? *Sinead?*”

“Yes, it *is* a lot of money—yes, too much for a telabortion. It’s not for a telabortion. I’m not having one.” She turns and looks out the door, then turns back to the counter.

“I’m on Panjandrum. I just got here. I’m going to get married.

“Please, Sinead. I can’t explain right now.” She gestures with her free

hand. “Just trust me. Tell Billy that I’ll get his money back. Within the week.

“Sinead, the fones of Panjandrum are not the place to be going into details. I’ll click my *local* to you as soon as I get a room. Got to go now. Give Billy my thanks. Love you Sis!” She clicks off the fone and sets it down on the counter. She tosses her head, getting her hair out of her eyes.

“Well, will you be getting the money?” asks Pierre Bordeaux, the proprietor of the antique shop.

“Of course I will. My sister just needs to talk to her husband,” Sheila says, batting her green eyes at the three-foot silvery skink as he puts his vocofone back behind the counter.

“The 30,000 SECredits should more than cover a couple of days at a decent hotel and your plastidroid. You will hold it for me, won’t you Monsieur Bordeaux?” she asks, glancing at the featureless metallic green humanoid standing beside the proprietor.

“*Oui*, for sure. But you must remember—I make no guarantees for the operation of this device beyond what you yourself have seen it do. I comply with Stellar Economic Community Regulations, no more.” He wags his finger at her.

“Of course, though I’m sure SEC regs mean next to nothing here on Panjandrum. Well, thank you. I’ll be back first thing in the morning, I’m sure. Now I need to do some shopping for my fiancee,” Sheila says, picks up her purse, and walks back onto the street, disappearing into the crowd of afternoon pickpockets, murderers and pirates.

“Well, David, *mon ami*, I think you will soon have a new owner. It will be better than sweeping the floors here, *n’est-ce pas?*” Bordeaux says, the bright blue tip of his tail twitching with anticipation.

“*Oui, Monsieur Bordeaux*,” the android says without inflection. “You don’t really believe that she will come back, do you?”

“Why would she not return? Although dressed like *that* on Panjandrum...” He looks out the window, but Sheila is out of sight.

“If someone claiming to be your sister,” David says, motioning with the handle of his broom to the door, “but whose voice you could only hear, called you from another star system—from Panjandrum of all places—to tell you that she was pregnant, and ask for 30,000 credits, would you send it?”

“Of course not. I don’t have a sister. But I see what you mean. Shall we wait and see who is right, *mon ami?*” Bordeaux tilts his head and smiles up at David.

Somewhat less than twenty-four hours later—Panjandrum has a rotational period of about thirty-eight hours—Sheila and David stand on the

balcony of her ninth floor room in the Hotel Parisian.

Sheila steps back inside and, toying with the faux-diamond encrusted control ring on her finger, says, “Tell me, now that the purchase is final, what exactly is wrong with you?”

“Wrong?” David straightens and lifts his chin, like a Marine coming to attention. “Wrong! Nothing is ‘wrong’ with me. As far as my sensors can tell, I am fully functional,” he says, showing emotion for the first time. He steps back inside.

“That’s what Bordeaux said. So why are you in an antique shop going for ten cents on the credit if nothing’s wrong with you. Cough it up m’laddo,” she says, hands on hips.

“Bordeaux didn’t know that I was a plastidroid when he found me on Earth about five terrestrial years ago at an estate sale. I was in the form of a marble statue, listed in the catalog as ‘David, reproduction, slightly less than life size. Artist unknown.’ Fortunately Bordeaux bought the control ring too. About a year later he accidentally activated me while cleaning the ring. I’m twice as tall as he is, so maybe I intimidate him. Though I don’t think that anything does. And he certainly doesn’t need the money. So maybe it’s just that he sort of promised me that someday someone would come in and take me away. He told me that he thinks you’ve got more up your sleeve than plans to get married, that being owned by you would be more interesting than sitting around a bunch of dusty old antiques. Do you?”

Sheila ignores the question. “So you don’t know much about yourself?”

“Of course I do. Just because I was shut down doesn’t mean that my memory was swished. My first owner was a Mexican mercenary. We were all over, sometimes beyond, the SEC. He finally upgraded to a newer model, but didn’t trade me in—I knew too many valuable things, and I was very good at security, just in case. He thought that I’d look good in the garden. The ‘just in case’ never happened and, somehow, the ring and I got passed from heir to heir until the estate sale at the end of the line,” he explains without inflection.

“When did this all start? I mean—being passed heir to heir?” Sheila goes back to the balcony once more and bends to look over the railing toward the ground.

“About three hundred years ago.”

She looks back to him. “Then, when you say ‘fully functional’ you mean you’re pretty far out of date but still fall within your original design parameters?”

He turns his featureless face and leans toward Sheila. “Yes, Mademoiselle Cash. I am *fully* functional” he says in a conspiratorial whisper. If he

had eyes, they would be twinkling. “I have never worked as a ‘husband’ before, although I have had some experiences along that line.”

“Oh, a *husband* is the last thing I need in my line of work,” she says, coming back inside and walking to the door to peer through the security peep. She walks to the center of the room. “I told Sinead that I was getting married just to keep the family from going completely tharn, to make sure that she really would send me the money.”

“So you really don’t have a minnow in your tummy?”

“What? A ‘minnow?’ Oh, I see, a *minnow*. Yes, I do have ‘a minnow in my tummy.’ And I’m going to keep it there for now,” she says, tapping her stomach.

“Then what do you want of me?” he asks, bending to pick up a hair brush from the floor beside the bed and dropping it on the night table.

“Would you believe me if I said I collect antiques?”

David walks back to the balcony, turns to face Sheila, but says nothing.

“Okay, so I don’t. But sometimes antiques are better than something new. You, for instance. See this?” She pulls a reader from her purse and checks the time. “Seventeen minutes. Transform yourself into this statue of ‘Diana the Huntress’.” She shows him the picture on the screen and reads off a list of identifying marks.

“Don’t worry, you won’t stay this way for the next three hundred years!”

“But why?”

Sheila looks at the time again. “Let’s go. He might be early.”

David does as he is told. His height diminishes. His proportions and color change to those of the bronze goddess in the picture. He takes her pose. His skin ripples into the metallic garments of the statue.

“A little more green patina if you please... More... Brilliant! Just hold that pose.” She glances again at the time.

“Bidido was one of the native johns that I had on Adondus. Somehow he convinced me that I was in love with him, and that I should invest my savings, that he knew a way to double my money. Like a fool, I fell for it and, like the cliché of a story it was, he disappeared with my money. Unfortunately for him, I wasn’t just the simple working girl he thought I was and I traced him here.” She walks around the statue, examining it.

“He doesn’t spend much time here, but he owns a castle on the other side of the city. I want him to take you there. Then tonight I want you to take his Tartian Egg. I can’t describe it—I’ve never seen it. Don’t even have a picture on the reader. But it’s the size of your head and will be protected by some pretty sophisticated security measures. So don’t get caught! I’ll be waiting for you with a runabout outside the castle.” She walks to the door

again to peer out.

“Excuse me for breaking character,” David says. “But this sounds highly illegal, even if he did to you what you say. Besides, won’t he recognize you?”

“Illegal? Of course it’s ‘illegal,’ but I don’t care! I’m going to make sure that he pays, *really* pays, for what he’s done to me, and to others,” she says, jabbing a finger at the statue.

“Anyhow, I don’t see why a little illegal activity should worry you, *Señor Juan del Rio*. Yes, I know more about you than you thought. And no, he won’t recognize me. I’d gone native on Adondus, taking a drug to give me the blue skin and all. When he walks through that door all he’ll see is a scantily-clad red-headed colleen with an ancient statue from Earth. He’s going to pay a *green farthing* for it, and that’s just the beginning! That’s one reason why I need an antique plastidroid like you. When you transform into bronze or marble, your quantum dots become bronze or marble as far as any scanner can tell.”

“But when I disappear tonight he’ll realize what happened.”

“You’ve been shut down for too long Juan. Plastidroids have been outlawed by the SEC for nearly a hundred years! He’s probably never even heard of a plastidroid.

“That’s him, ringing the chime. Be Diana!” she says as she approaches the door, then peeks around the edge before removing the chain lock.

“Won’t you come in please, Monsieur Bidido?” Sheila says to the short Adondi sporting a black patch over his right eye. Apart from his light blue skin and wavy gray-green hair and moustache, he looks almost like a human. A human who can afford a gray pin-stripe hand-tailored suit. Two other burly Adondi, well dressed but not in such expensive suits, follow him into the apartment.

“I understand that you have a friend of mine with you. Diana, I believe?” Bidido says, coming to the point of his visit.

“Yes, but please believe that I didn’t know she was stolen when I purchased the statue. In fact, it was just by chance that I ran across the article in *Antique Universe* describing the theft.” Sheila holds her hands together and hunches her shoulders in obeisance.

Bidido stands to one side of the statue while one of the other Adondi circles it with a hand scanner. The second, large for an Adondi, moves around the room, looking into the bathroom and closet, at the ceiling tiles, and out onto the balcony.

“Well, Minarus?” Bidido says.

Minarus frowns and shakes his head. “It has the proper marks, but too

much corrosion. It's a fake."

"Well, Mademoiselle Cash, I'm sure that you did not know." He turns to leave. "I am sorry that you've come all this way for nothing."

"Monsieur Bidido, wait," Sheila says. "She must be genuine. You see, she was on Alpha Thentis 2, decorating a serena bean plantation house owned by a retired Panjandrumian smuggler. I don't collect statues, but I recognized that this was from Earth. I'm just sorry that I didn't find the statue sooner if the climate there damaged it. But I can find a buyer for it if you don't want it."

"Alpha Thentis 2?" Bidido hesitates.

"Very warm and wet in the tropics, where the beans are grown. I was forced down there once. Not a nice place," says the second Adondi as he comes back in from the balcony.

"Yes. Thank you Zentaxus. So you are saying that it was not a proper place to leave a bronze statue." He looks back at Minarus, who hesitates, then nods his tentative approval.

"You did speak of a handsome reward?" Sheila asks, smiles at Minarus and Zentaxus, and bows toward Bidido.

He doesn't even try to hide his leer. "Yes indeed. I feel generous today. Not only does it seem that I have my Huntress back, but by tomorrow morning I will have taken possession of a second Tartian Egg!"

"How exciting! I've never seen a Tartian Egg," Sheila says, clapping her hands.

"Then you must stay the night at Caryton Gray," Bidido says, motioning toward the door.

"Oh, I'm sorry but I can't. I'm expecting a call from my sister and brother-in-law this afternoon, and I've got to be at the spaceport early tomorrow morning. So, please, just leave the reward and I'll take you up on your offer the next time I'm in Panjandrum."

"No, no, no, my dear. I won't hear of it. What kind of gratitude would I be showing if I left such an attractive young lady to the mercy of the pirates of Panjandrum?" He steps up to her and clasps her hands in his. "Besides, with such people walking the streets, you don't think that I would be carrying 175,000 SECredits, do you? No, I insist. You must come to Caryton Gray. I'll see that you get to the spaceport in time for your flight.

"Minarus, stay with the lady. See that her calls are forwarded to the castle and take care of her luggage. Zentaxus, bring the statue," Bidido says, going to the door.

Zentaxus picks up the statue, salutes Sheila, and walks out the open door, holding the statue under one arm.

“But...” Sheila begins to protest.

Bidido just smiles. He and Zentaxus walk to the teleportal to the ground floor. Outside the hotel, Bidido opens the door to his electric blue sportster. “Put the statue into the back seat. And stay with it to make sure that we don’t lose it in this terrible traffic. I’ll drive.”

As the sportster floats out over the green bricks of Main Street, Bidido says, “What did you think of our Mademoiselle Cash, Zentaxus?”

“Very classy lady, for an Earthling. Though I find it hard to believe that she would come to Panjandrum alone.”

“She must have a male companion keeping an eye on things. I *am* known to be just a bit of a lady’s man. So they thought that I would be more accommodating if an attractive female returned the statue. Did you notice how she leaned forward, exposing herself to me?”

“And the candy on that ring she was wearing!”

“It’ll be interesting to see where that ‘call’ she’s expecting comes from once that I’ve separated her from her companion.”

“I found no signs of a companion in her room. It’s good that Minarus will be there to keep an eye on her.”

At Caryton Gray the sportster floats across the moat and the Centaurian steel portcullis slams down behind them. “Zentaxus, take Diana to the Game Room where she belongs. I want to check on Mademoiselle Cash’s flight out tomorrow morning. And Zentaxus, put some real security on that thing this time. I don’t want it to walk away again!”

“Yes, Sir,” Zentaxus replies, salutes, and strides off with the statue tucked under his arm.

In the Game Room Juan recognizes a few fellow statues of mythic hunters from several other worlds, but most of the other occupants are creatures, large and small, secured with tractor beams to keep them from moving around—wild game from other worlds.

Zentaxus sets ‘Diana’ onto an empty pedestal. “Home again, little lady,” he says, patting her ample breasts and then walks away to a control panel on the wall. “An infrared holo-alarm should let us know if someone tries to haul you off again.”

Don’t bet your hacienda on it, amigo, Juan thinks. I’ll just tune my IRtransparency to 100 percent. Your absurd holo-alarm will think the pedestal is me. As long as I’m careful when I get down, no one will be the wiser. But what about the Senorita and this plan of hers?

A little before dinner time, servants come in to feed and clean up after the animals. Then Juan hears voices.

“They are not antiques, of course, but I think these creatures will be of

interest to someone who travels as much as yourself,” Bidido says to Sheila.

“Yes, fascinating.” She stops and looks at the statue of Diana. “I wouldn’t want any of these beasts coming to look for me tonight.” Bidido is behind her, and cannot see her wink. But Juan sees and understands.

“Have no fear, your sleep will be undisturbed. As you said, you need to be on your way early in the morning. Oh, speaking of your flight. I checked after I got home—I couldn’t find a booking for you.”

Sheila clears her throat. She looks at the floor, then toward the statue. “No, you wouldn’t. I’m not taking a commercial flight.” She runs her fingers through her red hair. “I met this fellow, you see, who, uh... Well, he said that he’s got this small freighter and he’d have room for me if... if I wasn’t in too much of a hurry to get home. Do you understand?”

Bidido smiles a conspiratorial smile. “Yes, I understand. In the morning you can tell Robinson which hangar to take you to and he’ll get you to your ship on time. Oh, speaking of Robinson... Yes, Robinson, you’re looking for us?”

“Yes, Sir. A call for Mademoiselle Cash. From Sol 3, I believe.” Blue-skinned, but dressed in a black suit, Robinson looks the part of the perfect valet.

“Brilliant! It’s the call from my sister on Earth. Perhaps I can come back here, later?” Another wink to the statue.

“Thank you, Robinson. Take Mademoiselle Cash to her room so she can talk with her family in private.”

Juan waits on the pedestal as evening comes and night falls. He occupies himself creating crossword puzzles in his head.

Long after midnight, with his audio receptors turned to full gain, he hears Bidido and Zentaxus walk down the hall outside the Game Room.

“Are you sure that it was wise to give her the reward?” Zentaxus asks. “What if her partner teleports her out of here?”

“The call *was* from Earth and Security found no code in the conversation. Perhaps she is just what she says she is. Though I have this feeling about her. Like *deja vu*. In any case, don’t worry—House Security has a lock on her. Also, I think I know a pirate captain who might be only too happy to take her off our hands. Let’s go, Zentaxus, I want to be there when my Egg comes in!”

After Bidido and Zentaxus have gone, Juan, realizing that something is happening, gets impatient. *Hurry up, Senorita. I’m beginning to understand what you’re trying to pull off. I hope that this ‘friend’ of yours has room for us both. Where are you, anyhow?*

“Juan? Are you still there?” comes Sheila’s voice in the dark.

“Yes. Do you think that I could leave without you?”

“Let’s go. Bidido is on his way to the spaceport. We’ve got to get that Egg and meet him there. And please, transform yourself into Juan del Rio. I don’t want those cutthroats on the streets to see me with a half-naked Amazon.”

“Diana was *not* an Amazon. She was...”

“Get down off of there and put these clothes on. I don’t want to be seen with a naked man either.”

“I can simulate male garb, just as I did Diana’s,” Juan says as he comes down from the pedestal.

“I know, I know. But I want you dressed in these.” She holds up bag from a DuBois Clothing store.

“*Bueno*. Did he show you where the egg is?” Juan asks, getting down from the pedestal, transforming, and dressing. “These are the clothes you wanted to buy for your ‘fiance’ yesterday, no?”

He has long, curly, gray hair, dark skin, a handlebar moustache, and intense dark eyes. Sheila looks at him, raises her eyebrows and smiles, then says, “No and yes. He didn’t show me the Egg, he wants to show me both at the same time. But I know where it is by where he didn’t take me. It’s not far.”

Moments later they stand before the Tartian Egg, an exquisitely carved diamond within an exquisitely carved diamond within another and another and another... Each decorated with gold, silver, platinum, sapphires, emeralds, rubies...

“Brutal!” Sheila says. “Can you deactivate the security?”

Juan walks around the Egg, sniffing the air. “Technology can change but basic security procedures don’t. Yes, I think I can take care of this. Piece of cake, *Senorita*.”

Juan works at the control panel on the wall. “*Ay, chihuahua!* No, it’s all right. Just burned myself creating a short circuit. The Egg is yours. Let’s get out of here. Caryton Gray Security is on our side now.”

“Eh?” She looks puzzled. “How’s that again?”

“I just talked to the House Computer. He’s an old friend, of sorts. Owes me a favor in fact. Also, he has no allegiance or love for your friend Bidido.”

They hurry down the hall, through a teleportal to the ground floor, and stop in the courtyard. The portcullis is down. Guards are stationed on the towers at each side.

“Can you hot wire a sportster? Bidido was going to take an armored van with some of his security people,” Sheila says.

“I’m 300 years out of date when it comes to transports. But I can try.”

“Forget it. I’ll do it. Remember Robinson? Be Robinson.”

Sheila starts Bidido’s sportster and they drift toward the portcullis. “Hello there,” ‘Robinson’ calls to the guards. “Monsieur Bidido wants Mademoiselle Cash to come to the spaceport to be with him when the Tartian Egg is delivered. Open for us, please.”

The guard salutes and the portcullis edges up out of the way. Sheila edges the sportster onto the street, then heads for the spaceport. “Like you said, piece of cake! Transform yourself back to Juan.”

“Show a bit more caution as you drive, Senorita Cash. They have a saying here in Panjandrum—’The whores know the way to Caryton Gray’—and this sportster is one well known way. We don’t want to appear to be joy riding or we’re apt to end up with quite an entourage.”

“Thanks, Juan. And call me ‘Sheila.’ We might just end up working together for a while. Might as well be friends.”

“*Si, verdad.*” Juan smiles, pleased with himself. He looks like the cat that ate the canary.

After a few minutes of driving, Sheila pulls up to the curb. They get out, look around for others out at this hour, and walk down the street to the row of hangars. Sheila says, “Here we are. Bidido is expecting an arrival at Hangar 7. This is 11. Here’s what I want you to do...”

Juan bends to listen, then picks up the box with the Tartian Egg and strolls away, in the wrong direction.

“Juan! What are you doing?” Sheila calls out, running after him.

“Keep out of sight! Slight change in plans. Trust me. Bidido and his crew will be coming by in just a few minutes,” Juan calls back and keeps moving.

When he gets to Hanger 14, Juan stops, glances toward the roof, then goes inside. “I need to get a message to some friends at Hangar 7,” he says to a sleepy eyed skink behind the cargo counter. “Piece of paper, *por favor?*”

He steps behind the counter, hands the clerk, who becomes awake and attentive, a 20-credit note from the billfold that Sheila had placed in his pants, and runs the paper through the vocoprinter as he speaks into the microphone. “Got a porter?”

The skink blinks and points to the door where Juan has just come in. Juan walks over to the porter, gives him instructions, and hands him a twenty and the message. Then he sits down with the box containing the Tartian Egg and waits several minutes. He looks at the clock. “*Gracias a Dios que hoy es Viernes.*” he says, gets up, and walks back out to the far side of the street.

Moments later the porter returns, darting head-down ahead of Bidido and a half dozen brawny Adondi. The armored van drifts down the street behind them.

“Senor Bidido,” Juan calls. “I believe that you have something for me.”

The six Adondi take up positions—three in front, between Bidido and Juan, and three behind. They advance toward Juan.

“I believe that it is you who have something for me. You are Monsieur del Rio?” Bidido says.

“Yes, of course. I suppose you would like to see the item which my Principal, Finder of Lost and Valuable Items, feels will be of much interest to you. Suppose we show each other what we have?”

“Certainly,” Bidido says, and smiles. As he advances with a briefcase, the Adondi ahead of him part.

Bidido places one foot up on the curb, opens the briefcase, and rests it on his knee. Juan takes the top off of the box and lifts the Tartian Egg into view. He takes little notice of the large SECredit notes in the briefcase, but Bidido is entranced at the sight of the Egg.

“And just how did you come upon this Tartian Egg, Monsieur del Rio?”

“It was not I who came upon the Egg, Senor Bidido. It was my Principal, Finder of Lost and Valuable Items, who ‘came upon’ this remarkable twin of your Tartian Egg. He believes that you, as a Collector of Lost and Valuable Items, will not be too concerned if we don’t go into the minutia of his activities. You will ‘collect’ your Tartian Egg this morning and I will ‘collect’ his money, no? Unfortunately, one very small matter remains to be resolved.” Juan places the Tartian Egg back into the boxes and replaces the cover.

“Small matter? No,” Bidido says, trying to stand a little taller. “No, I have the agreed upon amount here. What are you saying?”

“Just this morning my Principal was contacted by another Collector of Lost and Valuable Items. This Collector has tendered a bid somewhat larger than your own.”

Bidido’s face turns a dark blue. “We had an agreement!”

“Yes, we *had* an agreement. I realize that you probably have no more cash with you, and in the interest of time I am authorized to take payment in another way.”

“Another way?” Bidido steps back behind the row of Adondi.

“Yes, my Principal knows that you are the owner of a small Falcon-Class starship docked here at the spaceport. Something of an antique, I understand. He has a crew examining it as we speak. Although its value is less than the additional bid, in the interest of a timely and amicable conclusion to our transaction, he will settle for this ship.” Juan holds out a copy of a title transfer form that Sheila had given him.

Zentaxus approaches Bidido and whispers something to him.

“My friend reminds me that I *do* wish to obtain the Tartian Egg and that,

perhaps, your demand is not too far out of line,” Bidido says. “The agreed upon amount is here. You may count it if you wish. Just allow Monsieur Minarus to make a scan of the Egg, to make sure that your Principal has not been ‘cheated.’ I will sign the title transfer.”

Juan hands the Egg to Minarus, who has just come up from the van. Juan closes the briefcase. “No need for me to count it. I am sure that you are completely trustworthy, Senior.”

Minarus scans the Egg and smiles. “Authentic and a perfect match.” He hands it to Bidido, who, looking elated, signs the title transfer and passes it back, via Minarus, to Juan.

“Well, I would like to meet this ‘Principal’ of yours, to invite you both back to Caryton Gray for a little celebration. He certainly drives a hard bargain.”

“I am sorry, Senior, but we have heard that some of your guests, perhaps over indulging in your hospitality, seem to get a little carried away and are not seen again. My Principal must give his regrets.” Juan begins to back away with the briefcase.

Bidido looks around, smiles, then motions with his hand. The six Adondi pull laser pistols and begin to move toward Juan. “I insist that at least you join us,” he says and chuckles. “Hand over the briefcase and title transfer!”

As the Adondi surround him, Juan holds up his hand. “Wait, Senors, before you do something foolish. Look up, and behind you. Perhaps you will agree that we have no need for a ‘celebration.’”

The Adondi hesitate. Bidido looks back. On the gallery of the upper deck of Hangar 14 he can see a dozen or more armed pirates of various planetary races. At first glance, they do not seem to be paying much attention to the activity on the ground. Just enjoying their drinks.

“Even friends in high places can get a bit rowdy at parties, no?” Juan says. He holds his right hand up in plain sight. He extends one finger, then a second, counting.

Bidido hesitates. He begins to speak, but just at that moment they are interrupted by an insistent jangle. Juan halts his count. A moment later, Zentaxus, looking somewhat pale and shaken, hands Bidido his vocofone.

“What? Fire!” Bidido motions with his hand. “Back to Caryton Gray!” He looks back over his shoulder at Juan, then up to the gallery. “We’ll meet again.”

“Then perhaps we can have that celebration, Senior,” Juan says, and waves, still showing two fingers, to the departing van.

Bidido’s van has just rounded the corner when Sheila runs out of the shadows. She jumps up and down, dancing around Juan, almost dropping

her laser pistol. “You did it! You did it! A lot of Bidido’s prey are in for pleasant surprises!”

“Oh? How much of a ‘pleasant surprise’ is in this briefcase?” Juan asks.

“Just 200 million smackers!”

Juan snatches the pistol from her hand. “For 200 million SECredits you were going to defend me with this little crackle-fizzer?”

“I had it just in case itch came to scratch,” she says looking up into Juan’s face.

“It’d be about as useful as ears on a dandelion!” Juan says, frowning.

“It may be small, but I can take down six Adondi quicker than you can say ‘Panjandrum!’ Now tell me, what was that about a fire? And where did this small army of yours come from?” she says, waving her arm toward the gallery.

“Oh, the fire?” Juan sticks his left index finger in his mouth for a moment. “Remember when I burned my finger? I guess somehow the short must have been more serious than I imagined. It seems that Caryton Gray is ablaze.”

“You demon!” Sheila says, still dancing. “But what about *them*?” she says, pointing toward the gallery.

“My amigos up there? I haven’t the faintest idea who they are. All I know is that the upper gallery of Hangar 14 is the place where all the tourists go every Friday to watch the Twin Suns come up between the Twin Peaks of the Twin Mountains. I understand that it is a sight you should not miss.”

“You imp! Perhaps another time for the sunrise. We’ve got to get out of here before Bidido finds out what has really happened. Let me see that title transfer... Hmm... Yes, the *Marcopo*. Used to be a Taupoian freighter.” Sheila studies the title in the dim light of dawn.

“But Senorita, look how old it is.” Juan taps the paper.

“Pretty old—makes you look young—but maintenance records indicate it’s still in good shape. It’s just what we need.” She turns toward the street with the stolen sportster.

“I don’t know what you have in mind, but if the *Marcopo* is ‘just what we need,’ I think that we should rename it the *Marco Pollo*.” Juan says with a broad smile.

“Because you think we’re going exploring?”

“Not *Polo*, *Pollo*!” Juan says, and chuckles at his own cleverness. “Because this is going to be a chicken sh...”

“Juan! Watch your language!”

“...operation.”

“Oh yeah? We’ll see about that. Let’s go find your *Marco Pollo*,

pronto,”Sheila says, and giggles. She grabs his hand.

“You know, *Senorita*, a husband would come in handy for you. You know, with your family and all.”

“You did say you were fully functional didn’t you?” she asks, pulling him along toward the sportster.

“*Si, verdad*, although some functions haven’t been exercised in three hundred years.”

“Well, we’d better get them checked out!”

“*Si, andale!*” he says, hurrying to keep up with Sheila.

“Good,” Sheila says. “So you have experience as a starship pilot?”

“What? Pilot? That’s not what I thought you had in mind.”

She giggles. “It’s not, but it would be nice to know if I’m going to have to fly this thing myself.”

Juan gives her a sideways glance, then smiles again, as they hurry on. “Well, yes, I can fly this little starship of ours. I’ll fly it through the eye of a needle if you ask me. Unless you can find someone who’s been flying since he was a child, you won’t find a better starship pilot. And where would you find such a person?”