

Robber Baron

A FUZ Timeline Story

A science fiction novel

By
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ROBBER BARON FINALLY CAPTURED!

Philipp Kaplan Behind Bars at Last

Charta, Turner's Planet — Yesterday, the 122nd day of 2515 (GS calendar), during a daring raid on the First Central Commercial Interplanetary Bank and Trust, the notorious Philipp Kaplan was apprehended by local authorities without a struggle.

Early in the morning, by local time, Kaplan walked into the building, heavily armed - apparently the weapon detection system had been dismantled - and immediately immobilized the two guards on duty at the time, authorities said.

According to eyewitnesses and security cameras, he ordered the other employees and customers to get on the floor, then took the bank manager to the safe.

When the computer system shut off the combination dial -the computer had determined that a robbery was in progress - Kaplan held a blaster to the manager's head, and convinced him to override the computer, which the manager did, promptly, police said.

As Kaplan exited the vault, carrying the bags of money, a male teller attacked him, and held him to the ground until police arrived, witnesses said.

Kaplan was taken to Chatta's Central Detention Center, where he will be held without bond, until his arraignment, early next week, according to municipal court records.

"He will have to plead guilty," stated Chatta Chief of Police, Kergen Bowler.

"He was caught red-handed, with the bags of money actually in his hands. There were eight eyewitnesses, and four policemen in the building.

"At best, he could try to plead insanity, but that won't get you very far on this planet."

It appears that after a 25-year reign of terror, Philipp Kaplan's career as the most successful bank robber ever has come to an end.

The arresting officers did not allow Kaplan to comment.

I spent a week in Chatta's jail; fed, clothed, and entertained at the expense of the citizens of Turner's Planet. I've always heard that if you get something for free, then you get what you pay for, but the food in that jail wasn't too bad. Nothing

else was that bad either, except that the building is old, having been built early in the colonial days, just after the Granger-Stranger Wars.

The jail was shaped like a large cube, about ten stories high, and exactly as wide and long as it was high. It had been built out of solid Turner's Planet stone. The lower two floors were filled with offices, supply rooms, a medical clinic, a break room for guards and police officers, and the booking rooms. The upper floors contained the cells, a mess room for the inmates, the exercise room, and a few more supply rooms. The laundry and power systems were in the basement.

The heating and cooling systems had been in need of repair for a long time, and the water had a slight metallic taste to it. The water bothered me, but I didn't mind the heating and cooling systems acting up, since the climate in Chatta is nice all year round. I also didn't mind chatting with the guards.

The other prisoners pretty much stayed away from me, except those who thought they could bolster their own criminal careers by chumming with me. Most of them were locals, though, and not really of my stature in the criminal world. You see, I've robbed over 800 banks, hi-jacked two or three dozen armed transport ships, not to mention other jobs. And I've never been caught. Well, except for this once.

My reputation did bring a lot of VIPs my way. The Chief of Police had me in his office the day after my capture, asking me was the food okay, and was anyone bothering me unnecessarily. I guess he was trying to make doubly sure I wouldn't get off on a technicality. Turner's Planet has laws that have stood firm for three centuries, where a defendant can get out of a conviction if he can prove that he was abused, neglected, or mistreated in any way, while in jail or prison. And I guess he figured that I had more than enough money to hire a good enough lawyer to get me off, if he gave me even the slightest chance.

I told him, thanks, I was fine, and the food was great, but could I have some spicier sauce for my hamburgers. No problem, he says, just don't tell the other inmates.

I'm sure he was recording the whole thing; they probably even had cameras in my cell, making sure I couldn't use the "abuse" angle in court. They wanted me bad. One hundred fifty planets had been looking for me, some of them for more than twenty years, and Turner's Planet needed this boost in their publicity to pullout of their economic depression. At least that's what I read in the papers. Of course, I've never read the papers to find facts; hard facts can rarely be found in newspapers. But, by reading a newspaper, you can get a general "gist", or feeling, of what's going on.

I played cards with a few of the guards, and a few games of chess with the head jailer, while awaiting my arraignment. I've never been that good at chess - my wife is much better - but I was better than my opponent this time. Good enough to let him win, barely, every time. I didn't want him to get even the smallest inkling of how smart I really was.

After a week, I went before the city's head judge, and pled guilty. To "attempted robbery". I pleaded ignorance to the assault and battery charges on the security guards; I never touched either of them, and the cameras can prove that. They just fell over. The prosecutor for the government of the planet mentioned that other charges would be brought against me, from other robberies, but I'm not worried. I don't think anyone can prove it was me that did all of those jobs. I've been careful throughout the years to cover my tracks. I've got more than three dozen *valid* IDs, all with different names, and it's been thirty-two years since I did a job without wearing gloves.

The sentence for bank robbery on Turner's Planet varies from five years to

twenty years, depending on how much money is stolen, whether or not the money is recovered, how many people were hurt, etc. But the sentence for “attempted robbery” is two to five. The prosecutor was too smart to try the first charge; I never made it out of the bank - I would’ve been a free man if he had tried that. And since nobody was hurt - the guards were fine after a few minutes - I only got two years in the Meela Penitentiary. And that without a lawyer! I just let the evidence speak for itself, and the law mandated my sentence. I know there are a lot of people mad about all that, but the next time they’re in court, they’ll demand their rights and a fair trial, just like I had. Most people think the court systems on the older planets are too slow and too lenient, but I know the courts are that way for a reason. It’s to keep the innocent from being punished. “Reasonable Doubt” is a powerful concept, when explained to a jury. And if it weren’t for this very “lenience”, the government could take whatever they wanted, and our democracy would be dead.

Most of the planets in our corner of the Milky Way have some form of democratic government, with a bill of rights to protect the citizens. This Bill of Rights ensures that the members of the normal population have certain freedoms, and that they are protected in the event of a mistaken arrest. Not all governments are like that.

Imagine a government where the only witnesses allowed in court are brought in by the prosecution, and there are no appeals, and the sentence is always exile to a salt mine, and citizens aren’t allowed to leave or enter a city without a passport. They say that there actually were governments like that, back on Old Home Terra. They also say that there are a few planets around today, with similar laws. They start out by banning citizens from owning firearms, using the excuse that it will cut down on crime. Of course, it usually doesn’t, but they always got the population to believe it. Then, with the best part of the population disarmed, some economic or natural disaster would conveniently come along, giving the government the excuse to exercise emergency powers and set up martial law. Many times, because of a charismatic leader and the fear of the current “disaster,” the populace goes along with the changes. After that, no one has a fighting chance. It hasn’t happened in a long time, since most people nowadays turn colonist whenever they see the initial signs. When privacy rights start being violated, when the police can search your home, vehicle, or luggage without a warrant, and so on, it’s time to sign up for a colony world. Keep your eyes peeled.

Meela, where I was sent, is the ninth of 10 planets in the Tau Ceti System, almost 700 million miles from its mother star. The gravity is about three-quarters of Galactic Standard, and the warmest it gets (at noon, on the equator, in the summer) is just above the freezing point of water. It rotates every 21 days or so, meaning that at night it can get pretty cold. In the winter, even at the equator, it will get as low as 100 degrees below zero.

I remember seeing on the news that someone didn’t think it was fair that prisoners should get to relax in lower gravity. What they don’t realize is that it just weakens the prisoner. After a man in his 40s (like me) spends two years at three-quarters gravity, getting used to weighing only 135 pounds, it’s very difficult to readjust to my standard weight of 180.

A week after the sentencing, I was prodded onto a medium-sized transport ship along with 25 other convicts, and two days later, we were landing in a blizzard on Meela. And there I stayed, until I forgot what the free life was like.

The Meela Penitentiary is not the kind of place I wanted to be. It was nothing like the Chatta jail, where we got to sit around all day, watching satellite holovision. There were a lot of rough characters there, and I was around them all day. Each

prisoner is assigned a job, and the bosses aren't very nice. But I got along with them the best I could. And after a few initial skirmishes with the prison gangs, they left me alone.

I didn't stop planning new scores.

*

I had been at Meela for a month when a guard came to my cell and escorted me to the prison psychiatrist. He was a young man, of slight build, with a large mop of tousled brown hair.

"So, Mr. Kaplan," he said, after I had been seated, "we meet at last. My name's Sanderson. John Sanderson."

"Nice to meet you," I replied, sincerely. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting? Or do all of the convicts get to see you?"

"Oh, they all get to see me," he said emphatically, then laughed, just a little. "But that's just a formality. You see, I have to have a file on all of you. All the files go to the parole board for consideration. But you - you, Philipp Kaplan, are a special one. You're the best in your specialty. Every classification has its top few, but sometimes, one person stands out above the rest, and his name lasts through history. Like Jesse James, Billy the Kid, the Newton Boys, or Al Capone, from Old Home Terra, your name will probably live on long after you're dead."

I smiled at that. "Sounds interesting, doc. Did you bring me in here to flatter me? Or do you want to talk about what makes me tick?"

"More than that," he said. "I want to know *why* you do what you do."

"It's a little more complicated than that," I replied. "There's not a simple answer."

Sanderson sighed. "There is rarely a simple answer, Mr. Kaplan. If there were, society wouldn't need people like me. So, tell me your story. When did it all start?"

I started telling him. After about thirty minutes, he suggested politely that perhaps I should write it down, since he didn't have all day, so, I requisitioned pen and paper from the supply room, and started writing.

*

Where did it all start? I mean, psychiatrists, for centuries, have been wondering about that. What makes criminals do what they do? There is a school of thought that says ever since religion was taken out of the home, the crime rate has been going up. I don't know about that. Have you ever read the story of King David and Bathsheba? Or what about the man in the Book of Judges who sliced his concubine into twelve pieces and sent one piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel? Don't take my word for it, read the Bible.

There is another, larger and more vocal group of people who say that it is the fault of our education system. They think that if we pump more cash into our school systems, kids will suddenly develop morals and consciences, and decide not to turn to crime as a way of life.

Others say that too many parents are working, and the kids don't spend enough time with the two people who should be instilling morals into them. The arguments go on and on, with no solutions. Crime has followed humanity since the murky beginnings of our race.

Where did it start for me? Let's see...

*

I think I was about four or five years old when my parents signed up to be colonists to Persiphone. We had been living on Tuf, one of the very oldest planets in human civilization. In fact, they say Tuf is the first planet that mankind landed on when they left Old Home Terra's System. However, there are a growing number of people who say that Terra is just a myth, and that we never came from such a place. I can remember my dad pointing to the night sky above Tuf, and showing me which star was Sol, the original Sun of humanity.

Anyway, one night after dinner, my dad explained to me that Tuf was getting too crowded for him, and there were plenty of new planets to choose from, but Persiphone seemed to be the best one. I just shrugged it off, and went back outside, to play with the neighbor's kid.

Funny thing is, I can't remember that kid's name.

In those days, the Great Separation was still going on, and cheap food was scarce. My dad was a hydroponics supervisor on Tuf, working for a firm that was inventing ways to make better synthetic food.

Sometimes we didn't have news from other planets for a year or two at a time, but every freighter that showed up was welcome. I think the current historical perspective about the Separations is wrong. Historians are saying that the older planets cast away the unruly colonies, and that started the whole thing. But I remember all of us on the established worlds waited anxiously for any contact with the other, newer planets. That leads me to believe that it may have been the outer colonies that initially broke the ties with Tuf, Paradise, Turner's Planet, Willsworld, and the other older worlds.

Either way, my dad heard from someone at work that the outer planets were still sending out scout ships to new suns, and they had found Persiphone, Golian, Wederr, Jalla, and other new worlds, all empty of intelligent life, and each ready for new colonists.

Maybe it was this fresh wave of colonization - of which I was a part - that brought the human race back together in the form of the Second Galactic Rim Federation. I don't know, but the new colonies needed some kind of trade and support, and either way, the established planets seemed to grow closer together shortly after the new colonies were born.

I remember we got rid of a lot of things, keeping only our most rugged clothes and most precious heirlooms. Almost all of our furniture had to go, along with most of my toys, and a few of our luxury items. By the time we rode the shuttle up to Nubase, that giant city in the sky of my childhood, I think my entire family only had about 100 pounds of property.

I think at that time, there were perhaps 4 or 5 million people living in Nubase, more than half of whom had never been on the ground. There, I had my medical exam and IQ tests and was let loose with the other children while my parents had about two weeks of colonial training. I've talked to a few people who don't know much about the colonial process, and they're usually surprised that two weeks of training is all you get - less, if you're under eighteen, as I had been. The reason the Colonial Commission doesn't spend more time on training is this: a colonist can only end up three ways. Either they become successful thriving colonists, die trying, or give up and go back home. More extensive training would run up the cost, but wouldn't change the outcome. Some people just aren't cut out for colonization.

We rode in the old *Jeffries*, a freighter that also carried passengers, out to Blabrow, in the Jelpp System, where we disembarked in Astropolis IV, a century-old space city that was the main processing station for colonists. There, we had our immunization shots and received booklets describing Persiphone and detailing

the homestead laws of the Colonial Commission.

The factories on Blabrow and Mouwor were spitting out all kinds of machinery: mining equipment, farming tools, construction equipment, and shuttles were ferrying all of this up into the cargo holds of the colony ship *Skelton*. Last of all, we got on and rode out of the Jelpp System. That trip took just over one full day, until we were far enough out of the gravity well of the system, then we took the big Jump. It was only my second Jump ever, taking us to the Hollis System, where it took two more days to negotiate the gravity well there, down to Persiphone. It was a brilliant blue-green planet, just like Tuf, with blindingly white clouds and polar caps. Thinking back, I wonder now why no intelligent race had ever developed there; it was perfect.

I don't remember a whole lot about the colonial effort, except that I went to school a lot, and had trillions of chores when I got home every afternoon. My dad worked in town - Tarkin - for the first two years, earning enough money to make sure we got our land proved. Within five years, by the time I was ten years old, there were 200,000 people in Tarkin, but we were 20 miles out, on a five-acre homestead farm. I remember trying out for the basketball team at my school, and not making it, but that's about all.

We were a quiet, conservative family. All three of us worked the farm every day, dad helped with my homework, and so forth, and I was happy. I had a few good friends in school, and I loved our farm.

I was a skinny kid, with scraggly brown hair, freckled skin, and flecked brown eyes. I got the hair and the brown eyes from my dad. The iris flecks and the fast metabolism came from my mom.

I didn't fully understand why we moved away from the more populated center of human space. It seemed like there were so many more things to do and see, back on Tuf, and nothing was lacking. Back "home," my mom hadn't needed to work - she just kept the house clean, and looked after me. My dad's job had been a lot easier, physically, with much shorter hours, and a lot more money.

On Persiphone, we all worked. There was no late night holovision show for the whole family - we were too tired for that, once the sun went down. Our nearest neighbor wasn't in a house crammed up against ours, their front door only a few feet away. They were a few hundred yard's walk down a dirt road. On Tuf, the most common way for me to get dirty was spilling food on myself. On Persiphone, I was dirty all day long from working outside.

Yet, somehow, my parents, especially my father, were happier on our new planet home. My dad came home from work in town each day with a smile on his face, ready to work in the fields. When he went to bed at night, he slept soundly, instead of lying awake for hours, watching late night shows, trying to find sleep. There weren't nearly as many fights between my parents. I wasn't sure why they were so much happier, but I knew they were, and it translated over onto me, I guess.

And soon, I forgot about Tuf, and Tabumb. I made new friends among the other colonists living around Tarkin, Persiphone. A mile or two down the road was another boy about my age, Norman Dester. We were in school together, and sometimes found time to play on the weekends. Norman had an older sister, and two older brothers, so he wasn't expected to work quite as hard as I was. His parents let him help out at our place on weekends sometimes, and he and I became friends. We talked of someday owning our parents' homesteads, and maybe going to new planets of our own.

I don't know if I was *happy*, like my dad, but I wasn't sad. I was satisfied, and there were no emotional roller coasters for me. My parents were stable people,

with good ideas about life and child-rearing. My dad had once been a very religious man, and some of that stuck with him, and carried over to me - at least the morals part. We didn't go to church as the Desters did, but my parents didn't swear, drink or smoke. My dad, in his eccentric way, taught me not to steal, start fights, or treat other people wrong. He said there wasn't anything inherently *wrong* with drinking, but that when people drank alcoholic beverages, their natural evil tendencies took over, and bad things seemed to happen. He said stealing was wrong, because it took the livelihood from other people.

*

Then my parents died. No, I'm not blaming my parents' death for my criminal career; in fact, now I'm proud of my illegal success. But I can point to that time as the turning point. I was about thirteen, and just hitting puberty, when the autodriver on the city bus my parents were riding decided to quit, and the whole contraption buried itself into Mike's Meat Market on Third Street. I was on my way home from school at the time, and so I didn't know until the next day; I just figured they were spending the night somewhere else. Even when my principal told me, the next day, that my parents were dead, I didn't really accept it.

I was forced to accept it the day after that, when a representative from the Colonial Commission arrived at my house, I was out feeding the cows, the six-legged kind - imported from Willsworld, when I saw the shiny ground car float up to the door of my parents' house.

"Hey there! Philipp?" A portly looking man was stepping out of the ground car, wearing a suit that may have fit him when he attended his prom, but now was decidedly not his size.

"Maybe, What do you want, mister?" I dumped my bucket of high-protein feed into the trough, and came sauntering toward him, running a hand through my sweaty hair.

"Um, I need to talk to you, Philipp." He seemed nervous, as if he didn't talk to kids much. Now, thinking back, I realize that he probably didn't have much chance to talk to kids. Most of his business was with adults. "Can we go inside?"

"We can talk out here." I stopped about twenty feet away, still holding the feed bucket. "What do you want to talk about? I haven't broke no law, that I know of."

He grinned then, as if trying to give the impression that he was friendly. "Oh, no, I don't know anything about any of that. You see, I'm from the Colonial Commission. I, uh, need to talk to you about your parents, and what happens to you." He was holding a trim briefcase, and looked as if he needed a place to set it down. I couldn't understand why he didn't just put it back in the car.

"What happens to me? My principal says my parents died in a bus wreck the night before last. I'll miss their help, but I can run the farm by myself; I've been working out here for maybe seven years." I'm sure he had to try hard not to laugh. I probably weighed 80 pounds or less, and I was wearing nothing but my work shorts, my skinny ribs and arms just dangling around in odd directions.

"Yes, Philipp, your parents were in that bus, and they are dead. But you can't run this farm by yourself. It's against the Commission's rules to let a boy like you live out here without supervision. We need to find any of your relatives that may be living, or someone else that can take care of you, okay?"

I hoped he really didn't think it would be that easy. "Mister, you work for the Commission?"

"Eh? Why, yes. Yes, I do, and--"

“Is the Commission the same thing as the Government?” I knew it wasn’t, we had a pretty decent school system in Tarkin, even if it wasn’t quite what they have on Tuf. But I was trying in my adolescent way to make a point.

“Well, for this planet, yes. The Colonial Commission is all you have for government, except for the provisional city government in Tarkin. That is, until the people of Persiphone set up their own government.” He shifted his briefcase to his other hand. “And the Commission has rules, you know. You have to be at least eighteen to be a colonist, unless you’re with your parents. And your parents aren’t with you anymore, so you can’t be a colonist. Do you understand that?” I could see that he was starting to sweat, and perhaps getting a little bit frustrated.

“But I was with my parents when I came out here, and now I’m not a colonist anymore; I’m a resident. We proved our farm for five years, just like the rules say to. This land has been ours and just ours for more than two years. Now it’s my farm.”

He didn’t quite roll his eyes then, but I bet he wanted to. “Look here, Philipp, I’m sorry about all that. But there is no such thing as a resident here. Until Persiphone has her own government, you’re all colonists. And you’re not old enough to be here by yourself.”

“I’m not by myself, mister. I’ve got all those people in Tarkin, just a few miles away, all the kids at school, my bus driver Mr. Jonessy, and my neighbors. I’ll get along just fine. Do you mind if I get along with my chores now?”

He looked around, as if making sure no one could see his embarrassment. Like the time I stumbled off the edge of a sidewalk in the city; the first thing I did was to look up and see if anyone had seen me fall. “Now see here, young man. I’m trying to explain that you *can’t* stay here. I’m trying to be polite about this, man to man, you see. But I have a job to do, and that job includes finding you a new home. A home with someone who can look after you. You *CAN’T* .. stay here. Okay?”

“I want to see your manager.” I had heard my mother say that once, when she was having a problem with a clerk in a store in Tarkin. After twenty minutes of turning red and threatening to take her business elsewhere, the manager had fixed her problem, whatever it was. I was hoping it would work here.

“What! Now, look. I am the manager. I came out here myself, since-“

“You mean you’re in charge of the whole Colonial Commission? Wow! I thought you’d have a nicer car.”

He was really turning red. “No, Philipp, I’m not the President of the Company. But I am the representative in charge of this planet. Look, if you don’t want to leave this planet, maybe I can find someone around here that will adopt you or something. But I do have to do something about this.”

“If you’re not in charge of the Commission, then I want to speak with your boss. I don’t know what you call him, but that’s who I want to speak to. Now I’m going back to work.” I turned around and headed for the barn, carrying the feed bucket with me. At the barn door, I turned around and saw his car speed away, heading back toward Tarkin.

As soon as he was out of sight, I collapsed on the ground inside the barn, and began crying. I don’t know how I’d held out until then, with a straight face, but to this day, I’m proud of the ability to hold in my emotions when I needed to. I sobbed for at least thirty minutes, thinking about how I’d never see my dad and mom again, and how the Commission was going to take my farm away.

Finally, I pulled myself together, and fed the other animals, then went into the house, and started cooking dinner. The night before had been the first full meal I’d ever cooked by myself, although I’d helped mom plenty. This time, I just warmed

up my leftovers from that first meal. I had some chicken and noodle casserole, with homemade rolls, green beans, and carrots. Then some homemade ice cream for dessert.

As I was cleaning up the dishes, I began to cry again. I knew I had been bluffing to that man; there was no way I could run the farm by myself. Oh, I could keep the animals fed and watered, and I could cook and clean house, and even tend to the small vegetable garden next to the house, all while going to school. But there was no way I could tend to the tobacco plot, the corn plot, and the wheat plot, all by myself, not while doing the other things. I went to sleep curled up in Dad's big chair, with the tear stains still on my face.

The next morning at school, I was busy scrambling my way through a math test, when a student aide from the principal's office showed up and handed my teacher a note. My teacher grunted, then told me that I should go with the aide, back to the principal's office. I asked what about my test, and he said if I didn't have time to finish it when I got back, I could finish it the next day.

To my surprise, that "Planetary Representative of the Colonial Commission" was sitting in the principal's office. My principal said, "Philipp, this is Harry Bates. He's here to try to talk to you again. I hope you're not still mad at him; it was my suggestion to send him to your house. I thought that would be better for you; But he does need to talk to you. Will you sit down?"

I sat down, trying hard not to cry again. My dad used to say, "I don't see nothing wrong with a man crying, but he shouldn't do it in front of other people, unless he's at a funeral or a church, if you're into that sort of nonsense. "I could hear him now, whispering in my ear, "Don't cry, Philipp. Don't let these men see that you're weak."

Bates started out, speaking softly and slowly. "Philipp, I really am sorry about yesterday. I hope you will at least be patient with me this time, and listen to what I have to say. I know you don't want to leave Persiphone, and maybe you won't have to. But I do need you to listen. Okay?"

"I'll listen, Mister Bates, but can I say something first? It won't take long."

Maybe he could see by how wide my eyes were that I was trying not to cry. "All right, Philipp. It's only fair for me to listen, since that's what I'm asking you to do. Go ahead."

I sat up a little straighter, ran a shaky hand through my mop of hair, and cleared my throat. "I was wrong, Mr. Bates. I can't run that farm by myself. I can feed the animals, and take care of the garden and the house, but not the three acres of crops by myself. It's just that I don't know what else to do. I can't remember Tuf; I wasn't even five when we left there, and I've been here ever since. I've been farming, cooking, and building ever since I can remember. If you have to appoint a guardian, could it be someone here on Persiphone, so I could do what I know how to do?"

Mr. Bates looked up at my principal, then back at me. "Well, Philipp, that's what I'm trying to work out. But I have to think about that, okay?" I nodded. "And now, I have some things to run by you, all right?"

I nodded again, and he went on, "I'm glad you've admitted you can't run that farm. I mean, I'm sure you could if you weren't in school, but you need to go to school. The rules are a little complicated here, but basically what we need to do is sell all of your parents' property, and put the money in a trust fund that will be yours when you turn eighteen. And whoever becomes your guardian will be authorized to take money out of the fund if they need it to take care of you. Besides that, all colonists with children are required to take out an insurance policy, in case something like this happens. The policy your parents bought amounts to

about 30,000 Colonial Credits, which converts to about 40,000 newdollars back home.

“I know that seems like a lot of money to you, so in case you don’t know what it means, I’ll try to explain. It’s enough to buy a pretty decent house or three nice cars on a stuffy planet like Tuf. Out here, it would buy you a nice plot, and some nice equipment to work it with. Added to what you’ll have from selling your farm and animals, you’ll do okay when you turn 18.

“But back to the matter of a guardian. The rules say I’m supposed to send you back to your nearest living relative. According to your parents’ applications, that means your grandparents, in Nubase, back at Tuf.” He held up his hands to ward off my interruption. “Now hang on a minute, Philipp, I’m not done yet. In order to get you a guardian out here, I’ll have to write to your grandparents for permission. And someone will have to find them, if they’ve moved. It would help your cause, I’m sure, if you’d write them a letter too. If by some chance your grandparents are no longer alive, or can’t be found, we’ll have to search for other relatives. This could take a long time, if your grandparents don’t reply immediately.

“So here’s what I’m willing to do...”

*

As it worked out, I let Mr. Bates make himself my temporary guardian, and he let me keep my house. I sold the three worked acres to three different neighbors, with one of Bates’ assistants handling the sales part, and the paperwork. Since the land was already worked, and had crops growing on it, I sold it for five hundred colonial credits (cc500) per acre, except for the tobacco acre; it went for cc750, since the market for tobacco was going back up. The neighbors were going to make payments, with interest, but the initial sale amount came to cc 1750. That’s over 2300 newdollars, enough for a beat-up, used ground car, most places. But out on the colony worlds, ground cars were very scarce, and even a used economy car would cost more than that, for a while. But with interest, after two years of payments, the total of the land sale came to around 4500 newdollars - or 3423 Colonial credits (since I financed it myself - or rather, Mr. Bates’ assistant did. After his fee, I would get about 3,000 newdollars for the sale.)

Financial dealings were way too complicated for me back then, and still are. Maybe that’s when I decided, subconsciously, that the best way to live would be to have so much money that it didn’t matter how many fees and how much interest you had to pay.

Anyway, the 3,000nd went in my trust fund with the 40,000nd from my parents’ insurance policy, where they would slowly accrue interest until my eighteenth birthday. I figured that even if I didn’t sell anything else, and with the interest accruing yearly, I would end up with about 52,500nd, when I turned eighteen. But I had been figuring the interest at about 4%. Mr. Bates told me later that I would only get maybe 3%, but that it would accrue monthly. That made it more complicated, but he assured me that the end total would be higher that way.

I kept the cows, pigs, chickens, and turkeys for the time being, and the two acres they were on, with the house and the barn.

I wrote a letter to my grandparents, telling them that I didn’t want to go back - no offense to them, please - but I liked Persiphone. I asked them to tell the Commission to let me stay, and to appoint a guardian for me.

A month later, Mr. Bates showed me a letter from the Nubase Colonial Commission office, saying they had found a death certificate for my grandmother; she had died six months after we had shipped out, nearly seven years before. And my grandfather had moved, so they were trying to track him down.

Two.

The Colonial Commission's search for my grandfather was hindered by several things, the least of which was my grandfather's elusive nature and unwillingness to be reached. Not only had the Commission recently approved four new planets for colonization, taking up a lot of their time, but also the Separation was still in effect. It is hard to track people from planet to planet, when the governments of the planets involved are at odds with each other.

Now, someone reading this may live at a time when it is the normal state of affairs for planets and solar systems to be divided in their governments much like they were when I was very young. But for four hundred years or so, nearly all of the planets colonized by humans were under the same government, first under FUZ (Forces Under Zarcon), then under the People's Ruling Council, and later under the dubiously titled "Federation of Species." That first Federation had initially set up the Colonial Commission as a branch of the Federal government, to test and process all applicants for emigration, and to set up provisional planetary governments. This gave the Commission a lot of power, and the Federation continuously had to keep an eye on the goings on inside their offices.

However, when the Federation began to split up and the 140 planets were left to rule themselves, the Colonial Commission retained its recruiting offices on many of the main planets, in cooperation with each government, and they kept their headquarters in *Astropolis IV*, in orbit around Blabrow. This made the Commission the only organization that still had authority on an interstellar basis.

The governments of each planet or solar system were never at "war" with each other, but each was suspicious of the other, and every ship that arrived or departed from anywhere had to undergo searches, and all cargoes were subject to high tariffs.

All of this makes it difficult for the Commission to run its business, and the business of finding my grandfather, I soon learned, wasn't very high on their priority list. But I wasn't too concerned, as my grief for my parents lessened with each passing week, and I became accustomed to answering to Mr. Bates.

Many weekends, he would actually come out to the farm, and "help" me. We weeded the garden, and picked off fresh produce, some of which I kept to eat, but most of which I sent in to the market, to sell. Mr. Bates seemed to actually like the working in the open air. He said it was a lot better than being stuck in an office all day, getting hand cramps from signing papers and migraines from trying to figure out every little problem. He told me I could call him "Harry", and he gave me an unlimited public bus pass, in case I ever needed to come see him at his office or his apartment.

When school let out for the summer, I convinced Harry to let me get a job. My friend Norman Dester said his father needed extra help with that year's harvest, so I accepted. Harry said it was okay, as long as I didn't ignore my own place. Every morning, I walked two miles to the Dester farm, which was comprised of nearly a hundred acres. Mr. Dester had been overly optimistic when he had arrived, and had taken fifty acres. Five years later, after being tremendously successful, he had taken another forty-five. Of course, he had two grown sons, besides Norman and his sixteen-year old sister Destiny, but 95 acres is a lot to work, especially without expensive power equipment.

When the Federation had still held all the planets in its grip, there had been a "minimum wage law" on most planets – two newdollars per hour, Harry told me. When the Federation broke apart, some planets had raised their minimum wage, while others had done away with the law altogether. In Tarkin, the minimum wage

(set by the Commission) was one credit per hour, but I wasn't sixteen yet, so the law didn't apply to me. Mr. Dester paid me six Colonial Credits for every full day of work I put in, besides two full meals for every day I was there.

I saved money that way, since I wasn't buying nearly as much food as I had been, so I used the extra money I made to buy food for my animals, and every now and then I had some left over. So for the four months that school was out, I helped the Desters weed their large vegetable garden, feed their livestock, spray insecticide, build a new barn, and – right before school started again – harvest their main crops. I got off work one day in seven, when the entire Dester family attended religious meetings, so I made more than cc600. After my own expenses – feed, clothes, and other things, I had about a hundred credits left over, and I wanted to start a personal savings account at one of the little banks in Tarkin.

My parents had never installed a vidphone in our house, so I called Harry from the Dester house, to ask him if it was okay for me to start a separate savings account. He said it wouldn't be a problem, but he couldn't go with me for a few days, so could I wait? Then he suggested that I just put that ccl00 in my trust fund – he could arrange it. I was about to tell him I would wait until he could go with me, but then Destiny spoke up. She had been sitting across the living room from me, reading a book, apparently eavesdropping on our conversation.

Norman's older sister put the book down and said, "I could go with you, Phil." When I told Harry to wait, and looked up, she went on. "I've got a savings account in town, and the bus will be out this way in an hour or so. You could start your account at my bank."

I told Harry what she had said and he said that would be okay, so I hung up. Destiny grinned at me, and said, "Let me know when the bus shows up." Then she stuck her nose back in her book.

I wasn't sure what I should do for an hour, until the first evening bus came out from town. We had finished the first half of the Dester family harvest, and they had fed me lunch. Basically, I was unemployed now, and school was starting back up in a few days. It would be a waste of time for me to walk home, and then come right back. Norman was doing his chores outside. So I just sat there, glancing outside every few minutes, and alternating that view by looking around the Desters' living room, and down at my nails. A few times, I looked at Destiny.

I guess it was about the fourth time my gaze swept over Destiny when I stopped, and really looked at her. I suddenly realized that I liked girls, and especially this one. For the last couple of years, I had been vaguely aware that girls were different, and I had known Destiny merely as Norman's older sister whom I saw around the school from time to time. But now I was looking at her in a decidedly different light.

Her hair, the color of straw, with light brown roots, hung in loose curls around her sun-tanned face and down over her shoulders. Her light green eyes brightly reflected the light from the lamp next to her and her full lips were slightly pursed, as if in deep thought. I turned away and blushed deeply when she suddenly looked up at and smiled. I realized when she smiled that I also liked her teeth. When she looked back down, I looked at the rest of her. Her breasts weren't fully developed, but I could see the twin bulges under her shirt, and her shapely legs were folded under each other on the couch.

I think I may be the only man alive who can point back to the exact moment when his puberty kicked in. A lot of men have told me over the years that they can't remember when they switched from avoiding girls to being attracted to them. I know. It was that moment, in the late afternoon at the end of Persiphone's summer, in 2483.

I was a little relieved when I heard the bus approaching, although I had forgotten all about my boredom. “The bus is coming,” I managed to say, and got up, realizing that my pants were tight in an unusual area, where they had never been tight before.

Destiny closed her book and stood up, in one beautiful motion. “Let’s go.”

When we got on the bus and found two seats next to each other, I realized that she smelled good too. I remember wondering to myself if I was in love, then shutting off the thought. Of course, I wasn’t in love! She was three years older than I was, and I would have to be a fool to think she’d ever reciprocate my feelings. Besides, I’d worked right beside her for six days of every week for four months and never noticed a thing, even on the days when she was just wearing shorts and a halter-top. And now, all of a sudden, I loved every thing about her. Then I realized she was talking about something.

“I’m sorry, Destiny, I wasn’t listening. What were you saying?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just wondering how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Live by yourself. Isn’t it hard? I mean, everyone else around has families, and I don’t think I could live without my family, even though they bug me sometimes.”

Maybe it was the fact that school was starting the next week, but I said, “Isn’t that a ‘run-on sentence’?” Immediately I felt stupid for saying it, because she looked at me very strangely. I wondered if it really was a run-on sentence.

Then suddenly she laughed, and patted my knee. “You’re funny, Phil. But seriously, don’t you ever get lonely out there?”

I found it hard to speak, since her hand was still on my knee, but I did. “Sometimes I wake up in the morning, and wonder where my mom and dad are, but after a few minutes I remember they’re dead. It’s a lot easier to cook and clean house with just one person, though.”

She raised her eyebrows at that last, then asked me, “Did you ever cry, Phil? I think I would cry for days if my mom and dad were dead.”

“I cried a little, but I got over it. ‘Life goes on,’ my dad used to say. He also used to say, ‘You can’t change the past, unless you have a time machine.’ There’s nothing I can do about it, and crying doesn’t help a whole lot.”

We fell into silence then, but she left her hand on my knee for a while. When the bus reached the end on the line, and headed back for town, she rested her head on my shoulder. That’s when I realized what a difference four months of hard work can make. When I started working for the Desters, I had been very skinny, but Destiny’s head on my shoulder made me realize that I had put on some muscle. Suddenly I felt very good about everything and didn’t want the bus ride to end.

*

At the First Bank of Tarkin, North Branch, Destiny showed me where the applications for savings accounts were stacked, and helped me fill one out. Then a nice lady at the counter took my money and application, and gave me a handful of brochures describing other accounts.

The lady said, “Just wait here, Philipp, and look over these pamphlets. I’ll go get you a balance book for your savings account, and then I’ll explain to you how it works, okay?”

I nodded, and she wandered off. I noticed that she stopped to pour herself some coffee, on her way to get my “balance book.” Everyone needs a break

from time to time, but should you really take one in the middle of helping a customer? Even if he's a kid?

Destiny bumped me, and I looked at her. "What?"

"Shhh. Look over there." She pointed with her eyes, then became very casual. I looked where she had been looking, and my eyes widened. There was a stack of bills sitting on the counter, apparently left there by a careless teller, since the bank was near closing time. Thinking back, I assume that someone must have been counting down their drawer, and gotten distracted.

I looked back at Destiny; she was scanning the room. "There aren't any cameras," she whispered. "No one's looking."

I realized then that she wanted to take it. Or she wanted me to take it. I forgot for the moment that my dad had taught me that stealing was wrong. I was still enraptured by the presence of this 16-year old girl next to me. I looked around the room, and thought that maybe the cameras were hidden behind mirrors or something. I had never before actually been inside a bank, but I had seen movies on the Desters' video in the evenings. I knew banks were supposed to have cameras, to avoid just this situation. The thought briefly ran through my mind that maybe there weren't any here, since it was a colony world, and the city was only seven years old. This bank branch had only been here for maybe two or three years. There wasn't a lot of crime on colony worlds. Most people moved to the colonies to avoid things like crime. And the really big criminals stayed in the big cities, where it was easy to disappear, and where there were plenty of choices. Then suddenly, I thought of a way to get the money, whether or not there were cameras.

"Move over here," I whispered to Destiny, pointing. "And open your purse." She moved quickly, and was then in a position where she would block two possible camera angles. "Don't move."

I noted the position of her purse then turned away from her, setting my stack of bank brochures on the counter, directly in front of the bundle of bills. From there I could see that it was at least cc2,000, in two bundles of 10-credit bills. I waited, with my hand on the brochures. As soon as the lady with my bank balance book and her coffee came out of the back room, I slid the brochures off the counter, on her side. "Oops!" I called out, and reached over for them. But two had fallen all the way to the floor. I leaned over the counter, reaching for them, letting my arm block the stack of money from the lady's view.

"Oh, that's all right," she chirped. "I'll get them." She hurriedly set her coffee down, and bent down for the papers. As soon as I saw the back of her head, I snatched the money, and reached back, slipping it into Destiny's purse. I felt her hands cover the money and I immediately put my hand back over the counter. The lady teller put my brochures back in my hand, and then she handed me the balance book.

"Do you need me to show you how to use it?" she queried, indicating the balance book. "Well," I said, trying to keep the shakes out of my voice, "we've got to catch the second out-bus. Maybe I can get my dad to show me." Wow! I had lied without even trying.

"All right then, young man. I hope to see you again."

We left as quickly as we could, maybe too fast, but no one followed us. Once on the bus, Destiny suddenly grabbed me in a bear hug. "Oooh, you're great! We did it!" All this in an excited whisper. After looking around, she pulled the money halfway out of her purse. "How much do I get, Phil?"

"You carried it out," I said to her.

"You took it, and told me what to do," she pointed out to me.

“Fifty-fifty, then,” I said, shrugging. “How much is there?”

She looked at it, then shoved it back into her purse, zipping it up. “Let’s count it at your house.”

“My house?” My eyebrows went up. “How are you getting home?”

“Oh, I’ll walk.” She smiled at me. “We’ve got to keep the money at your house, anyway, you know. I can’t be bringing in that much money to my house! Either Norman would find it when he’s snooping, or my mom would find it when she’s cleaning. After we’ve split the money, you’ll have to keep my half at your house, and give it to me when I’m ready to spend it. That’s okay, isn’t it? Since you’re the only one living there?”

I shrugged, and was content to ride home in excited silence, with Destiny’s hand on my knee and our traded looks of badly suppressed anticipation.

*

There were indeed 2,000 Colonial credits in those two bundles, and we counted every bill. I put my half in a small box, and taped it to the underside of my dad’s old dresser, behind the footboard. For Destiny’s half, we thought a while. I thought of all the places where I would look for money if I were burglarizing someone’s house: under the mattress, in the underwear drawer, under seat cushions on the sofa or chair, etc. Then I hit on a bright idea. I had a full loaf of bread in the refrigerator, which I hadn’t even opened yet. I took it out and carefully opened the seal, then poured the slices out on the counter, telling Destiny to wrap her money tightly in a plastic sandwich bag. While she did so, I gingerly tore a small hole in the very middle of about ten slices of bread, toward the middle of the loaf. Then I began replacing the bread into its plastic sack. When I got to the middle of the loaf, I stacked the ten slices with holes together on the counter, and placed Destiny’s jury-rigged moneybag in the cylindrical hole I had created, then put those slices back in the bag. When all of the bread was back in place, I replaced the seal; the loaf looked as if it had never been touched. All of the extra bread I put outside for the birds, then wiped the crumbs off the counter into the trash. I promised I would keep that loaf until it was too old to be inconspicuous, then I would replace it, using the same method of concealment. In more than seven years, our house had never been broken into, but I figured that even if the improbable happened, the burglar would never find that money, even if he or she stopped to have a sandwich or two.

We promised each other that we would never tell anyone else about our theft, then I walked her home since it was getting dark. Just before we came in sight of her home, she stopped and kissed me lightly on the cheek. “I had fun, Philipp. Maybe we can do something like that again, sometime. Bye now.”

And she trotted the rest of the way to her house, leaving me standing there in a daze.

*

That fall, I entered high school. The school year came and went; I saw little of Norman or Harry or Destiny, since I was wrapped up in schoolwork and chores. I saw Norman every now and then, if we had a class together, and occasionally I saw Destiny in the halls. She would always smile and wave, but she was a senior then, while I was only a freshman, so we didn’t ever talk, except on the sixth day, when I would take an afternoon walk with her, or help her with her chores. Harry spent a lot of time on the other side of the planet, where a new city was going up

even faster than Tarkin had, as new colonists poured in from the inner planets. He blushed over the phone when he told me that the new town was to be named “Batesville,” after himself.

Harry told me that the older worlds were working together again, trying to come up with a new interplanetary government, that would once again pull all the known worlds together. Tuf, Turner’s Planet, Willsworld, Junxle, Aurora, Paradise, Maze, Leech, Mars II, Ibeen, Earth II, Bellow, Poois, Grink, Mouwor, and even Yurple were cooperating, for the first time in nearly a century. He said that the colony worlds would probably be flooded for a while. Fifteen thousand people landed at our new city in just one week, all looking for homes.

*

Shortly after the winter break, I turned 14, and the Desters invited me to their house for my “party.” Mrs. Dester had a cake waiting for me when I showed up that evening. Mr. Dester gave me a small video unit to install in my house. Norman gave me cc10, and Destiny gave me a new shirt to wear to school. Mrs. Dester remarked that I had grown quite a lot since last summer, and Mr. Dester said I had put on a lot of weight too, and he patted my shoulder firmly.

It all made me feel very special and happy, and I went to the bathroom and cried for five minutes, wishing my parents were around to see how well I was doing. Then I thought I heard my dad’s voice: “We’re here, son, and we’re proud of you. Just remember everything I told you about life. You’ll be all right without us...” Destiny kissed me good-bye as I left for my house.

I still thought of Destiny in my free time, wishing that she could be “mine.” I never told Norman, since I figured he would laugh at me. I didn’t tell my other friends at school, either. I knew what they would say. And, I thought, they were probably right. There was no way a popular senior was going to go out with a freshman like me, even if I was a particularly grown up freshman.

*

A few weeks after my birthday party, Harry told me that Persiphone was going to have elections. There were now more than 250,000 people on the planet, and that was the minimum required by the Commission to set up a planetary government. I had read somewhere that my hometown of Otok, Tuf, had more than ten times that amount in one city! From then until the summer break, everyone was talking about the elections; even our math teacher broke his routine and discussed government for two or three days.

We weren’t going to be minions of the Colonial Commission anymore. We were going to be a regular planet. One of my teachers said that it would probably be a long, long time before we were heavily settled, like the Old Worlds, but we would have “equal status” with them in any galactic government that was set up.

I had read an old science fiction book during the summer, in which the “Federation” government didn’t like to let colony worlds achieve full status. In the story – written in the 20th century – the government bled each colony for all it was worth, until the colonists rebelled and set up their own government. I had also learned in history that things like that had happened back on Terra, when they were still colonizing continents.

The Colonial Commission didn’t work that way. For one thing, there were too many new planets opening up, farther out, and each planet meant a lot of work. For another thing, their big profits came from their ships, not from their

planets. They could still make that profit after a colony achieved full planetary status. The Commission charged each colonist a basic fee, for transporting them to the colony, and for shipping their property, even if the planet had already elected its own government. They required each colonist to buy a substantial insurance policy for each child, in case of death or inability to provide. They made a lot of money buying produce cheaply from homesteaders and reselling it at a good profit. Usually, on a colony world, the first stores that opened were run by the Commission, and brought in huge profits. But once the society on the planet reached a certain level, these “Company stores” closed – colonists had a way of opening their own stores, at their own prices.

So, it actually profited the Commission to run each planet for as short a time as possible then let it go. And that’s what they were getting ready to do with Persiphone. They had determined that the economy there was stable enough and growing fast enough to keep itself going without help. The population was large enough to continue with a relatively clean gene pool, should interplanetary travel be cut off for some reason. The Commission was going to help set up a fair election, and then they were going to get out.

*

Sometime during all the election talk, Destiny turned seventeen, and she invited me to her party. One of Destiny’s senior friends held the party at her house, since her parents were on the other side of the planet, campaigning for office. There were maybe seventy-five seniors at the party, and two dozen underclassmen. I felt out of place until Destiny sat on my lap and handed me a beer. She stayed there a while.

After about an hour, and a few drinks, I loosened up and began to enjoy myself. The music was loud, the other kids were having fun, and soon most people forgot that we were in different grades and social groups.

Since the party was being held for Destiny, many of the kids there vied for her attention constantly, and I didn’t get to talk to her much. I did, however, make a few new friends from the senior class.

Later, though, Destiny remembered that I was there. In a way that I’ll never forget. I know she had gone on dates with a few of her male friends in her senior class, but I’m pretty sure that she never got as close to them as she did to me that night. I’m convinced that the alcohol helped a little, but suddenly we were kissing in the hallway. She dragged me into an empty bedroom, and started pulling my clothes off. At first, I was too nervous to be aroused, but when she started removing her own clothes, I didn’t have any problems.

It was my first party, my first drink, and my first sexual experience, all in one night. After Destiny and I had put some of our clothes back on, we sat there, holding each other in the semi-darkness of the bedroom. My mind was still reeling, and I could smell her. I didn’t want to think of anything else for the rest of my life. I wanted to marry her, build our own farm on an empty planet, raise beautiful children, and stay near her all the time.

Her mouth was near my ear and I could feel her breath in my hair. She said softly, “I want to rob another bank, Philipp. And I want you to come with me.”

I turned slowly, until our eyes met. I looked deep into the translucent pools of her irises, and felt and smelled her body next to mine. We kissed for a little while, until I sensed that she wasn’t really into kissing anymore. I broke away, and asked, “You mean right now?”

She nodded, and I could see the excitement building in her face. “How, Destiny? At night, the money’s all locked in the safe and the doors are locked.” I didn’t question the morality of it all; only the logistics, and the fact that it would make her happy.

“I’ve got an idea.” She whispered her plan to me, and then we put the rest of our clothes on and returned to the party. It was ending, anyway – several people had left while we were in the bedroom, and others were passed out on the furniture and floor. She said good-bye to all her friends, and we left, heading in the direction of her house.

As soon as we were out of sight of the other partygoers, we doubled back, and I grabbed a length of pipe out of the hostess’ barn. An hour later, in the very early hours of the morning, we were in an alley beside a bank in Tarkin that I had never seen before.

I peeked around the corner, and saw the night watchman, just inside the door. He was reading a book, sitting at his desk. “Okay,” I said, “your plan had better work. We walked into sight. Destiny was holding the pipe behind her and my arm was around her shoulders; we were wobbling just a little bit, partly from the alcohol we had consumed, and partly because of our plan.

As we drew adjacent to the front door of the bank, we stopped, and I pointed at the night watchman, saying loudly, “Maybe he can help us.” The street was empty, except for the car parked at the corner – probably the guard’s car.

The man looked up. I could tell he wasn’t a colonist, not in the real sense of the word.

He hadn’t come to Persiphone to farm or to build a new life for himself. He was here as a chattel of some intergalactic banking corporation, hoping to draw higher pay or buck for a promotion on a new world. He also didn’t look happy about his new shift. But he did seem a little relieved to see us; maybe his book wasn’t too exciting. Maybe his life wasn’t too exciting. That was all about to change. He came to the heavy glass door, raising his eyebrows. “Can I help you kids with something?”

I acted as if I couldn’t quite hear him, made him repeat his question, and then raised my voice. “Yessir. I’m trying to find a phone, so I can call a cab. I need to get my girl home, before her dad beats me to a pulp.” Destiny looked at her watch then at me, with a worried look on her face.

“Just go down one more block,” he pointed, “and there’s a public phone outside that pharmacy.”

I looked at Destiny, then back at him, confused. “What? I can’t hear you man. This door’s too thick.”

He shrugged, and pulled a ring of keys from his belt. The guard looked both ways down the street, and finding it empty of a threat, he unlocked the door, and opened it. While he was looking down to pull the key out of the lock, I took the pipe from Destiny’s hands, and swung. *CRACK!* He went down, dropping his keys.

Like a flash, I swung the door open, and dragged him inside. Destiny followed us, and pulled his sidearm from his holster. I re-locked the door, and pulled the semi-conscious guard back to his desk. Then I traded the pipe for the gun. Destiny looked funny wielding that length of pipe, and I’m sure I looked equally harmless holding that big gun, but we were inside. Desperately, I looked at the gun; it was old, the kind with bullets. I found what I thought was the safety, and pushed the switch. The magazine fell out, clattering to the floor. We both jumped. I picked the clip up, and examined it. *Fifteen bullets!* I popped it back in to the handle of the gun, and pulled the slide back, like I had seen bad guys do on old movies. As

I did so, I saw one of the bullets slide into the firing chamber. I flipped another switch, and a red dot appeared behind it. That had to be the safety.

The guard was coming to, and rubbing his head. I pointed the gun at his chest. “Don’t try anything funny, mister,” I said, in my best gangster voice.

“It’s too late for that,” he replied. “I’ve already opened the door for you. Wasn’t that funny enough?”

“Shut up,” Destiny added, raising the pipe a little. Then she put the pipe down, and pulled a roll of packing tape from her purse, smiling. “This won’t hurt a bit... Hey! Keep your foot *away* from that!”

I saw his foot sliding toward a button on the floor. “I would listen to her if I were you, mister,” I said. Then I motioned with the gun. “Stick your hands out, and put your wrists together.”

Minutes later, he was keying the vidphone, with me standing beside him, out of range of the camera pickup, holding the gun pointed at his face. Destiny stood to his other side, also out of range of the pickup, holding the pipe again. With his wrists taped tightly together, he hit the send key on the phone.

After two rings, a sleepy male face appeared on the screen. It was, I hoped, the manager of the bank.

“What do want, Schiller?” he growled, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

The guard looked down at the slip of paper we had placed on the desk for him to read. “Uh, Mister Sanders, I’ve got a problem.”

“Handle it, Schiller,” Sanders said, and reached for the cutoff switch.

“Wait!” The guard looked worried, and a little sheepish. “Mr. Sanders, I know it’s late, but I need you to come up here for a few minutes. You know I wouldn’t be calling if really didn’t need you.” He paused, and I shook the gun menacingly (I thought). “I, uh, you see, it’s not a security issue, sir. It’s a bank issue, and I’d rather not discuss it over the phone. But I think you’d better get it cleared up before morning, sir.”

Mr. Sanders sighed heavily. “Okay. I guess I asked for it, bucking for this promotion. Be there in a few.” He cut off.

I was starting to feel very relieved. First, Destiny and I had had no way of knowing that there would be a night watchman on duty – not for sure, anyway. If we had not found Schiller there, our plan was to break the glass door with the pipe. We would have waited for a security car or a tired, third-shift police officer to show up to check out the alarm. Second, we had been counting on Schiller to read his script as written. If he had tried to play the hero and tip off his boss, we would have had a problem. I don’t know what we would have done then. When I had asked Destiny about that, back at the party, she’d just shrugged, saying he would do as we said. I hadn’t been sure, until Schiller read the script and the call went as planned.

*

I breathed a sigh of relief.

I looked down the sights of the guard’s gun, making sure his chest was behind the tiny white dot at the end of the barrel. The white dot was glowing slightly in the dim light of the closed bank. I was standing to one side of the front door, with my back to the wall. Destiny was on the other side of the door. Schiller sat on his stool behind the desk, his wrists taped together, and his arms taped to his sides. Tape ran around his waist, pinning him to the stool. Not one bit of the tape showed above the ledge of his desk.

His eyebrows raised and I heard a key working the lock. As soon as Sanders stepped inside, Schiller opened his mouth to warn him, but Destiny was already swinging. The pipe connected with the back of Sanders' neck, and he went down. I kept the gun pointed at the guard while Destiny locked the door again.

Then I gave her the gun, and she pointed it at Schiller while I taped up Sanders, and dragged him away from the door. Then I taped Schiller's mouth, and Destiny helped me drag his stool away from the desk and off to the side, where he couldn't shake himself free and hit the alarm.

When Sanders came to, he tried to swear for a second, until he realized that his mouth was taped shut.

"Shut up," I growled, pressing the barrel of the Schiller's gun against his temple. My finger shook on the trigger. He shut up. "Now listen to me, Sanders. When I rip that tape off your mouth, you're going to give me the combination to that safe, or I'm going to place the other side of your head all over the floor. Then I'm going to do the same thing with your rent-a-cop over there. And some poor teller in the morning is going to have to mop the whole mess up. You understand me?"

He nodded, meekly.

"And you're not going to say anything else, okay?"

He nodded again.

I pressed the gun harder into his head, and Destiny hefted the pipe, looking even more beautiful than usual. "I'm going to back away from you after I take the tape off. Then you're going to give me the combination. Now."

I peeled the tape off, slowly. I figured we had hurt the poor guy enough, not to mention his damaged pride. Then the poor guy actually told me how to open the safe. I guess he thought I would go over and do it myself, leaving him free to wriggle away. Instead, I stayed where I was, and Destiny went to the vault door, and punched in the first two numbers.

"Wait!" I said. "Hold on, girl." I looked at Sanders. "If any kind of alarm goes off, you're still going to get it, right? Did you give her the right combination?"

He nodded, his whole body shaking. "I promise. Nothing will go off. Just let me live. I've got a wife and a son at home. I just wanna live, man." I could see the wet spot on his pants.

"Go ahead, darling." We had agreed not to use our names, so it would be harder to identify us. There were thousands of boys matching my description in Tarkin, and maybe two or three hundred that would be mistaken for Destiny in a line-up. But no names, please.

She hit the final number, and there was a hiss as the door swung outward, heavily. "Wipe off your prints, Sandy," I said, picking the first name that came to the top of my head.

"Sure thing, Karl," she answered, winking. She used her blouse to wipe off the keypad on the vault door, then stepped inside the vault. Quickly she stepped back out and said to me, "Let's take care of these two, first."

I saw Sanders' eyes widen fearfully. "Get over by the rent-a-cop," I ordered. He struggled to his taped feet, and hopped clumsily over to Schiller, who looked just as worried, and was mumbling something through the tape.

Sanders said, "I thought you weren't going to kill us."

"I'm not. Now, stand with your backs together." They complied. Then Destiny ran the rest of her tape around both of them, one sitting in the stool, and the other standing behind it.

She was thorough, going all the way from their ankles up to their necks. The last stretch of tape went around Sander's mouth, silencing him again.

Then she dropped the empty spool back into her purse, and we ran into the vault. Inside, on a shelf by the door, we found several large bags. We used these bags, filling as many as we could with the largest denomination bills we could find. Then halfway through, we changed our minds and started grabbing fives and tens, and twenties.

When we had six bags full, I decided that would be enough, and we got out of there, leaving the vault door open. On the way out, I snagged another empty bag. While Destiny waited, I used the empty bag to wipe the shelves we had emptied, just in case, deciding on the spot that if I ever did this again, I would wear gloves. Then I wiped off the pen I had used to scrawl Schiller's script for the phone call. I opened the front door, then wiped off the keys, leaving them behind the guard's desk. I wiped off the pipe, and left it behind the guard's desk, since we couldn't carry it. Last of all, I emptied Schiller's clip, putting all the bullets in my pocket. I cleared the chamber, and put that bullet in my pocket too. Then I wiped off the gun and the clip, setting them beside the phone.

With a final glance at our two taped prisoners, I grabbed two bags in each hand, and peeked out the door, ready to go.

"Wait." I looked at Destiny, wondering what she wanted. "The stool. We touched the stool."

I saw Sanders roll his eyes, and Schiller sighed. Apparently, he had been counting on those prints. Hurriedly, I rushed over, and wiped every part of that stool, then we left, careful not to touch the door with our hands.

To throw them off track, we headed up the street toward the center of town, the opposite direction from our homes. Later, we doubled back behind the building, me carrying two bags in each hand, and Destiny carrying the last two.

After winding our way through back streets, and sprinting across empty thoroughfares, we finally made it to the open fields of the farmland. Only two cars came near as we made our way to my house and both times, we dove into the nearest ditch, hiding until the cars had passed.

It was four in the morning when we finally plopped down on my sofa. That's when I started shaking. Suddenly I was wrapped up in the womanly warmth that Destiny was developing quickly, and she was kissing me all over. We held each other for a long time.

*

I woke up with the morning sun hitting me in the face. The first thing I realized was that I had slept on the couch. Then I realized that The Only Girl For Me was laying with me, our arms around each other. It was after that when I saw the six bulging bags of money piled across my living room floor. *So that's why my shoulders and arms are so sore*, I thought. I must have moved, because She woke up then. Then her lips were on mine, and my pants were coming off. I wasn't ready for her blooming libido in those years, but it sure didn't bother me a whole lot.

After I cooked her breakfast, she said she had to get home, since she'd told her dad she'd be home first thing in the morning. "But don't count it without me, Phil. Please?"

"I'll wait." We kissed, and she skipped out the door, heading home.

*

It was Monday afternoon before we had a chance to count it, since we both had a lot of chores and homework to do on Saturday, and on Sunday she had to go to church. I went to church with her, and sat on the other side of her dad. I didn't move for a full hour and a half, except when we were asked to stand up or sit down. The preacher hollered a lot about how mankind was perverting the plan of god, and how every man, woman, and child would be destroyed in a nuclear fire unless we "repented" and paid a lot of money to the church, and were nice to every one.

I didn't know what "repent" meant, but I figured I was nice to most everybody, even Schiller and Sanders. A lot of people get shot during bank robberies, so I guessed that I had let them off pretty easy. And I figured I could afford to give some money to the Church, now that I had so much, and if it would keep me from such a horrible end.

*

"What? I can't believe you, Phil. You mean you actually believe all that garbage?" Destiny's gorgeous eyes widened in disbelief.

"Well, don't you?" I was unsure of myself, then. Sitting on my couch again, with a wad of money in my hand, I had been trying to impress her with my newfound knowledge of "god."

"Of course not." She laid a stack of cc100 notes down beside her. "Well, I mean, I don't believe that God would send us all to Hell, or anything. But I believe in God. I mean, someone had to build all of these planets..." She waved her arm around, as if indicating the whole universe. "I know that in school they keep saying that it all just happened. But how could all these beautiful things just come into being? And how could we humans be self-aware, and intelligent, and able to appreciate all the beauty? And the Trayaks, the Grangers, the Strangers, the Kelvods, and any other intelligent races that may be out there; did they just happen?"

I shrugged. "I guess not. But if God made all of everything, then why couldn't He choose to send us anywhere He wants, if we don't do just like He says?"

She laughed knowledgeably, then answered. "Philipp, I can't imagine a being that's powerful enough to make all of these planets. But logic tells me He's real. And if He is that powerful, but still made everything beautiful, and made all the races able to communicate and get along, and if he created sex—" she winked at me and giggled "—then why would He also be so mean as to want to destroy us after it's all over?"

"I think maybe there's some people who deserve to burn in Hell," I said, not meeting her eyes. "Like maybe men who get drunk and beat their wives and their children, or murderers, or rapists..."

She got serious then. "You know, Phil, my church teaches that sex outside of marriage can send you to hell too. And drinking. And robbing banks. And hitting people on the head with metal pipes. So do you think we're going to hell, too?"

That's when I smiled. "Maybe you're right, girl. But I'll still need to look into it, just in case. How much money do we have here?"

It took us a total of three hours to count the money; it would have been three times that long, but most of it had been bundled and marked, in stacks. We took a break, to eat supper, then continued counting. Our first take, in broad daylight, had netted cc2,000. This time, in the dead of night, we had come up with – I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT! – over two million Colonial Credits!

We celebrating by doing what she later told her father was “homework.” Then she asked me if I had seen the paper.

She pulled an article out of her purse:

SUSPECTS STILL AT LARGE AFTER TARKIN’S FIRST BANK ROBBERY

Early Saturday morning, an unidentified couple forced their way into Tarkin’s General Planetary Bank, binding a security guard, and tricking the manager, James Sanders into coming to the Bank in the middle of the night, according to Tarkin Police Chief Donovan.

Using a metal pipe which they later left at the scene, and the guard’s own gun, they held the two men captive, while taking an undisclosed amount from the vault, Donovan said.

The two also reportedly left the gun at the scene after unloading it and wiping it clean.

Sanders said they also made sure that every surface they had touched had been wiped clear of prints, before leaving.

The male suspect is described as a white human, with dark hair, dark eyes, and tanned skin. He is between the ages of 18 and 22, about 5’8”, and weighing around 160 pounds. His accomplice called him “Karl,” said Sanders.

The female, called “Sandy” by her partner, is a white human, with blond hair and blue eyes, also with tanned skin.

She is around 20 years of age, about 5’5”, and weighing approximately 115 to 125 pounds.

Chief Donovan told reporters, “If anyone sees someone matching either of these descriptions, please report it to my office. I want these two behind bars, and deported off-planet.

“Just because we are a colony world, doesn’t mean that we’re sitting ducks for anyone who wants to take advantage of us.”

Sanders, the security guard, and Tarkin police detectives believe the two suspects to be new arrivals to Persiphone, since the methods used were those of professionals, not of long-time colonists or first-time bank robbers.

“The only mistakes they made,” said Donovan, “were these two: they used each other’s names, and they left living witnesses.

“That in itself shows that they’ve done this before, and now they’re getting cocky...”

I handed the slip of paper back to Destiny. She was smiling. “You see, Phil! They got our ages wrong, they got my eye color wrong, you’re not near that much taller than me, and not quite that heavy. They actually believed that nonsense

about our names. And they think we're professionals from the old worlds. They'll never get us."

She hugged me excitedly, and I returned it; then suddenly I had a dark thought. I pulled away. "Destiny," I said soberly, "you know we can't spend this much money on Persiphone; people would talk..."

"I know," she replied, her face darkening along with mine. Then she brightened, "But all the colony worlds use Colonial credits! And at the ports on most of the Old Planets, they have banks that will cash in the credits for newdollars, at a slight loss of value. Besides, we're not going to be a colony world much longer, from the looks of it; and we'll start using newdollars here too, unless Persiphone starts printing her own money..."

"So we just hang onto it until we're old enough to leave?"

"I guess so, Phil, but it was fun, wasn't it?" Her face was close to mine.

Three.

That summer, I worked for the Desters again, but it was different, for several reasons. First, Destiny had graduated high school, one of a very small number to complete nine years in Persiphone's public schools. Out of that small number, she had the highest scores, and received a partial academic scholarship to Tarkin University, a small college that was still getting on its feet. She spent a large part of the summer studying to get a jump on her first semester.

Second, Destiny's two oldest brothers had moved several miles further out from Tarkin, to prove their own farm. Mr. Dester himself spent a lot of time in town, attending the town meetings that led up to our first elections.

So it was mainly Norman and I who worked the farm, with a lot of help from Norman's mom. On the seventh day of each week, I attended church with the Dester family, listening closely, and keeping mainly to myself. In the evenings, I fed my own animals, until I sold my animals and their grazing pasture with the barn.

Somehow, I still had time to read books I borrowed from the Desters. I read parts of the New Testament – The Revised Colonial Edition, and a few other books the Desters had bought through their church.

I learned a lot of things, but what it amounted to was this (according to the Desters' brand of religion): God was an all-powerful being who knew everything, and had existed forever, and had no end. He had created the entire Universe, and all the beings in it. First, He had made angels, but a lot of them had rebelled, electing to follow Lucifer instead, so God had made the other races: Humans, Trayaks, Grangers, Strangers, Kelvods, and others, that we haven't found yet. Most of these had also rebelled, electing to follow their own selfish desires, which was why Old Home Terra had been destroyed by fire, and those humans selected by God had been given another chance. God had used His servant Millal Ba to bring us out of that fire, and had used His servant Kthorpa of the Trayaks to bring peace between the "sheep of different folds."

Now, God requires us to be decent to our fellowmen, and to spread the message of hope across the galaxy, while tithing to the church to help them pay their ministers.

On one of the rare weekends when Harry was able to come over for dinner, I asked him what he thought about religion.

"Philipp, my boy," he had answered, "the only religion I have is that which makes the galaxy an easier place to live in. I don't pray, I don't give money to churches, and I don't believe that if I sneak off and drink a beer I'm going to Hell.

But I try to do right by people. When your unfortunate situation came along, I tried to take care of you, but you obviously didn't need it, except legally. And now, Persiphone is struggling to set up her own government, and I'm trying to help them out. When I leave this dirtball for the next colony world, I hope to leave it a decent place for people to raise kids. There's some people trying to get me to run for whatever head office we're going to have, and I may just do it, to help some more... That's my religion. Why do you ask?"

I was clearing dishes off the table then, but I answered from the kitchen. "I've been going to church with the Dester family, and their preacher says that if I'm not giving ten percent of everything I make to the church, then God won't look highly on me. And they say that drinking is wrong, and smoking is wrong, and having sex is wrong, and a lot of other things are wrong. Like stealing." I was starting to feel just a *little* guilty for what Destiny and I had done, and I was looking for a way to justify it.

He looked up as I came back in to wipe the table off. "Well, I would have to say stealing is wrong, because it's taking away from someone else's livelihood. Say, for instance, if I went next door, and stole all your neighbor's chickens, they'd be put back a couple of months, trying to save up to buy more."

"What about those people that robbed that bank a while back?" I was in the kitchen then, but I could hear him go silent for a moment before he answered.

"Well, Philipp, that's a little different, because no one actually lost any money, but it is against the law, and if they're caught they'll be punished accordingly."

"What do mean, no one actually lost any money?" That was a new idea for me, but I was already starting to feel less guilty.

"You see, all the banks are insured. Some go through their planetary governments, some go through normal insurance companies, and some – like those here on our planet – go through the Colonial Commission. They pay so much every month, so if someone robs them, or if they go bankrupt, the insurance company makes sure that the customers still get their money. But I'd still have to say it was wrong. If no one robbed banks, then the banks wouldn't have to pay such high insurance premiums, and maybe interest rates would go down on loans, and up for accounts."

I came back in, and sat down with him. "So you're saying if not one bank was robbed in the next five years, then the insurance companies would lower the premiums? Or do away with them altogether?"

"Not likely, Philipp. See, the banks don't *have* to pay the insurance; they want to. Because there's no other way to replace their customers' money in case they are robbed."

"But what if no one robbed any – I mean *any* – banks for five or ten years?"

"I don't see that happening either. What I really don't see is why people rob them at all. Usually, they're caught while trying to escape, or while they're spending more money than they should. I've always said the safest way to make money is to earn it. Then no one will dispute that it's yours."

*

That fall, Persiphone's adults voted to make the planet a Representative Democratic Republic, with a Governor for the head. A month later, Harry was voted in as the first Governor of Persiphone. He almost didn't accept the position, he told me, since he liked working for the Colonial Commission. But he thought about it for a long time, and realized that he was starting to age a bit, and would

find it difficult to take up another colony world. Besides, he had made a lot of friends on Persiphone. I told him I thought he would make a great governor.

Also that fall, Destiny entered Tarkin University, and Norman and I entered the 10th grade. Mr. Dester sold his farm, except for two acres where the house and garden sat. Leaving Mrs. Dester, Norman and Destiny there, he left the planet to head up the Dester Mining Corporation in the mineral-laden asteroid belt of our star system. I found out he had been an executive for a large mineral company before he had emigrated. Now he was determined to run things his own way.

Tarkin suddenly doubled in size, as government offices sprang up all around the city, and new colonists continued to pour in. Two new cities (Helmston and Babcock) sprang up, Helmston being a lumber mill town 90 miles upstream from Tarkin, and Babcock being basically a trading post for colonial farmers too far from Tarkin. Both new cities grew quickly, since many of the new immigrants didn't want to live in a city as large as Tarkin. As always, I saw that they were defeating their purpose – those cities would soon be just as large. A tax and revenue office opened in the center of Tarkin, along with a licensing office. The licensing office handled all licenses, building, driving, liquor, etc. Our old landing field for passenger shuttles and cargo transports began to be transformed into a real spaceport, with plans already drawn for two passenger terminals, a customs office, a baggage sorting area, and several cargo docks.

When Mr. Dester sold his 98 acres of developed land, he used most of the money to start his mining company, but he also bought a used ground car for his family's use while he was – gone. It was a twenty-five year old lorry, seating four, with room in the back for hauling produce in to market. Soon after, Destiny passed her test for her driver's license. Then she got a job as an evening receptionist for one of the construction company's building terminals at the spaceport.

It seemed to me all of this work was making our planet into the same kind of world that we had gone there to escape.

Harry (“guv’nah”) tried to explain it to me one day. “It’s not like we could do anything else, Philipp. All of these people think they’re coming out here to run away from the crowds, the taxes, their old problems, high prices, and all that. What they’re really doing is making new crowds, paying taxes to a new government, creating their own new personal problems, and the big crowds will surely drive up prices. You see, humans bring their problems with them. My dad used to tell me ‘Wherever you go, there you are.’ It means that what you’re running from is really inside you.”

“My dad used to say that too.”

“Your dad was a wise man. Speaking of all of this, what are your plans?” When I looked dumbfounded, he explained. “Well, Philipp, you’re not the one who chose to come out here; your parents made that decision for you, but you’re here now. And technically, you’re not under my guardianship anymore, since the Colonial Commission has no more hold over this planet. Legally, you’re back where you started, early last year. And I don’t know that we’ve made a law to cover you yet. You can’t be a voting citizen until you’re eighteen, but I guess for now, we could call you a ‘non-voting’ citizen, or something. He looked at me.

“So you’re saying you’d make a new law just to cover my unique situation? Why don’t you just adopt me, until I turn eighteen? Can’t you do that? Or maybe you don’t want to...”

“No, no, no. That’s not what I meant at all, Philipp! I don’t want you to think I am trying to run your life. A lot of people on all the planets could learn a lot from your example of independence, character, and hard work, even after the hand that life dealt you. I’m saying that if you don’t want to answer to me – besides as

governor – that’s okay with me, we’ll work something out. But if you do want my guardianship, you’ll need to sell what you’ve got here, and come live with me. They’re building a governor’s ‘mansion’ right now. It’ll be about twice the size of this house – four times the size of the apartment I’ve been living out of. It’s just that as a public official – more public than before, you understand – I won’t be able to have you living out here in the boonies while you’re legally my son. People would think it was pretty strange, you know.”

“I guess I understand.” I paused, looking around the house, trying to remember what it had been like with my parents. The eighteen months had washed my memory of them. I found I could barely remember their faces. “Will I be able to go to the same school?”

“Sure. I can work that out. You see, the school district laws won’t apply to you, since I’m not a permanent resident of the governor’s mansion. In fact, I’ll probably be able to arrange to have you driven to school every day. You won’t have any chores, you’ll have a holovision and vidphone of your own. I could probably manage to give you an allowance out of your trust. After your land sale, and eighteen months of accrued interest, you probably already have over 34,000 credits, or more than 45,000 newdollars.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “In fact, your interest alone would probably be more than enough to buy your clothes, or anything else you might want for a while.”

Later I did the calculations on it, and found that the interest alone was about cc85 a month, and growing every month. Four credits would buy a pretty decent shirt, and five credits would buy good pants. I could eat a full meal at a decent restaurant for three credits, or at a really expensive one for ten.

“Can I get a job?”

“I knew you’d ask that, boy,” He managed to look both frustrated and proud at the same time. “I know you’re a hard worker, but why can’t you just be a teenager for a while? Do your homework, go to school, and enjoy the rest of your free time... The time will come soon enough when you’ll have to work six or more days a week, and... Well, maybe not. You could live off your trust for a while.” He rubbed his face. “I’ll think about it, son.”

I knew he meant that “son” as a term of age, not of relationship, but that’s when it was decided for me. It felt really good to be called “son,” for the first time in a long time, kind of like it had felt really good when Destiny had called me “darling” or “baby” or “my man.” I guess I needed to be wanted... or wanted to be needed.

“Okay, Harry, It’s a deal. You want me to wait on selling all this until you get that new house finished?”

“That would be a good idea. I’ll get the paperwork started on the adoption.”

*

We were lucky about a lot of things on Persiphone, but one thing I didn’t appreciate until later was the calendar. Persiphone revolved around Hollis in just over 364 Galactic Standard Days, and rotated on her axis in slightly less than twenty-four hours. The entire time I lived on the planet, our seasons fell just right, on the Galactic Calendar, gaining a day each year. I never really paid attention to this until I began to visit other planets, like Turner’s Planet, whose year is 380 GS days long, and each day is 43 hours long. People who live forever on planets like that must get confused; one year, new year’s day is in the summer, and the next year, new year’s day is in autumn. I know that most planets use the Galactic Standard Calendar for dating documents, and running school years, but if you’ve

ever moved from one planet to the next, it can get really confusing. Especially when all the space ships and space cities use only Galactic Standard time.

It is conceivable that I could get on a ship on Persiphone in the afternoon, and find that it was early in the morning inside the ship. After traveling eight hours to Golian, it would be afternoon in the ship. I could then get out, and find that it was morning again on Golian. It could make for a really long day.

Anyway, when school let out for winter break – a very mild winter that year – at the end of 2484, I sold all my animals; four cows, six pigs, twenty-two chickens, a rooster, and five turkeys. I sold them cheap, and got just over ccl00. Persiphone still used mostly the Colonial Credits, until the economy began to bring in enough newdollars. Or we could print our own newdollars, like Yurple and other planets had done. But Harry said when you do that, you never know how the money's value will hold. Yurple's dollars are worth slightly more than the standard newdollar, while Saivalaurie's were only worth half.

I also took Destiny out to dinner in Tarkin – or, rather, she took me. I paid, but she drove, using that old lorry her father had bought. We just ate, and talked about everything that was going on in Tarkin, and around the planet, and in our individual lives.

She thought it was really neat that I was going to be the Governor's son, and wondered why I wasn't so excited about it. I told her it really didn't matter, since it was only for three and a half years, or less, until I turned eighteen. Besides the fact that Harry had already been taking care of me for some time. Then she looked really worried.

“Um, Philipp... What are you going to do with all our money?”

I was silent for a moment. I hadn't even really thought about our hoard for several months. It had even been two months since the last time Destiny had come over to get some of hers. And I hadn't ever used any of mine.

“You mean where will I hide it when I move to the Governor's Mansion? I'm sure I can find a place. It's not like we're going to have maids and butlers digging through everything. It's just a big house, with the governor's office in it, and a room where he can hold press conferences. I'll be doing my own cleaning.”

“But surely someone will see it. That's over two million credits! You can't just stuff it in your underwear drawer.”

I looked around to make sure no one else had heard her. Then I kept my voice low. “Maybe you could keep it somewhere, until we can get it exchanged for real money.”

She looked depressed, and very thoughtful. Finally, she turned those beautiful green eyes back to me. “Philipp. You know I'm in college now, and I'm working, and you're only fourteen.

“Almost fifteen. What are you trying to say?” I started getting a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Then she said it.

“I'm dating someone from school. Please don't get mad; I just didn't know how to tell you! Look, we have this big secret between us, and no one can take that away. And you're the only guy I've ever been with, and no one can take that away either, Philipp. It's just that, well... we never had any 'commitment' between us, did we?”

I got the point. “You mean it would be embarrassing for a big college girl like yourself to be dating a 10th-grader, right?” I let the corners of my lips turn up, in what may have been my first sardonic smile. Outwardly, it looked like I had seen it coming, and I didn't seem too torn up by the whole thing. Inside, I was crumbling into tiny bits. I felt my stomach drop out from under me, and I wanted to throw up.

I swallowed a few times, and held myself together. I don't know how, or why – at the time, I felt like there wasn't really a reason to go on living.

She opened her mouth several times, then looked away, allowing a couple of tears to trickle out of her eyes. "Philipp," she said softly, "I'm sorry. It all happened so suddenly; I hadn't seen you for a couple of months, and I see this guy every day in class, and at parties on the weekends. He's nice, and has a car of his own, and he works at the airport..." She let her sentence trail off into silence.

I laid a wad of cash on the table. "That should cover the meal. I'll find my own way home, and when you want your share of the 'stuff,' just come and get it." Then I lowered my voice into a deathly whisper, leaning over her, "And the next time you want to rob a bank, get your new boyfriend to help you."

Destiny tried to stop me from leaving the restaurant, but I wouldn't stop. I walked right out, and headed down the street. She followed me on foot for a block or so – I was walking quickly, but I could hear her footsteps behind me. Then she got in her jalopy, and followed me almost all the way home. Finally, she realized I wasn't going to get in, or talk to her.

My feelings were a storm of confusion. Obviously, I was hurt that Destiny had taken it upon herself to date someone besides me. But that wasn't the worst of it. I berated myself for not seeing it coming. I felt ashamed that I had been so naïve as to think she would always remain with me. I felt like an idiot for reacting the way I had, back at the restaurant. I cursed myself for thinking that Destiny was the one for me. I was mad that she hadn't told me sooner.

I was also a little scared. I had heard that lovers share all their secrets – I knew that my parents had kept nothing from each other – and I wondered how long it would be before Destiny told her new boyfriend what we had done.

*

A week later, when I began moving my things into the new governor's mansion, I was still depressed. In my entire life, I had never written a poem, except when required to, in school, but in that one week, I had written four. One, I called "Languish", and it goes like this:

Languish

Straining, sweating, squinting, betting
Shouldering the heavy load that is my
conscience

A prophet once said, "to whom much has
been given, much will be required"

And I languish under the import of those
words

Aching, crying, hurting, dying
Wondering about the trash that is my life
A prophet once said, "O my God, I cry out
by day, but you do not answer"
And I know what he was talking about"

Slipping, sinking, failing, thinking
Considering the frustration that is my fate

A prophet once said, “everything is
meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing...
gained under the sun

And I have found it to be true

Spitting, lying, choking, dying
Imploding from pressures that are imaginary
A prophet once said, “It is appointed unto
man once to die, and after that, the judgment”

And I am waiting

It is slightly humorous as I look back on those words, now, because I was only fourteen. Yet, I felt like there would never be another woman for me. I felt lost, as if I had no reason to live. As I packed my things to put into the moving truck, I did so in great melancholy.

Harry had hired a truck to come out to my house, and the driver helped me carry the furniture into the back. I took dad’s favorite chair, my parents’ bed, two dressers, all my clothes, all my books, and the money.

I left my bed, the kitchen furniture, the sofa, and all the rest, for whatever family would buy the house. I packed the money with my clothes, making those boxes a lot heavier, and a lot more numerous.

The truck driver said, “Kid, you sure got a lot of stuff for a full time farmer. Where’d you get all these clothes and stuff?”

“They pay you to ask a lot of questions, or to drive a truck?” I retorted in a surly voice.

He shut up.

*

I was showing my house to a newly arrived family, a week or two later, when the reporter showed up. “Philipp Kaplan? Hold on there! Let me ask a few questions!”

The man and woman on the front porch with me looked at the news van, then at me with raised eyebrows. “What’s all this about?” the man asked. Surely, he had just wanted to look at the house, and perhaps make an offer. He hadn’t wanted any distractions.

“Don’t know. But we’ll find out.” I stepped off the porch, and met the two reporters in the front yard. “What’s this all about?” I quoted.

The man holding the video camera kept quiet while the other man – the reporter – spoke up, too loudly and too clearly. “You’ve been living here by yourself since last spring?”

“That’s right. Is there a problem?”

“Oh no! Mr. Kaplan, my name is Donny Miles, with PPNS? I think the people of our great planet would like to know how you’ve managed to get along here, by yourself.”

“What?”

He lowered his voice a little, but it was still louder than normal. “You’re a hero, Phil. As far as we know, you’re the first colonist under the legal age to hold down land on your own. If this story does well, I’m going to be sending it to other planets as well. Now, when exactly did your parents die?”

The woman behind me on the porch gasped. I hadn't told them how young I was or anything else about me. I just wanted to show them the house, and get it sold.

I answered, my voice clear. "Look it up. The bus crashed into the meat market in Tarkin. I'm sure the police can answer that question."

"Okay..." Miles looked down at his notepad. "And you've kept house here since then, without help? Cooking, cleaning, feeding the animals... Hey, where are the animals?"

"I sold them last week. Like I'm trying to sell the house right now. If you don't mind."

"Not at all! Do you mind if we come inside and take some holo-shots?"

I looked up at the porch. The woman looked at her husband, and he shrugged at me.

"Okay. Just don't get in our way."

*

The story was on the front page of the paper the next day, and on the evening holo-news. "Philipp Kaplan, a young boy struggling to survive by himself on a lonely colonist world, after his parents were savagely taken from him in a gory..."

They made Harry out to be a hero too, since he had "extended his hand of mercy" to me, and taken me in. I guess I didn't mind so much, since that couple paid more than expected for the house. They got pretty excited about the story too, from hearing Donny Miles talk to the camera, with them in the background. I guess most people have never been on the news or on camera for any reason, for that matter. When a holovision camera points in their direction, they're not sure what to do.

They paid in *newdollars*! For two acres of prime land, a house and a barn, I got 25,000nd. That went in my trust, making a total of 70,000nd. Harry said the bank had already converted the credits to newdollars in my account, so when I turned 18, I wouldn't have to worry about it. That meant I'd be getting 175nd in interest next month and a little more each month after that. More than I'd need for a long time.

*

When I finally had my stuff set up in my new bedroom in the mansion, Harry gave me my own phone! Not just my own extension in my bedroom, but my own portable phone. It would hold a full charge for a week, and completely recharge in about 4 hours, and from it, I could call any phone on the planet.

That made me feel a little better, but I was still hurting. A few times, at the dinner table, Harry noticed that I was moping. Finally he asked me about it.

"It's nothing," I replied, mechanically putting food into my mouth. Truthfully, I was wondering inside what was the point of eating, if there was no reason to live.

"Don't give me that," Harry pushed. "I know a depressed face when I see one. Why can't you tell me? You think I wouldn't understand?"

I was about to give him another automatic reply when I remembered something. Hadn't he told me that he'd been divorced twice? At a young age? Maybe he would understand after all.

"Well, Harry, I guess you could say I've got 'girl trouble.' And it's taken the life out of me."

“Ah.” He took another bite with a thoughtful look on his face. After he swallowed, he said, “In my opinion, they’re all trouble, but then I’m biased. What seems to be the problem?”

I told him most of it – not about the money, of course! It started to sound pretty silly when I heard it come from my own mouth, and I said as much.

“It can’t be too silly,” he said, “if it’s been bothering you so much.”

I was waiting for him to feed me the normal platitudes that are supposed to make you feel better when you’ve been dumped, but then I remembered that he had a degree in psychodynamics. Harry was too smart to feed me a line of crap.

He went on, “It sounds like you had some pretty strong feelings for this girl, and she didn’t take that into account when she dumped you. It sounds like she was being selfish. On the other hand, though, you were being selfish too. You forgot that she has her own life and her own dreams. You just wanted her for yourself. I have found that most – if not all – relationships between the sexes end due to some kind of selfishness.”

I saw his point, but the dull ache at the bottom of my rib cage just wouldn’t go away.

“So,” I asked, “what can I do about it?”

He laughed, quietly. “You can do whatever you want, Philipp. I’m not going to give you one piece of advice about relationships. I thought I’d learned my lesson the first time, but then I had my heart handed to me on a platter again. You’re asking the wrong man. I will tell you this: Your parents had a strong relationship. Think about them, and maybe that will help you decide.”

He was right; it did help. I remembered that my mom and dad were always careful to apologize to each other when there had been a disagreement. They never let more than a few hours go by without resolving the issue, or agreeing to forget about it. So, I wrote Destiny a short note:

3rd, 2485GS

My Darling Destiny,

I’m sorry that I walked out on you the other day; I had no right. In fact, I realize that I have no claim over you whatsoever. I hope that you are happy with your new friends, that your education goes well, and your career after that. If I never see you again let it be known that the best times of my short life were while in your presence.

My private phone number is 111-111-111, at the house, and my portable number is 342-777-098. When you’re ready to pick up the stuff I’m keeping for you let me know.

Always yours,
Philipp Kaplan Bates

I expected to hear from her soon, since I figured she wanted the money, but I never expected what happened.

I had been back in school for a whole week, and was at home doing homework, when my room phone buzzed. I hit the answer key, and a face appeared on the screen. It was the security guard at the front gate of the governor’s mansion.

Looking harried, he said, “Philipp, there’s a woman out here, claiming she knows you. She’s in pretty bad shape, clothes all torn and stuff. Says to tell you ‘Sandy’ needs you.”

“Let her in, James. I’ll meet her at the door.” I wondered if perhaps she’d been in an accident. Then I told myself if that were the case, she’d be in a hospital, not at my door.

I ran to the front door, startling Harry out of his office. “What’s going on, son?”

I opened the door, and she fell into my arms, crying. Her clothes were indeed torn, she had a growing bruise on her face, her eyes were bloodshot from crying, and she had several scrapes on her wrists.

Her strength left her body as she fell into my embrace, and she sagged like a limp doll, whimpering like an abused puppy. “I love you, Philipp, I love you...”

I looked up at Harry, who was standing there in his suit, not sure what to do. I held her with my right arm, and ran my left hand through her tangled hair. “What’s wrong, baby? What happened? You’re safe here. I’m here; nothing’s going to happen to you...”

When I looked up again, Harry was rolling his chair out of the office; the nice one with real leather and deep padding. “Let her sit down, son.”

I helped her into the chair, and knelt beside her. “Do you want something to drink?” I prodded.

She shook her head violently, slinging tears into my face, the sweetest tears that have ever been on my skin. Then she looked me in the eye. “I’m so sorry, Philipp, I didn’t know!”

“Didn’t know what?” Harry was slipping a glass of something cold into her hands. I repeated my question.

“Philipp, he raped me.”

That’s when Harry jumped in. “Who? When? How long ago? I’ll get the police right on it”

She looked at him. “Chief Donovan is his dad! Don’t you see? I’ve dated him for a couple of months, and we were kissing, and he just...” She broke down again.

“Oh, Kthorpa!” Harry exclaimed, and put his face into his hands. He told me later that he was ashamed to admit his first thoughts had been about a government scandal. What he said at the time was, “Don’t worry, Destiny, we’ll get this all straightened out soon enough.”

I stood up. “Harry, stay with her. I’ll see if I can’t get her a good shirt.” And I headed for my room. I closed the door behind me, and opened the window, vaulting softly to the ground outside. I ran the whole block, going behind houses, all the way to the chief’s house, on the edge of the “good” neighborhood.

Young Donovan was just driving up. He hopped out of his car, and made for the door. Later, I realized that he was probably trying to get to his dad before the whole thing erupted in their faces, publicly. It never got that far. I don’t know what my plan would have been if he had not been there. But he was.

I was out of the bushes, and crashed into him just before he got to the porch. He never got a chance to get his breath back, for I held my left hand in a vise-grip around his throat, crushing it into the ground, while my right pounded his groin repeatedly. I didn’t stop hitting him until he stopped breathing. As I got up, I stomped my bare right foot down on his throat, and heard a sickening crunch.

Two minutes later, I was stepping out of my bedroom, holding a shirt, and breathing heavily. “Here’s you a shirt, baby.”

I hadn’t decided to kill Billy Donovan. There had been no decision to make. To this day, rapists and child abusers rank at the top of the list of people I hate. Thieves? Well, I am one, so I can’t answer that question. Murderers? In my opinion, there’s a lot more to murder than meets the eye – more than half the time,

the victim gets his just desserts. Prostitutes and pimps? Most of those women made their own choice, trying to make money fast, and the fact that they do make money shows that there are a lot of men who secretly approve of the profession. Pornographers? Again, the sales figures show how popular pornography is.

But I cannot abide a rapist or a child abuser. When you violate someone like that, you have stolen their humanity, and reduced them to the level of a helpless animal. Now, I won't get into a discussion about rough sex: there's a fine line, there. The same goes with spanking: the debate gets too heated, and there are too many opinions. But if I see a man punch or slap his small child, I will teach him a lesson he'll never forget.

For that matter, I think I let Billy off too easily.

*

Two days later, Harry was standing in his pressroom, with several cameras and several reporters crowded in with him. I stood beside him, in a suit he had bought for me, just for the occasion. He raised his hand for silence, and gave his carefully prepared speech.

"As my office informed all of you two days ago, there was a small emergency here. It's odd, I know," he smiled, "but I've never had my appendix out. It exploded two days ago, and my adopted son Philipp," he rested a heavy hand on my shoulder, "called the guard, who brought in the medics. My appendix was removed right here in this house, and I am recovering nicely. I would like to publicly thank Philipp, my guard, and the prompt service of Tarkin General Hospital for saving my life."

He paused dramatically, then held up his hand again. "Now, about the other matter: Against the advice of the City Council and the Planetary Council, I have given Chief Donovan permission to head the investigation into his son's death. For Kthorpa's sake, it was his son! If my son were killed, murdered even, I would want to lead the investigation myself, and bring the killer or killers to justice. That is all."

The questions broke out, and I stood there while he fielded them. Then there was a question for me, from Donny Miles, I noticed. "Philipp! How does it feel to be a hero again? You braved nearly two years on this new world all alone, and now you've saved the Governor's life."

I looked straight into the camera, and said, "Mr. Bates is a great man. He took me in when I had no one else to look to. Any of you would have done the same thing, if you were in my shoes.

*

Young Billy Donovan's killer was never brought to justice. The medics in question had shown up and treated Destiny, and had been sworn to silence when Harry had concocted his plan to cover up the scandal. None of the medical personnel were told who had raped her, and I never told Harry or Destiny that I'd killed him. But I'm sure they knew. I know Destiny knew.

Four.

Harry talked to the bank where I had my trust fund, and got them to give me a debit card and a checkbook. He explained to me that each month I was allowed to use up to the amount of interest I had received for the month before, and no more. That way, I would never dig into the 70,000nd that were in my trust, and it would all be there when I came of age.

I never used that much. For every newdollar I drew out of my account, I spent at least one credit from my hoard of stolen money. Most of the businesses in Tarkin were equipped to handle both kinds of money. If I spent four newdollars from my trust fund to buy a shirt, bought matching pants at another store with five credits from my stash. I told Destiny about my spending habits, and she thought it was a good idea. She started doing the same thing. But she reminded me that spending credits that slowly would never get rid of all the credits we had stolen.

*

Work on Tarkin's spaceport continued, and people kept pouring in from the Older Planets. The Persiphone Planetary News Service (PPNS) reported in late winter (early 2485) that the known human population in the Milky Way had passed ten billion people, spread across nearly 150 Class-1 planets and 210 Class-2 planets. That was an average of 62 million on every Class-1 world, and just under five million on every Class-2 world. The Dester Mining Corporation, among others, quickly got rich when they suddenly struck uranium in the Hollis System asteroid belt. Trillionaire Michael Hubbard Cyr – owner and CEO of the Cyr Corporation – moved to Persiphone, buying the smallest of six continents from the planetary government, naming the 3 million square mile area “Basplace” (pronounced “BOZ-plus”). The scout ship *McRay* failed to return when scheduled; the *McRay* had been charting habitable solar systems, working toward the galactic core, reporting in every nine months or so.

When Mr. Dester's company struck it rich in our asteroid belt, his oldest son sold his half of his farm to his younger brother, and joined his father, buying as many shares as he could afford – Destiny said he got the shares cheap, since he had advance notice of the strike. Mrs. Dester sold her old lorry very cheaply to some newcomers, and bought two new cars with her husband's earnings; she got a Cyr family cruiser for herself, and a Cyr Luxury Sport for Destiny.

For my fifteenth birthday, I got to ride in Destiny's new car, which she'd only had for a few days. We cruised slowly through the city streets for a while, then headed out through the farms. When we got to the unpopulated area, she took the car up to a few hundred feet, and pushed its limits. I about wet my pants, watching trees, hills, rivers and wild animals pass by underneath at 1500 miles per hour.

We were on the way back from this pleasure cruise when Destiny brought up “The Subject.”

“Fun isn't it, Phil?” She had one hand on the control wheel, and the other on the armrest. “Yeah,” I breathed, gripping both my arm rests. “This is the fastest I've ever gone in a car. It's pretty exciting.”

“But not as exciting as robbing banks.” She stated it as a fact, and turned to look at me, while cutting her speed and altitude.

“You want to do another one?” I thought we had enough money to last a lifetime, if we could only convert it to newdollars, and get to some other planet. But she did have a point about the excitement; I could feel adrenaline squirting through my body just at the mention of robbing another bank.

“Don’t you?” Her eyes smiled at me.

“Baby, where you lead, I will follow. You are my Destiny.” I grinned back at her. “Hmm... Maybe we need to set this car down for a little picnic. See if you can see a good spot, where no one will see us for an hour or so. And promise you’ll be gentle.”

Things had smoothed out between Destiny and I, after the Billy Donovan incident. We both realized we had been behaving selfishly. I knew I didn’t want anyone else – I wasn’t even *attracted* to any other girls. She realized that once I finished growing up, I would be the best thing that ever happened to her.

*

The tenth grade went on as usual, five days a week, six classes a day. My mechanics class was the most fun, since we got to build our own low-powered anti-gravity motor. Our teacher, Mr. Jacobs, said that knowledge of basic mechanics was about all that was necessary to get along in the world. He said that if you could build something, or fix something, you could always find a job somewhere. But my math teacher, Mrs. Baldwin, said that was ridiculous; if you didn’t understand the math – the *why* – behind a machine, you could never build or fix one with any degree of accuracy.

History was always fun, and that year we studied the Post-Exodus Expansion Period, when the 90-year Trayak war was taking place on two planets, and the Granger-Stranger wars kept resurfacing. The book said that back then almost everyone was in the military, except pregnant women. There were only 4 million humans in the entire galaxy, and it took 90 years to build that number to 15 million.

It almost made me wish we could have a war of our own; the human race hadn’t fought in almost four hundred years, except a couple of rebellions on new planets. The Kelvods – the only new race discovered in the last four hundred years – had been peaceful.

Norman raised his hand in our history class, and asked, “What about that *McRay* ship, Mrs. Ballader? Do you think that maybe they found a new species out there? Maybe we’ll have a war with them.”

She smiled, condescendingly. “Norman, I don’t really think so. There are a lot of things more dangerous than other races. It’s a lot more likely that they came out of hyperspace in the same place as an asteroid, or too close to a planet. Or maybe they’ve had some type of equipment failure, and they’ll be back as soon as it’s fixed.”

“But what if they did find a new race?” he persisted. “Maybe something a lot less like humans than the ones we’ve found.”

She continued smiling. “I doubt that too Norman. You see, most scientists agree with historians on that subject. The humanoid form is the only form we’ve found that is suitable for the necessities of civilization; we have the digits on our hands to work with tools and electronic equipment; we have our arms and legs for lifting, embracing, walking, running, jumping, and fighting; and we have the large cranial cavity for our superior minds. I think that maybe you’ve been reading too many of those fantasy magazines.

“All the intelligent races we’ve encountered in our expansion have humanoid forms, with only slight variations, probably due to evolutionary differences. The Trayaks may have developed their blue skin as a survival technique, blending in with the flora on their home planet, of which a lot is blue. The Grangers and Strangers are red and green skinned for similar reasons. The Kelvods almost certainly evolved their thick hides and fur as a survival technique, millions of years

ago, and perhaps a thousand years from now, their race will begin to lose the fur, or the hides, or both. But the odds are against us finding giant insects, or intelligent reptiles, or anything of the sort. Now, let's get back to the subject, which, I believe, was the forced development of strict laws during wartime.

"Now, if you'll all turn to page 74, you'll find the section on Paradise's polygamy laws, which stand to this day..."

I struggled in Language, mainly because there are so many rules regarding Standard speech and writing. If the plural form of "mouse" is "mice," then shouldn't the plural of "house" be "hice"? And so on, like the conjugation of verbs. What does it matter if you say "dragged," "drug," "drugged," or even "yuilenopadndoe," as long as I understand what you're saying?

The Trayak language is much simpler. Our language teacher, Mr. Thtrolla, had lived in Hjertdon, the capital city of the Trayaks on Tuf, for four years, and made the class fun, by serving Trayak dishes once a week. He said that sometime in their past, the Trayaks had probably had many cultures and languages, much like Old Home Terra, but at some point in their history, they had sat down and "fixed" their language. He said the human race probably would have done the same thing, but they had been forced to flee their home planet before history and evolution had taken them to the point of needing a common language. Of course, the human race does use a common language, but that's because all the ships that were used to evacuate our home system used English, which is now called Standard.

"But," he said, "this summer, I'm going to a convention on Yurple to meet with a lot of other language experts, and we're going to examine the possibility of 'fixing' Standard. If anything like that ever happens, though, don't worry; you can talk the way you do until the day you die. Changing the common language of ten billion people will take several generations. In fact, it'll take years and years just to decide *how* we're going to..."

My last class every day was an elective, taken mainly for fun: ESP. Mainly we studied the history of telepathy, its possible future uses, etc. But there were also tests to show our "ESP rating." Mine was zero. When another student looked at a certain card, and concentrated on the picture, *I never once* guessed the right card. Mrs. Rutherford said that was strange, since even probability said I should get one in five, just from luck. Norman usually guessed two out of five, but as other cards were introduced, his rating went down. There was one girl in our class who only missed one card out of every ten or twenty hands. Mrs. Rutherford always got excited, and had tears in her eyes whenever this girl was doing her thing. I don't think that girl could read minds, though, because she wasn't doing too well in any of her other classes. They say Trayaks have the highest ESP rating of any known race, and sometimes, they use telepathy instead of radio for communication. That's hard to swallow. Destiny was taking self-defense as her fitness elective at Tarkin University; she had switched into that class right after the "incident" with Billy Donovan. She said it was really exciting, since her instructor had once been an instructor with the Yurple Militia Regulars, and knew a lot of neat stuff. I told her just to keep me around, and she'd be okay. She laughed and told me I should take the class.

When the New Planet Spacelines opened their terminal, just before Destiny's 18th birthday, she quit the construction company, and got a job with New Planet.

One Sunday afternoon, while we sat in a restaurant, I asked her about it. "I know you're just keeping a job so no one will ask where you get your money from, but are you sure you want to work for a spaceline? They could transfer you at any time, to some planet I haven't even heard of. Besides the fact that space ports are the first targets in any war."

“How do you know, Philipp? The human race has never had a war on a planet with spaceports, now have they?”

“Well... No, but that’s just logical. If I were a general, trying to occupy a planet, I’d hit their spaceports first, to disable their fleet. It’s just the way it would be done.”

She laughed. “Don’t worry, my dear. If a war starts, I promise you, I’ll quit. Okay? Besides, I think the job will help us. With the money.”

“The wha—” I saw the look in her eye. “Oh. With our *money*. How?”

“Well, for one thing, all employees get discounts on trips, and once a year, every employee gets a *free* trip, and a paid vacation. When we’re ready to start taking our money off-planet, I can use the discounted trips, and get my pick of berths in the liners. And employees don’t get their baggage checked, even if they’re going to the stiffer worlds, like Tuf or Turner’s Planet. *You* could carry just about anything anywhere, but if you went to one of those older worlds, they’d sort through your bags. Not only that, I’m making more per hour now, so it doesn’t look so bad when I spend it. Are you going to eat the rest of that steak?”

“What? Oh, sure, sure.” I went back to my food, using my last bites of steak to wipe up the remaining sauce, while I thought about what she’d said. That moment, right then and there, is when I made the unconscious decision to go on robbing banks.

She watched me think for a while, then asked, “So when do you think we should do it again, and where?”

I swallowed the last bite, and washed it down with the last of my Bliss soda. “Whenever we do it, we should plan it out a little longer than we did those other times. You know, find out how many people there are going to be, whether or not there’s cameras, the possibility of disabling the cameras, our getaway route, so forth. And let’s wear gloves next time. We wasted like ten minutes when we were wiping all those prints off.”

“What about Batesville? I hear they have two new banks over there, and the town is still growing so fast they don’t have enough police to watch the whole place. They’ve probably got cameras, since they heard about the robbery over here, but we can either figure out how to turn them off, or maybe wear masks.”

“Have I told you lately that I love you?” “

“Not since you had your first taste of that steak sauce. I told you it was good. Do you know how to drive?”

“Destiny, has anyone ever told you it’s really confusing when you switch subjects so suddenly?”

“No. I thought it was the same subject; good steak sauce and fast cars all go under the main heading ‘Big Money And How To Get It’. So I really didn’t change the subject. Can you drive, or do I need to show you how? I think we might need two vehicles for this job, if we want to do it right.”

*

As I crouched in the darkness outside the Townsend house, I told myself again that they’d be getting their car back. I told myself I really wasn’t stealing the car; I was just borrowing it for our getaway, then we’d leave it somewhere in good enough condition so they wouldn’t have lost anything but maybe a day’s use of it.

The Desters’ old aircar looked much like it had before the family had gotten rich. When they’d sold it to the Townsends, the ancient vehicle had kept on ticking.

I checked my watch, then moved stealthily out of my cover, and up to the lorry. Sure enough, the old key Destiny had found in the bottom of her purse fit the lock. When I turned the key, I found that the door hadn't even been locked. People on colonial worlds are of an innately trusting type. Quickly, I opened the door and slipped inside. I pulled my new penlight out of my vest pocket, and turned it on, cupping my hand so the light wouldn't go everywhere.

When I found the power switch, I slipped Destiny's old key into the slot, and turned it. With a loud pop and a few deafening clicks, the old machine came to life. The dashboard lit up, and I hit the drive switch. The lorry rose off the ground, and I sped away, just as the house lights came on. I headed toward town at breakneck speed, until I was out of sight of the Townsend house, then turned down a side road, doubling back toward the outer farms where Destiny would be waiting. I was driving without lights, bending over the steering wheel to try to see the road better.

As soon as I had reached open country, I pulled off at the designated spot, and parked the lorry between two clumps of Persiphone's tall bushes. I didn't see Destiny, so I dialed her phone number.

"Yeah, what do you want?" I heard her sweet voice say, with just a little paranoia in her tone.

"I don't see your car, baby. Where are you?"

"Right beside you, on the other side of these trees. Come get this power cell; it's too heavy for me"

I stepped out, got the spare power cell out of her car's storage compartment, and lugged it over to the lorry. I pulled out the lorry's old cell, which still had a little charge left, and replaced it with the new one. Destiny watched me, looking up the road every now and then.

I looked up at her. "Do you think this old crate will make it all the way? It seemed pretty shaky on the way out here. I mean, that's a long drive to Batesville."

"We kept it in good condition, back when we owned it. But, if it starts to go down, hit the landing skid button, and brace yourself. Then I'll come back to get you."

"Okay."

With the new cell in it, the lorry acted much better, but still popped and clicked annoyingly, especially when I got it up to high speeds. We had decided to go across the ocean, since we didn't need any insomnia-stricken hermit farmers spotting two speeding cars in the middle of the night and deciding to report them. Besides, it would have taken more than twice as long to stay over land. Even then, we'd end up having to cross some pretty good stretches of water. We made it to our continent's west coast in about 45 minutes, then lit out across the water, about fifty feet above the cold black sea.

We had agreed not to call each other while over the water, since our phones would have to track with a satellite in the absence of transmitting towers, and we were trying to do this job without leaving any traces. I did take my gloves off during that long stretch though, since my hands were starting to sweat. I made a mental note to wipe the steering wheel again, after I put my gloves back on.

Even though night had been well in progress when we left Tarkin, we crossed nine time zones, going westward. So, since we made the trip in less than five hours, we had gained four hours. It was early evening in Batesville. I had fallen asleep once or twice while driving, but luckily I hadn't touched the control wheel while asleep; it held its bearing, so I arrived at the right place. It was a Friday evening in Batesville and the night life had just started up.

I followed Destiny through the same streets we had driven down the weekend before, and pulled into the parking lot of an unfinished hotel. I parked the lorry out of sight behind a bulldozer, while Destiny parked in front of the main office. I waited about fifteen minutes, until she called me from the room. Our phones were now transmitting through the local towers, so there would be less chance of detection. Most calls were just sent on automatically to the recipient, and the record was deleted when the call was over.

“Come on in, baby. Room 210. The guy in the office is reading a book.”

“Yeah, and if he’s smart, he’ll go to sleep, and dream about you. Be right there.”

As I got out, I wiped the steering wheel clean, and the few switches I had used in parking got the treatment too. My bare hands would never touch the lorry again. Before going inside, I rubbed some mud over the ID decal on the lorry. I had switched off the transponder when I had first stolen the vehicle. It would be days before local police could identify it as the stolen vehicle they were looking for.

Inside the room, I flopped on the bed. “You would not believe how tired just driving can make you. I don’t know how late I’ll wake up.”

“What do you mean, I wouldn’t believe it?” she retorted with a grin. “I just drove the same distance. And I know how late you’ll sleep, because I’m going to wake you up.”

*

When I woke up, Destiny was emptying her bag onto the bed beside me. When I got out of the shower, she was ready to go. She wore nice but comfortable pants, a thin, almost see-through blouse, and a woman’s sport coat over it. In each inside pocket of her coat, she had two bags, the collapsible kind that takes up almost no room when it’s empty. In the outer pockets were her gloves. In her purse, she had a new roll of packing tape, should we need it, and a pair of wire cutters.

I wore jeans, a T-shirt, and a multi-pocket vest. In my pants pockets, I had two bags of my own, my own gloves, my penlight, and the gun that Destiny had given me. Billy Donovan had given it to her when they were still dating, and she almost threw it away before she gave in and let me keep it. It had twenty tiny darts in its magazine, each with enough medicine to put a man down for a few minutes.

And on my back, under my vest, I wore my school project: an a-grav motor. The ones we built in class had been cube-shaped, roughly eight inches on a side. This one was only an inch in thickness, and covered most of my back. As long as I didn’t bend over too far, or try to twist around, it wouldn’t show much. The control module was about the size of my phone, connected by three feet of self-retracting wire, and hooked on the top of the gadget, just below the top of the vest. There, I could reach it by bending my arm back as if to scratch the middle of my back.

We were ready. We had scoped out the bank the weekend before, telling her mother and Harry that we were going sightseeing. The weekend of the actual heist, Harry himself was in Batesville, meeting with the town leaders, and I had left a message for him at our house, saying I would be out all day with Destiny. Destiny had told her mother she was staying the weekend in the dorms with some of her friends. Our plan was as foolproof as we could make it.

She parked her car on a side road adjoining one side of a supermarket, about six blocks from the bank. I picked her up in the lorry and we parked it in an alley

one street away from the bank. I left it unlocked, but taped the ignition key on the inside of my upper arm, under the cover of my T-shirt sleeve. We walked out onto the main street, and crossed it, so we could pass the bank on the opposite side and take one last look before we went inside. Everything looked good.

“Let’s walk on down, Sandy, and come back on the other side,” I said quietly. We had decided to keep using our same fake names for the present.

There were a lot of people out on the streets, doing their shopping. Some were buying groceries for their apartments in town, some were selling produce from their farms, and some were buying clothes and other goodies. I saw one family loading up a brand new tractor with all sorts of brand new fanning attachments. All the faces looked bright and healthy, as they should, on a growing and prospering planet.

We came back down the other side of the street and when we got to the bank, Destiny ducked down the alley next to it. I headed for the front door, lighting a cigarette as I went. I didn’t smoke and didn’t like people who did – I was only using the smoke as an excuse to stand outside the bank until Destiny’s job was done. Standing under the wide awning in front of the bank, I watched the people going in and out, for two reasons. One, so I would know how many customers we’d have to deal with; two, so I could locate any potential heroes. Of course, every man that walked in looked like a colonist, all of who have the potential to play hero, but some were more alert than others. I pulled my left-hand glove out of my pocket, and pulled it on. Nobody was giving me a second glance. Then I looked at my watch: if Destiny was doing her job according to plan, I had fifteen seconds.

Without hurrying, I took the right-hand glove out of my pocket and put it on. I flicked my cigarette into the street, and turned to walk in the door. Just as I grasped the handle, the lights went out. I heard a gasp, then the emergency power came on, lighting the place dimly.

I pulled the gun out of my vest pocket, and walked in. The guard by the door got two darts before anyone else knew what was going on; he went down with a thumping sound. One lady let out a whimpering scream, two or three men voiced a little profanity, and the other guard came for me. He had been standing by the counter, but now he was drawing his own weapon and moving forward. Even as I pulled the trigger, I saw that he had a gun just like Schiller had – the old fashioned kind, with shell casings, lead bullets, exploding powder, and the like. As my two darts entered his chest and neck and he went down, he kept moving forward, so when he dropped his gun it came sliding across the slick buffed floor and stopped at my feet.

The two tellers and the weekend manager were just then starting to react. I grabbed the guard’s gun off the floor, and pointed both guns at them. “Don’t touch those alarms, people,” I managed to say in a pretty strong voice.

Destiny rushed in the door behind me, and took the other guard’s gun out of his holster. I noted with satisfaction that she had her gloves on.

She spoke. “Get on the floor. NOW!” They got. The customers, that is. The tellers and the manager were standing dangerously close to the counter. I put one dart in each of the tellers, and they each looked sick for a second, then dropped to the floor. .

I waved my guns at the manager. “You don’t get a dart, you hear me? You try anything funny, and I’m using the real gun, okay? So let’s be a good little colonist, and do what you’re told.”

I handed the dart gun to Destiny, and she handed me her two bags. I had been inside the bank for only twenty-five seconds.

Tucking Destiny's two bags under one arm, I pulled my own two out of a pocket while I walked to the counter, and behind it, still pointing the gun at the manager. "Now, let's get that vault open, mister."

He looked surprised. "But it's already open, I—"

"Shut up!" I growled, and looked around the corner to find that the vault was indeed open. "Sandy. Do him."

She complied, putting two darts into him. I headed into the vault. Setting the gun on a shelf, I began loading up the bags, only taking a few 100nd notes. Mostly I grabbed the bundles of 10s and 20s. I just dropped them into the bags as fast as I could, filling them up.

When I was starting on the third bag, Destiny walked in and started helping me. I stared at her. "What are you doing? Who's covering the lobby, my dad's ghost?"

"Get on with it," she ordered, even though we were both stuffing money in bags as fast as we could. "I darted all the customers, and taped the guards and employees."

"What if someone comes in the door?"

"We're done, aren't we?" she answered, zipping up the last bag. "And I've got seven darts left, if anyone's in the lobby."

We stepped out of the vault, to see that one of the female tellers was stirring, so Destiny dropped a bag and shot another dart into the woman. The front door swung open right about then, and two more darts went flying through the air. The man who was entering the bank dropped to the floor, propping the door open with his limp form.

"Let's go," I said. I had the guard's real gun tucked into my waistband; Destiny handed me the other real gun, which I stuffed into a money bag while she put the dart gun in her own belt. As we headed for the door, I held both of my bags in my left arm, while I reached over my shoulder, and pulled out the control module for my a-grav motor.

Destiny and I stepped over the crumpled customer in the doorway, and stepped out. I hit the power switch on the control panel in my right hand, and swung my left arm around Destiny's waist, moneybags and all. Just as I gripped her tightly and pressed the "up" button, we noticed that a crowd was quickly gathering in front of the bank, possibly due to the limp body in the doorway. As we rose into the air, my left arm muscles bulging from the strain, Destiny ripped open two stacks of 20s, and dropped them. The bills fluttered down. Disappearing over the top of the bank, I saw a fight breaking out below, as a dozen people tried to catch the money at one time. Two minutes and fifty seconds had elapsed; I guess Destiny is the fastest tape handler I know.

We popped up into the sky above the bank, and I punched two more keys on my control panel. I then wrapped my right arm around my girl, to give the left arm a little relief. We floated forward and down, heading for the alley where we had parked the lorry, dropping slowly due to the setting on the machine. Just before we landed, the power in my a-grav unit cut out. We dropped the last four feet as if we were rocks. I banged into the side of the lorry, still supporting Destiny.

I let go of her and my bags and ripped the key out from under my arm, getting the tape stuck to my gloves. I hopped in the driver's seat and turned the key while Destiny tossed the bags in the back. When I heard her yell, "Go!" I went, pulling out onto the street, just as people were walking around the corner, curious as to where we had disappeared. Most of these pedestrians had their eyes pointed to the sky, and barely had time to fallout of the way when I powered the lorry past them.

Taking every possible turn between the bank and the grocery store, I kept my speed up, but not too high. I didn't want to end up like my parents, a bloody burning pulp smeared across ghastly wreckage.

"Get ready, girl!" I hollered back to Destiny when I saw the store approaching. I brought that lorry to a lurching halt next to her car, and then pivoted it, so the back door would be right against her car's rear hatch. I left the key in the ignition, and hopped out to join her. I still didn't hear any sirens. There were a couple of people coming out of the grocery store, but they were looking out toward the parking lot and didn't see us. During the drive, I had put my control module back in place, and buttoned the lower button of my vest, so we probably didn't look too suspicious, except that we were moving pretty quickly. In the Cyr Luxury Sport, there is only a small storage space behind the two seats, and Destiny's duffel bag already occupied half of that space. We crammed two moneybags back there, and the other two rode with me in the passenger seat. When we pulled out of the parking lot in her car, I looked at my watch.

"Girl, that was fast! Look at that, five minutes and ten seconds!"

She ignored me as she pulled out into traffic, hurriedly making several turns. After that, we just blended in with the traffic, heading due south.

*

Persiphone has six continents, more than most of the planets that humans occupy; Turner's Planet, for instance, has only one major land mass, covering just more than half of the planet's surface area, and two large islands that don't really qualify. Grorange also only has one continent, but it's not that big. Poois is named for its lack of landmass: Planet Of One ISland. Tuf has four continents, and two major islands. Willsworld has three continents.

Tarkin, our hometown, is on Persiphone's largest landmass – Alana – and just south of that continent is Basplace, owned in its entirety by the Cyr Corporation. South of Basplace is Ostrollia, presently uninhabited. Just west of these last two, is another empty continent, Lichten. Keep going west and you'll run into the southern tip of the long, skinny continent, called Vertiga, where Batesville is. From the northern tip of that beanpole continent, go back east, and you'll find the sixth landmass, known as Troller. Go east again, and you've come back to Alana, completing the square. Except that planets are round.

So, from Batesville, you could keep going west, and circle the globe, and run into the eastern edge of Alana. But we decided to go back pretty much the way we had come, since the police would be looking for the lorry. And would find the lorry. Then they would check its registration, and find the Townsends. They would probably find that it had been reported stolen earlier in the day, and find no fingerprints, or any other identifying marks, except the new power cell, which had been wiped clean of prints. I'm sure the Townsends would appreciate that new addition.

After we came out of the south end of Batesville, we turned west just long enough to get to the mountains, and then went north. After our mileage indicator said we had traveled north past Batesville's latitude, we looped back east, keeping the car low to the ground, soon slipping out over the ocean. We kept edging to the north, until we saw the southern tip of Troller, then curved back southward, completing our arc back to Tarkin. That sporty little car had the luxury of a planetary map in its computer, so we didn't get too far off track. We left Batesville at 9:30 or so in the morning, and made it back to Tarkin in about five hours. When you tack on the nine hours for the time zone change, it was after midnight in Tarkin, but we

had only been awake for six or seven hours. So we got another hotel in Tarkin, and celebrated for the rest of the night.

*

The take came to more than three million newdollars. Added to our previous “earnings” and split fifty-fifty between us, my half came to more than 2.5 million. And I was only fifteen years old.

This time, we buried the money, along with some of the previous take that I could sneak out of my mansion. We did it the next weekend, after school ended for the summer. We drove into the Cloudy Mountains in the northeastern region of Alana, memorized the exact location off the satellite tracker in Destiny’s car, and buried almost four million newdollars in six waterproof bags.

We each still had more than a half million still hidden in my room in Harry’s mansion, and we tried to be careful as to how we spent it. But the money in the ground wasn’t there very long.

Five.

“I think we could all use a vacation, now that I can afford one. What do you all think?” Mr. Dester sat back in his chair, and lit a cigar. His 800-newdollar suit looked strange on a man I had last seen wearing dirty coveralls and sweating in a field under bright sunlight.

I was sitting with the whole Dester family, in a nice restaurant in Tarkin. Although I Destiny and I had already made our decisions to continue robbing banks, we would never hurt for money. Colony worlds inevitably produce some new millionaires, and I already had personal contacts with more than one. Destiny’s family would never be short on cash again, unless her father made some really stupid business mistake. There were enough minerals in the asteroid belt to last for many generations. Besides the Desters, I was the adopted son of Howard Wingate Bates, the governor of the planet. And through him, I had an indirect link to Michael Hubbard Cyr, since Harry had met with him several times.

Most people would never figure Destiny and I to be criminals, living in a money-laden atmosphere like that. Sure, a lot of rich kids rebel against the ways of their parents, but not when they’ve been working out in the hot sun for ten years, and all of a sudden find themselves surrounded by money.

Mrs. Dester was about to answer her husband when Destiny broke in, “That sounds like a great idea, Dad! Where do you want to go? I can get half-price spacefare for the whole family, and 25 percent off for Philipp, if you’ll let him come.”

Mrs. Dester said, “We know a lot of people and things to do back on Sixxle. And it’s been ten years since we’ve seen it, dear.”

Everyone looked expectantly at Mr. Dester, except me, because I was trying to act like I wasn’t interested, and Norman, who argued, “Dad, I don’t think I want to go back there. I don’t remember anybody there, and besides, it probably hasn’t changed much since we left.”

Norman’s older brother Jeffrey broke in, “Norman’s right. Sixxle is most likely just as we left it. We’re the ones who’ve changed. We’ve grown, experienced new things, and made a home and a business for ourselves. We’ve made new friends and new lives, on an open and free world. There’s nothing for me there.”

The oldest of the four children, Allen, spoke up. “Well, Jeff, I agree with you, but Mom’s got a point too. If she wants to go there, let’s go. Remember, she spent her whole life there; the rest of us just happened along later.”

Mrs. Dester said, “Honey, I think the kids are right. All the people I can think of that I’d want to see... well, they probably won’t understand us. We would be telling them our farming stories, about how we built our own house and mining business, and how there are less than a million people on this planet. We might find them unchanged, just a little older, while they would find us to be drastically different people than we were ten years ago.”

Norman broke out with, “I want to go to Paradise! I’ve got a friend at school who’s from there. He says—”

Jeffrey and Allen interrupted with the planets they thought would be cool to visit, and all three boys were talking at the same time.

Mr. Dester held up his hand. “Hold on there, boys. There’s a difference between a family vacation and a sightseeing tour. I don’t know if I’ll feel up to traveling the whole time we’re gone; I’ve been working ninety hours a week for the last eight months, and I’m tired. I finally have an assistant that I trust to run things for three weeks or so, and I just want to sit by a pool somewhere on a planet with a low-radiation sun and enjoy the singing of the birds and such like. Destiny, you have all the brochures and information at work; why don’t you bring some home tomorrow, and we’ll look them over. And, yes, if Mr. Bates will give his permission, Philipp will be very welcome to come with us.”

“Daddy,” Destiny said, pulling a paper brochure out of her purse, “I think I’ve found a place that we’ll all like.”

“What? You mean someone already beat me to the idea? Where, dear?”

The three boys were quiet now, looking at their sister. Mrs. Dester raised her eyebrows, still a little depressed after her thoughts of her home planet, but willing to listen to new ideas. I perked up, not having known that Destiny had already thought that far ahead. Of course, I should’ve known; she’s never been one to just “go along for the ride.” My girl is always on top of things. I knew that if and when we got married, she would be the one in charge. Of course, she’s never made my decisions *for me*, but she can usually present an idea in a way that I’ll agree to it.

She winked at me, like I already knew about the planet she had selected, then opened the pamphlet. “They say that Paradise used to be a planet with a lot of beaches and nice hotels, and honest casinos, and beautiful sunsets and all that. But now it’s crowded with almost 200 million people, the second most populated planet that we know of, and there are factories all over the place, and everyone says the tourist spots have been overrun with corruption.

“But there’s another planet that’s just like Paradise used to be, two or three hundred years ago. ‘Justine’ is its name, in the Betelgeuse System. Humans first landed there in 2399, but the Kelvod people discovered it in 2301. The whole planet has a population of about 8 million Kelvods and less than 10 million humans, since the Commission has been hesitant to colonize worlds that are already occupied. There are nice hotels, beaches, pools, mountains, rivers, casinos, amusement parks, nature walks, sports centers, all kinds of stuff. And no taxes, since the Commission’s not directly involved.

“And it’s a lot cheaper than going to Paradise. The Paradise tickets cost more for two reasons: one, the place is so popular and everyone goes there, so the prices are jacked up. Two, the ships have to make a double Jump to Paradise, since there’s two suns of almost equal size, and the margin of hyperspace error increases drastically. Justine has just the one big sun, Betelgeuse, and they don’t

advertise nearly as much as Paradise does. Besides, the galactic basketball championship is going to be there in a few weeks.”

She looked around the table. “So, what do you think?”

Allen looked thoughtful. “I’ve never seen a Kelvod in person. That might be neat.”

Jeffrey snorted, “You’ve never seen a Granger or a Stranger either! What does that have to do with it? I want to see the game.”

Norman defended Allen. “The Kelvods are the only race we know of that ever colonized another solar system without hyperspace or some kind of star drive. They launched out of Kelv in nuclear-powered rocket ships. Those people were in that ship for four hundred years before they found Justine.”

“That’s not right, son,” Mr. Dester disagreed. “The Trayaks’ first colony ship had no star drive either. But that’s not the point As long as it’s a good place to relax, and kick back, it sounds good to me. What do you think, honey?”

“What’s the gravity like?” was the only question Mrs. Dester asked.

“Seventy-nine percent of Galactic Standard,” Destiny answered.

*

It was decided that the vacation would take place at the end of summer, right before Destiny, Norman and I started back to school, and it would last two and a half weeks. I found out from Destiny that since Justine was a fully self-sufficient planet, they imported nothing, and exported mostly tourism. So, there would be several wealthy banks there, where we could trade in the rest of our Colonial Credits, and maybe even start a few accounts.

Since I was fifteen then, I got a work permit. The lady at the permit office was a little hesitant to give it to me; the under-age work permits are supposed to be for families with “hardships,” such as colonial farmers who aren’t quite getting along. I explained to her that I was bored, since school was out, and I didn’t have anything to do. Having a job might keep me out of trouble. I was about to call Harry, when she went ahead and gave me the permit, explaining that minimum wage was lower for underage kids. She said Persiphone’s new minimum wage was two newdollars per hour, but it was 1.5nd per hour for me. I told her that was okay; I just needed something to keep me busy.

I got a job at Mike’s New & Improved Supermarket on Third Street, packaging groceries. Mike’s was the first store in Tarkin to offer the service of bagging groceries for customers, and he wanted it to go over right, hoping to bring in more business. After one of the other bag-boys had trained me in the fine art of putting a customer’s groceries in bags and taking them to the car, Mike himself had a talk with me, in his upstairs office.

“Philipp, I’m curious. What do *you* need this job for?” He was puffing on a big cigar, homegrown.

I told him the same thing I’d told the lady at the permit office.

He laughed. “That’s good enough, I guess. But I want *you* to know I won’t tolerate laziness. I know you’re the governor’s son and don’t really need the money. Usually, I like to hire people who really need the money, so they’ll stick around for a while and do good work. If I catch you standing around, you’ll be gone, okay? When you’re on my time clock, I expect you to pretend like you really need the money.”

I never could pretend that I needed the money, but I did good work. By the end of the summer, Mike had given me a raise to two newdollars per hour, and I was learning how to build and fill the displays at the end of the long aisles. When I

left the job to go on vacation with the Desters, he promised me I could come back to work, part-time, during the school year, if I wanted.

Yes, I know some people – even Destiny – thought it was a little morbid for me to work at the same location where my parents had met their death. Maybe I felt I was closer to them that way, knowing that somewhere near the front of the store, a cleanup crew had wiped up my parents' remains. Sometimes, I even fancied that a few of their molecules were hanging around the store, watching over me.

*

Most of the money that we were transferring cross-planet went into Destiny's bags, although I carried about a million of it. It wouldn't look right if I brought as many bags as a young woman – that's one thing that's never changed, I guess.

We left both our stolen guns and the dart gun buried in waterproof bags in the mountains.

New Planet Spacelines was a great way to go – the only way to go from Persiphone, since the other spacelines hadn't begun to move in yet. The ship was big, new, clean, and well equipped, which makes a difference. Even with hyperdrive, it takes a few days to get from one system to another, and it helps the morale of the passengers if they're in a nice ship. We rode out of the Hollis System enjoying the company of the other young people on the trip and watching Persiphone shrink from a huge spherical sun to a tiny dot of light, just before we Jumped. Of course, I'd Jumped before, once on the *Jeffries* from Tuf to Blabrow, and once on the *Skelton* from Astropolis IV to Persiphone. But I had been only five years old then, and didn't really remember it. I didn't feel a thing when the spaceliner went through hyperspace, although some people on board said they got a little sick. I was up and eating a full meal a few minutes after the Jump.

We watched Betelgeuse swell in the view screens, until we could see Justine. She was indeed a beautiful planet. There were two main continents, one populated mostly by Kelvods and the other predominately human. By a stroke of luck, the ship's time (Galactic Standard) was almost the same as Justine's main city, so there was no time-lag upon our arrival, like there had been when we departed from Tarkin.

The age laws were very loose in Carmenghia – Justine's largest city, as were quite a few other regulations. Anyone older than sixteen could go anywhere and do anything. Anyone under the age of sixteen had to be accompanied by someone – anyone – over that age. The law wasn't strictly enforced, however. Any establishment that served liquor merely decided for themselves whether or not a certain patron was older than sixteen.

Modesty laws were not what we were used to, since most colony planets are very conservative. At the spaceport, we immediately saw men wearing only minuscule shorts, and woman wearing the same, their upper bodies covered only in body-paint or colorful adhesive material.

Mr. Dester did pretty much as he had said he would, and his wife joined him beside the hotel's pool almost every day. It was the one place they could accept the lack of clothing. Allen, Jeff, Destiny, Norman and I took one tour to the Kelvod continent, New Kelvod. There a nice female Kelvod gave us a tour of some of the farming communities, and showed us the exact spot where the first Kelvod ship had landed. There was a memorial plaque there, as there were on most planets, commemorating the first touchdown. A perpetual hologram floating above the memorial sight depicted the first ship's crew.

Back on the human continent, we saw risqué movies, swam nude in the tame ocean, gambled at the casinos, ate at nice restaurants, and watched some of the basketball championship. The two conference champions, one hailing from Maze and the other from Turner's Planet, were duking it out in a nine-game series for the Galactic Championship.

When Destiny's three brothers all went to the final game, she and I sneaked off to downtown Carmenghia, to visit banks. We had decided to split our money into several different accounts, of slightly differing amounts. Feeling slightly foolish, I wore only a pair of shorts and comfortable, form-fitting slippers, while Destiny wore a thong and body-paint. At my insistence, she added coin-sized stickers to her nipples. Still, I couldn't help drooling over her, and noticed that many other men gazed long at her supple form.

*

"How much?" The pretty girl behind the desk looked stupefied when Destiny had mentioned depositing half a million newdollars. She put a shocked hand to her painted chest.

"Is that too much?" Destiny asked, while I looked around, acting bored.

"Oh, no," the girl replied. "Not at all. It's just that, well, it's not often we find people as young as yourselves with so much money. Where did you get all that?"

"Are you new here?" was all Destiny said. "Can I speak to your manager?"

"Well, there's no reason to do that. I think I can handle the transaction. I was just curious."

Destiny looked at her and smiled. "I'm sorry, miss, I didn't mean to be rude. Look, there are a lot of casinos around. A lot of wealthy people visit your city, I'm sure. My father owns Dester Mining Corporation from the Hollis System. I would just like to deposit my money in your bank, since there's been some trouble on Persiphone. I'm sure you've heard. We had two banks robbed recently, and I don't feel comfortable putting my money in them."

"No I hadn't heard," the young woman replied. "But it makes a lot of sense. I think you'll be happy with our bank, ma'am. We don't ask for any identification when making deposits, and to withdraw, all you'll need is the code word and number. Does that sound all right?"

We repeated that scenario with only minor variations at eight different banks, depositing half a million or so newdollars in each one, cashing in our colonial credits for the more common currency. The only problems we ran into was deciding what to do with Destiny's empty bags. At first, we were going to drop them in a dumpster, but we elected instead to buy new clothes with some of the money we had kept out for ourselves. We filled the bags with our new purchases. I thanked my lucky stars that Destiny's parents weren't snooping types.

I spent the last two days at the Mirage Casino and Resort with Destiny, drinking a little, and gambling a lot. That's when I decided never to gamble again, unless I left most of my money at home. I had started with a thousand newdollars, won eighteen thousand, and left with about ten. Not ten thousand, you understand, *just TEN*.

I used that ten to buy a box of new darts for our tranquilizer gun. I'm not against gambling on moral grounds. I think it's a fun and relaxing way to throw away your money. But don't count on getting rich. Don't leave your wife and kids hungry while you spend the last of your life savings at a casino. For some people, it can become addictive, and destroy their lives. I prefer to bet only on things where I have a reasonable chance of winning.

At least when you bet on a ball game, there are only two possible winners. In a casino, your odds are much worse.

*

On the way back to Persiphone, in a different ship, Destiny and I met in one corner of the ship's recreation room, and brought up a chessboard on the table's holographic surface. I knew just enough about the game to move the pieces correctly, so I was content to lose to her while we went over the code words and code numbers for our eight accounts. I found that it was easy to remember all the numbers and words, but the hard part was to associate the right word with the right number.

As soon as I was sure we had it down, she shoved the paperwork into the trash can, and moved her queen. "Checkmate."

*

It was after the return Jump that we heard about the Sleebbs. The scout ship *McRay* had been following a pre-planned route from star to star, so it was fairly easy to retrace her path. The all-purpose cruiser *Dragonius II* had done so, finding the *McRay*'s remote beacon still pulsating in the outer reaches of the last system she visited, later to be called the Iakola System. There, *Dragonius II* fought a minor skirmish with an alien vessel, and returned to Nubase to report.

For the entire trip into the Hollis System, all we saw on the screens were news reports and discussions about the incident. One officer in the Tuf Space Patrol said it was time for war, since a vessel of humankind had been unnecessarily provoked and had been forced to defend herself. A historian said he was anxious to study this new race, to see if we had finally discovered the race that had chased us off our planet of origin. A Trayak politician from New Earth scoffed at this in his strange rendition of Galactic Standard.

"The human race has complaining been for almost 500 years that they chased away from Terra I were," he said. "First, accused *my* people they did, saying criminals were we. We then fought for 90 years, thinking they were the ones who attacked us had. After this misunderstanding, termed popularly 'The War of the Deadly Misunderstanding,' was resolved, should we not now wait before conclusions we jump to? Why permit another race indignities to suffer, without first researching, and collection more information?"

An official from the Colonial Commission cautioned all viewers not to get too excited. "This new system is a long way from here," he said. "The crew of the *McRay* was in the business of cataloguing worlds for distant future use. Humans will not colonize many of the suitable planets found by the *McRay* and her sister scout ships for centuries or more. All of these star systems are hundreds of light years from the nearest human world. There is no cause for alarm."

I wasn't too worried about the war that people said was coming. I knew, of course, that our militaries were mostly untested in real conflict, and that some race – possibly the Sleebbs – had devastated our race once before. We had only recently passed the 10 billion-mark, which was barely more than the amount of humans that had been alive before the Exodus from Terra. But, for some reason, that warlike race had not returned to our area of space. Some historians and military "experts" said it was because they had expended their entire fleet of warships when they attacked the first time. Besides, I knew that the human race had already

survived that worst possible scenario, and I figured we would survive the next one.

It seems like every so often a new problem arises, and weeds out a large portion of humanity. The Great Flood had come, according to Destiny's Bible. Then the Ice Ages, according to science. A few centuries before humankind left Terra, there was a horrible plague that swept that world, killing millions. Composed of malaria, smallpox, yellow fever, the bubonic plague, and others, the Plague had devastated humankind, leaving scars on our history. Each time, thousands or millions died, leaving the human race smaller and more fit for the next struggle.

It was similar to a computer game I played once, at an arcade in Tarkin. I had to play through the first levels, avoiding unknown pitfalls and enemies, while learning how to use the controls. If I survived that first level, I went on to the next, harder level. Each level allows the player to gain new weapons, supplies and skills that will help him in the next level.

If a war with the Sleebb peoples was the next "level" for the human race, then I guessed we were ready. Many of us might die, and some of our cities might get destroyed, but we would live on, and make something better of ourselves.

*

That fall (2515 GS), I entered the 11th grade, and kept a part-time job at Mike's Supermarket. Destiny kept her job with New Planet, and went back to school, taking Advanced Self-Defense and Fighting Tactics, along with several business classes, working toward her degree. Mr. Dester returned to the asteroid belt, just in time to take credit for a new lode of important minerals. Harry traveled from city to city, meeting with town leaders in Batesville, Helmston, Babcock, and the new town of Midway. He took me with him on one weekend trip to Basplace, the new home of the Cyr Corporation's Headquarters.

At Basplace, the professionalism and the symmetry of everything there impressed me. Every building was shaped differently, but they all fit the city plan perfectly. The farms were marked off in perfect squares, the grass trimmed very short, the guard fences brand new, very high, and walked constantly by very lethal-looking guards. While I was touring – under guard – Harry met with Michael Hubbard Cyr, who was easily the richest human alive.

I was shown a luxury factory where the most expensive Cyr cars were built – the limousines, the armored cars, the government official transport vehicles (GOTVs).

They say that the Cyr Corporation was begun by one man, a distant ancestor of Michael Hubbard Cyr. Legend (and some history) says that the same man who started the Cyr Corporation had once been heroic fighter pilot for the Federation Military Service, back during the Ninety-Year War, when we were fighting the Trayaks and Grangers.

I was impressed by the richness of the place, and determined to someday rival Cyr in wealth.

Over winter break, Destiny and I robbed the only bank in Helmston, and the tiny Savings & Loan in Babcock, the total from both banks netting less than 200,000nd. We wore masks, gloves, and used our dart gun very effectively.

Harry set up a special police task force to investigate the continued bank robberies. Chief Donovan was asked to head up the task force, and rewards were offered to anyone who could help out significantly. Quite a few people came forward, giving their accounts of the robberies, but the stories were all so different that no conclusive evidence could be drawn from it all.

In the spring of 2516, I turned sixteen, and was given another raise at Mike's Supermarket. Destiny turned nineteen shortly thereafter, and stayed on with New Planet Spacelines. Jeff Dester sold the remaining half of his farm, and joined Allen and their father in the asteroid belt. Norman got a part-time job working in the Tarkin office for his dad's company. He cleaned the bathroom, mopped the floors, emptied the trash, cleaned the parking lot, etc., but his father signed his paychecks, and as soon as he was eighteen, he planned on going into space.

Mr. Dester's company, along with four other brand new mining companies, began to plan a new space city in the asteroid belt, so the families of the mining crews could live nearby. Mr. Dester hired a well-known architectural firm from the older worlds to design the station. He said he wanted the design to be similar to that of Nubase, in Tuf orbit, since that city had been built for expansion. He didn't want a space city that would soon become overcrowded and dirty, but rather one onto which new additions could be built. Nubase was comprised of a central sphere, with transport tubes running outward from it, linking it to expansion living spheres. New globular stations could in turn be added, in an outward-growing group of massive metal balls.

*

"Married? *Married*? What have you been snorting?" Destiny looked at me across the table of our new favorite restaurant, Millicent's Diner. "Don't tell me you're feeling guilty about what we've been doing?"

"No! No, Destiny. I don't think I've ever felt guilty about anything I've done, except hit that poor guard and his boss over the heads with that pipe. I just thought that's what you might be thinking, and, well, I thought I would put it into words for you, now that I'm old enough." I sipped from my dazzlewater.

"Oh." She grinned. "I was worried that you were saying 'we've got to get married, or it's over.' Since you put it that way, maybe I understand. We've been together for two whole years, except for that little Donovan thing—" we both grimaced "—and it's all been great. I can't imagine another guy being better for me than you, Philipp, even if you are a little dense sometimes." She caressed my hand on the tabletop.

"Ahh! True love!" We both jerked upright, only to find our waiter standing there, holding the check. "How wonderful," he went on, "to see two young lovebirds making eyes at each other across the table of a romantic diner. So, which one of you gets the check?"

I took the check, paid him, and waited while Destiny tipped him the full amount of the check, and then watched him walk away. This big-tipping policy was making us quite popular at some of the restaurants and theaters around town, although we didn't go out a whole lot. When we did walk in, though, we got quick and friendly service from the staff. It's amazing how much better waiters will treat their patrons, if they're being paid well for it.

Destiny returned to our subject of conversation. "Philipp, if you want to get married, then wait until I'm done with college, and you've turned eighteen. At that point, if you still think that's the right thing to do, I'll do it. And I'll stay with you until we die. I just think it's unnecessary; I know you love me, and you know I love you. I mean, I've never even seen you *look* at another girl. We've been together since you were a skinny orphan and I was still developing breasts."

"And develop is certainly what you've done, girlfriend."

She ran a hand slowly down the curved front of her blouse, and winked at me. "I'm not the only one, Philipp. Look at you. It's too bad they don't have rugby on

Persiphone yet. Or football. You'd be great. I'll always feel safe with your strong arms around me."

That reminded me of something she had been nagging me about. "Speaking of my strong arms, you keep saying I need to take that fighting class you're in. Do you really think I need to?"

"Yes. Philipp, almost everyone in the class is female, but I'll bet every single one could take you down before you landed a punch."

"Why would I want to punch a girl?"

"That's beside the point, Philipp. Remember what Billy did to me?" I saw the fire in her eyes, and nodded. "It can never happen again, Philipp. I'm ready now. In a hand-to-hand fight, I can lick just about everyone I know, except my teacher, and maybe one other girl in my class. But if someone of your size and strength knew what I know, you'd be indestructible. Just think about it."

"You really think anyone of those girls could take me down?"

"You wanna try?"

*

I lay on my face, gasping, about ten feet from Lt. Col. Jason Quivers, retired. Rolling over onto my back, I looked up at him. "That's pretty neat. Show me again."

"Are you sure, Phil?" The soft-spoken Quivers gave me a hand, pulling me to my feet. "That didn't hurt?"

"It hurt, sir. My father used to say, 'no pain, no gain.' I reckon I've found that to be true. If it doesn't hurt a little, then I haven't learned anything." I swung at him again, this time feinting first with one hand, then power-driving with the other. When I regained my equilibrium, I noticed that I was lying on my face, gasping, about ten feet from Quivers.

"Okay. I'll sign up."

*

School ended soon after that interview and I went back to full-time at Mike's, mostly in the afternoons and evenings, so I could take the summer classes taught by Colonel Quivers. Destiny took the classes with me, as did about ten other girls, all of them repeat students.

Quivers told us stories about his time as an infantryman in the Yurple Militia, and later when he was an instructor. He told us stories about bars, and nightclubs, and dark allies, and all kinds of improbable situations. But the stories began to sound increasingly true as the class went on.

I sparred with Destiny (both of us wearing pads and helmets). I sparred with the other girls, and with Quivers. I spent more time on the floor and nursing my wounds than anyone.

And Quivers claimed to be going easy on me.

I remember the first time I actually landed a punch on him. There was the loud *Thump* of my fist slamming into his head, and a sharp gasp from the girls in the room. Colonel Quivers rolled backward and landed on his feet, facing me, with his guard up.

"All right," he said, without even breathing heavily, "I guess it's time to get tough on you." And he did. It was another three weeks before I hit him again. That time he was out cold. From then on, I never hit him again. It wasn't because I didn't try to; he never let me. I fell more times in the remaining two weeks of

summer than I had in the whole time I was learning to walk as an infant. I landed on my rump, on my head, on my back, on my chest, on chairs, on other people. And I started to learn how to fall as Quivers did, rolling back to my feet.

After that time I knocked him out cold, he wouldn't let me spar with the girls anymore, although Destiny and I would sometimes play at it in our spare time. Usually, we just practiced holds and throws, but every now and then we really got into it. One time, she landed a nice shiner on me, and I fell to my back, feeling for blood or broken bones. She landed on top of me, kissing my face, and holding me.

"Oh, Philipp! I'm so sorry. Here, move your hands, baby, let me kiss it." I think the best sparring partner is the one who will kiss it and make it better after they've given it to you good. Especially if that partner is Destiny.

On the last day of class, Quivers pulled me to one side, and spoke in a low voice. "Philipp, I've enjoyed working with you this summer. You've shown me that I need to brush up on a few things, and that I'm starting to get old. In this business, youth and speed will eventually overcome age and experience, especially when the youth is quickly gaining experience." He put a hand on my shoulder. "I know you've got to finish up high school, and all that, but I hope you'll try to find some time to work with me in the evenings. I see a lot of potential in you, and I haven't had enough time to give you very much personal instruction in just this one summer."

He waved his hand around the room. "In just three months time, you've absorbed more punishment than these girls could possibly take. When you started, anyone of them could take you down at any time, but now the situation's been reversed with most of them. How would you like to learn some more martial arts? Like Aikido, karate, tae kwondo, and such like. This judo stuff will keep you safe on the street, from muggers and so on. But I can teach you a lot of offensive things that may really come in handy, as long as you don't get careless."

"I think I'd like that, sir."

He gave me his personal phone number, and told me to call him any evening during the school year, and he would meet me for personal instruction, free of charge. I got the feeling that while he had become quite popular on the campus, he was a little lonely, and was looking for a male friend. I thanked him, and entered one last sparring session with him. The girls gathered around, and watched him throw me around for a while. When we finally ended in a stalemate, they all applauded, and Destiny kissed me full on the mouth once I got untangled from Colonel Quivers.

*

All of a sudden, I was preparing to enter my last year of high school. Mike (my boss) gave all his high school kids that last weekend off, as a special favor, and I did what I do best. Destiny and I robbed another bank. Our sixth, if you count that reaching-over-the-counter thing when I was thirteen. This time, we did it in Tarkin, in broad daylight.

The weekend before, Destiny had dyed her hair black, colored her eyes brown and worn very nondescript clothes. She had taken the public bus to Batesville – they were running two or three times every weekend then – and shopped around, looking for a used car. She had paid cash for a 20-year old Cyr farm truck, and then driven around to various hardware stores, buying a box of ammo at each, and a few boxes of tranquilizer darts.

For her trouble, I had promised her 60 percent on our next take. She frowned at the suggestion. “Philipp, we haven’t really kept track of how much money is mine, and how much is yours, have we?”

“Well, we’ve always counted and divided after each take, baby.”

“Right, but we’ve always put the money in the same place, and we both have all the account information on Justine, right?”

“Yeah...” I wasn’t sure where she was going with it. Maybe I *was* a little dense. “And we’re planning on spending our lives together, right? I mean, the last time we talked, you were saying something about a big farm on a new planet...”

“Yeah.”

“So don’t worry about the percentages, and who gets what. It’s all *ours*, okay?”

“Okay. Sorry, baby, I wasn’t thinking.”

“Just be sure you start thinking when we’re in the middle of the action.”

*

We hit the biggest bank in Tarkin, at high noon on Saturday. Four armed guards, eight cameras, a lobby full of customers, and a *lot of money*. Just around the corner, out of sight of the street, we put on our gloves and masks, and loaded our guns. Destiny carried her little dart gun, and I had the two Jenkins & Wesson .45 automatics stuffed in my belt. Four loaded clips filled my back pockets, for a total of 90 bullets, if you count the ones already in the guns.

“Let’s go,” I said.

We came around the corner, and hurried to the front door. Coming in, I pulled out my two guns and hollered, “Everybody, GET DOWN! This is a robbery!”

Some of the customers started dropping to the floor, while employees and guards went wild. Destiny started dropping them like flies with her dart gun. I fired two shots into the ceiling, to let everyone know that darts weren’t the only things flying through the air.

That’s the only thing that saved us. One guard had his gun in his hand, but once he realized that I was willing to fire, he dropped it. Destiny started taping up the downed guards and some of the employees while I had one of the female customers put all of the guards’ guns into a canvas bag.

When she was done. I handed the bag to Destiny, and pointed my big guns at one of the tellers. “Where’s the manager!” She promptly fainted.

Another teller pointed to the rest rooms. I almost gave up. I could just picture the manager sitting on the pot, calling the police on his personal phone. I handed one of the real guns to Destiny, saying, “Sandy, I’m going in. Watch the door.”

She nodded, her new red hair dangling purposefully out from under the back of her mask. As I headed for the restroom, I heard her ordering the same customer I had used with the guns to start taping up all of the male customers and employees. I stepped into the rest room.

Just as I had feared, the manager was standing there holding his phone, talking quietly. I raised my gun to his head; he dropped the phone. I pointed the gun down and shot the phone, splintering it into hundreds of tiny plastic pieces. “Get out there and open that vault, before your face starts to look like that phone.”

He got. Destiny kept her lady servant busy taping up all the customers, shouting, “Tighter! If you can’t get it any tighter than that, and he gets out. I’m going to have to shoot him! You don’t want that, do you? Then tape him *tighter!*”

I took the manager to the vault, which he opened quickly. I held the gun to his head while he dumped stacks of bills into bags I handed him.

I followed him out into the lobby, letting him carry the four bags. Then I heard the sirens. “Sandy! Let’s get out of here!”

She peeked out the door. “Oh my god, Karl! They’re coming!”

The manager picked that moment to drop the bags. “Pick them up, scum!” I pressed the barrel of my gun into his temple, and grabbed him by the throat with my other hand, still standing behind him. “Walk!” I used the bulk of my body to push him toward the door. Destiny took my cue, and grabbed her woman servant – the only other person left untaped – and got behind her.

When I stepped out of the door, police cars were whizzing to a stop in front of the bank.

I took the gun away from the manager’s temple and fired in the general direction of the cars, heading toward the corner, walking backward, pulling my hostage in front of me. Destiny pulled her hostage along in the same fashion.

The police were pulling their weapons, and shouting. I heard Chief Donovan’s voice over them all, “Hold your fire! Watch the hostages!” He was drawing his own weapon.

I fired several more shots in their general direction, not aiming at any of them, and Destiny did the same. I heard our slugs hitting their cars, and ricocheting wildly. I whispered loudly into my hostage’s ear, “Stay with me, and don’t drop those bags, or you’re going to get it.”

Donovan yelled through his megaphone, “Don’t go any further! If you lay down your weapons now, and let the hostages go, it’ll go easier on you in court! Don’t try to fight this out. You’re surrounded!”

I didn’t hear any sirens behind me, but I looked anyway. It was a good thing I did, because two cops were coming up the alley down which I intended to go. I fired three shots in their direction, and then my slide locked open. I dropped the empty clip, and whipped another one in before my hostage could escape. But the two cops had taken cover. I turned the corner and flattened my back against the wall, keeping the bank manager in front of me. I heard Destiny firing shots toward the police as she made her way toward the corner. I was trying to count her shots, knowing that I was carrying all the spare clips.

I could see the barrel of a gun protruding over an air conditioning unit in the alley, where one of the cops had taken cover. Then I saw the blood. And the other cop lying in the alley. I fired blindly at the air conditioner, until it suddenly exploded, throwing the man behind it into the wall, and tumbling him onto the ground. I threw the bank manager to the ground and grabbed the bags, stuffing all four handles into my left hand. “Stay down!” I shouted to him, and fired up the alley toward the cops in the street.

Destiny came around the corner, literally dragging her hostage with her; I noticed that the slide on her gun was open. As she drew near, I slid an extra clip into her gun. She pressed the slide release switch, and resumed firing. Police officers were moving into position at the corner we had just come around.

When we got to the next corner, at the back of the bank, she let her hostage go, and we ran for it, occasionally firing behind us. We turned several corners, ran across another main boulevard, and down another alley. It seemed that the city was full of sirens, and we could hear the cops on foot behind us.

As we went around the last corner, where the getaway car was, I whispered, “Stick with the plan!” and stayed at the corner, keeping our tails at bay. Bits of brick were chipping away above my head as they returned my fire. Destiny ran to the car, set the controls, and hopped into the dumpster next to it, keeping the door held open.

I fired two last shots toward the cops, and sprinted toward the dumpster. Just before I hopped in, I vaguely noticed the new car we had bought take off down the street, running on automatic pilot. I slid into the dumpster, pulling the moneybags behind me. Destiny let the lid come down.

We sat there in the trash bin, ignoring the stench, trying not to breathe too loudly, and listening to the cops run around the corner firing at the rear of our car. They ran on down the street, shouting loudly into their police radios, and soon we heard sirens go by. It got really quiet on our alley, and really started to stink inside the dumpster.

Destiny dug around in the dark, and found the airtight bag she had stashed there earlier. We pulled out two water bottles and two sandwiches, and commenced eating in silence. I kept watch through a couple of holes in the dumpster's sides, and we stayed there until dark. We ate another sandwich each, still in silence, and still wearing our gloves. We made sure all the trash from our sandwiches and drinks were tucked deep under the rest of the putrid refuge, then got out.

There was no sign of the police. We guessed that they had found the empty car by now, and knew that we weren't in it. But they would have no way of knowing that we were *never* in it. Surely, they would assume that we had jumped out along the way. Destiny hadn't given her real name to the man from whom she had bought the car, and she hadn't taken the trouble of getting the title changed over, or buying insurance. There was no trail leading it to us.

Two streets over, we found her personal car where she'd left it, got in, and drove into the country. On a deserted riverbank, we burned the clothes we had worn during the robbery, along with the masks, the gloves, and the moneybags, after we transferred the money into new bags. I helped Destiny wash the temporary red dye out of her hair, and re-dye it as close to her natural color as we could. We tended the fire until I was sure that nothing remained. The ashes, I dropped into the stream, and then I washed my hands. We put the new moneybags in her car, just behind the seats, under a few sweaters, and went home.

*

I started the 12th grade two days later. Destiny started her third year of college a few days after that, still working for New Planet. I stayed on at Mike's, working about fifteen hours a week. It was my first day back at school when I heard that Police Chief William Donovan had been killed in a shoot-out after a bank robbery in Tarkin. I kept my composure while in school, and then cried later, in my bedroom in the governor's mansion. Destiny came over and consoled me, in the way that only a woman can console a man.

I wasn't crying for Chief Donovan. I figured any man that could spawn and raise a rapist son wasn't worth much. I was crying for myself. I had killed a man. I hadn't intended to, either. I had only been shooting in the general direction of the police cars, trying to ensure our escape. I could see my dad, in my mind's eye, shaking his head sadly.

*

That take was just over 4 million newdollars, the most we took for a long time to come. In fact, it was the most we could possibly take, unless we started taking bigger bills, or carrying more bags, or taking someone else into our confidence. Later in my criminal career, I had some other career criminals tell me that two people is one too many. I've had others say that a crew of four would have been

better for some of our jobs: more guns and more arms. I think two is the perfect number; one alone leaves no one to watch your back. Extra people means extra leaks and more things that can go wrong. It also means smaller shares of the money.

Six.

Before I move on with these memoirs and write about my life after Persiphone, there are just a few more things I'd like to say about my life there. One thing is that Persiphone is perhaps the most beautiful planet I have ever been on, all things considered. The climate, weather, gravity, soil fertility, education, geography – everything. I've never been on another planet quite like it. I guess everyone feels that way about "Home," but think about it. Out of the few hundred planets occupied by humanity, only a small percentage is as close to "Terran normal" as is Persiphone.

During the next eighteen months, Persiphone's population continued to grow rapidly, passing the 600,000 mark before I left her. Almost due south of Batesville, in the equatorial region of the continent Vertiga, a new farming community/city sprang into being, called Ekwado ("EK-wah-doh"). Also near the equator, on the main continent of Alana, Kleenair began to grow into a powerful resort city in its own right. The previously unoccupied continent Lichten sprouted its own city – the center of a mining community – called Kracota ("kruh-SOH-tuh," apparently from the word "beauty" in some obscure Terran language.) Basplace brought in the most people during that time, as the Cyr Corporation continued to move its headquarters there. Michael Cyr was now said to be living on a million-acre ranch, in a 49,000 square-foot home, most of which was underground and nuke proof.

Harry continued on as Governor of the planet, seeing me only occasionally, except when he took me with him on a winter vacation to Kleenair. He had gained quite a bit of experience in the running of planetary governments, during his years with the Colonial Commission, and he applied it wisely to Persiphone. Whenever the Planetary Legislature put up a fight on something, Harry just suggested putting the matter to a planetary vote. Almost every time, the population voted in Harry's favor. After a while, the legislature grew more cooperative. He handily proved to the people that *they* were the bosses, not some stuffed shirt fat cats in the capitol.

During the winter break of 2486, Destiny drove the getaway car while I single-handedly robbed the only bank in Midway, the only town on the continent of Troller. We got about 100,000 newdollars, not even a pimple on the body of loot we already had. That was our seventh bank robbery and our last until we left Persiphone.

*

During my senior year of high school, I worked at Mike's about four days a week, and worked out with Lt. Colonel Jason Quivers (retired) two days a week. Sometimes we met at the gym and sometimes we met in the wild country outside of town. He told me to start calling him Jason, since I was almost grown. That only confirmed my previous suspicion, that he was only giving me the personal training because of a subconscious desire for a friend. And that was fine with me. The only other friend I had was Norman Dester, and the two of us had grown apart since I had moved into town.

Jason and I continued sparring and practicing judo moves, just for warm up, then he began to teach me more efficient attacking moves, and ways to turn defense

into offense. I picked up a lot of Aikido, karate, and other ancient fighting arts. He showed me how to fight with the quarterstaff, with a sword, with a knife and how to fight barehanded against someone who carried such weapons.

I learned that the unarmed man always has the advantage – unless you're talking about long-range snipers, or nuclear war. But even if my opponent had a pistol, I could win; Jason proved it to me. I fired tranquilizer darts at him, starting at twenty yards, and I never hit him; he got my gun away from me and had me pinned on the ground before I could fire the last dart.

Then he set up targets and showed me how to fire a pistol the right way. He taught me how to make a real silencer for a pistol, how to make a makeshift silencer for any gun, how to shoot a rifle with a scope from long range, how to handle an automatic weapon, and how to correctly operate a hand blaster. Automatic weapons and hand blasters are illegal for civilians on most planets, but he had them, nonetheless. Jason was a true believer in the rights of individual citizens, having been raised on Yurple.

Many times, if she could work around her job and school, Destiny came out into the field with us and merely watched approvingly, like a mother watches her son pull out a chair for a lady. She saw more possible future applications for my new skills than I could possibly imagine.

I was just enjoying myself, while she was seeing our next score in her mind. She did join in from time to time, asking a quick question, or wanting to try a certain move. She learned a lot faster than I did, and Jason said women were like that.

“The woman is the highest animal on the food chain,” he said to me once, when Destiny wasn't there. “It's the highest mark that human evolution has ever achieved.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“They're smarter, faster, stronger. They can stand more pain or gravity than you or me. That's why most fighter pilots are women now. In fact, most space ship pilots are women. Also, they have tricks that you and I will never have. You know what I mean, Philipp. I've seen you stare into Destiny's eyes, and in those moments, you'd jump off a cliff if you thought that's what she really wanted you to do.”

I nodded, understanding. “But you said they're stronger, Jason. That's one thing I don't get.”

“I mean by weight, pound for pound. And by capability. If you ever run into a woman who weighs what you do, and has been trained exactly the same as you, the odds are ten to one that she can lift more than you. And probably run farther, too. Of course, I'm speaking of averages here; there are exceptions to every rule. I'm just saying: In combat, never underestimate the power of a woman. My instructor on Yurple was a woman.”

I changed the subject a little, or so I thought. “So, why did you ever leave a great planet like Yurple to come out here?”

“I fell in love with my instructor,” he laughed, showing the wrinkles around his eyes.

“We got found out. On Yurple, although many of the laws are liberal, militia members are not allowed to be involved with each other. We got dishonorable discharges from the Militia, and life was never the same after that. She went to Wederr, and I came here.”

I fell into silence then, thinking about the power of a woman. I couldn't imagine my Destiny ever being the cause of my life's ruin. Later, I remembered how devastated I had been when she left me the first time, for Billy Donovan. I reflected that if Billy had not been an idiot, he would probably still have her today.

*

It caused a little stir at the high school when I took Destiny Dester to my senior prom; she was by far the most beautiful girl in the room, although Norman's girl-of-the-day wasn't too bad either. More than one student approached her for a dance; she politely turned all of them down. That was one of the happiest nights of my life: I had Destiny, I was the Governor's son, I was part of the first crop of true Persiphone students, and I was secretly very, very rich.

*

When I graduated from high school, early in the summer of 2487, Norman Dester and I, along with a few other students, received special honors. We were the first people ever to graduate from a Persiphone public school, after having completed every grade in a Persiphone public school. All the students before us had attended at least one year of school on some other planet. I had started school immediately after arriving there, as had Norman and a few others. It was a sign that our planet's population was putting down roots, becoming an established world.

The high school band played some special songs for us, commemorating our "achievement," and Governor Howard Wingate Bates III (my adopted father) made a short but regal speech about the historical sense of it all. He also mentioned that in a few years, there would be students graduating who had *been born* on Persiphone, true natives of the New World. He said that's when a planet is no longer a new world, a colony world, but a fully developed world – when there are adult citizens living there, who can claim that planet as a birthplace.

There were tears in several eyes; I know I cried. There, in the middle of the graduation ceremony, I felt my father's hand on my shoulder, and my mother's arm around my waist. I was glad they had decided to come to Persiphone. If I had stayed on Tuf, my graduation would have been just another ceremony.

*

The very next day after graduation, I was promoted to "head dry goods clerk" at the store, which meant I was in charge of all the stockers at Mike's, during the daytime hours. And I was second only to the Dry Goods Manager, who worked pretty much whatever hours he wanted. I made 2.7 newdollars per hour, and worked about fifty hours a week, all that summer, even helping Mike to open his second store, in Midway. That meant I was making about 150nd per week, most of which went back into my savings account (the one I had opened with only ccl00, accompanied by Destiny, all those years ago.)

Destiny worked her way up in New Planet Spacelines, which also ran a shuttle service to the other cities on the planet.

While Destiny entered her fourth year of college, I kept working for Mike – on the very location where my parents had died; I guess in away, it made me feel close to them – and training with Jason.

Jason said there was definitely a war coming on; since negotiations with the Sleebb people weren't coming along well. He said that both human and Trayak historians were now in agreement that the Sleebbs were indeed the ones that had attacked and sacked both races' planets, around five centuries ago, and that it called for retribution.

I didn't really see the point. I knew they had sacked Old Home Terra – that's what history says, I wasn't there. And I knew that they had supposedly bombed Tuf until the Trayaks had been forced underground. But that had all been *five hundred years ago*. So much had happened since then, and we had grown so much. In fact, we should be thanking them for forcing us off the planet.

For those of you who are not up to date on your ancient history, let me fill you in. According to Millal Ba – the great and legendary leader who had rescued a few million people from Terra – in his autobiography, Terra had been attacked by unknown aliens a few years before the Exodus. The Forces Under Zarcon had fought them off – barely. In the few years before the next attack, the wreckage of one of the alien ships had been studied by FUZ scientists. Soon, the secret of the aliens' star drive had been discovered, and new hyperdrive units had been installed in every FUZ ship. That had been shortly after the end of the 20th century.

Then, the aliens had returned, en masse. They had devastatingly bombed and effectively destroyed the surface of Terra. Because of the foresight and brilliant leadership of Millal Ba – which he denied in his book, a few million humans were rescued, and escaped the system. It took ninety years of war with the Trayaks, Grangers, and Strangers to figure out that we were fighting races who had also been devastated by invading aliens. I guess you could say that humanity's main goal for the last five hundred years has been to find out who those aliens were, and where they came from.

If those aliens had not attacked us at all, we would not have the hyperdrive that makes our space travel so easy now. Humans would still be mostly confined to the crowded, polluted and used-up surface of Terra. Of course, FUZ had sent out a few interstellar ships, powered by a primitive form of the gravitic drive we use now, but those ships would have taken a few dozen years to cover the mighty distance between even the closest stars.

And if the aliens had not attacked the second time, completely wrecking the corrupt governments of Old Home Terra, the almost Utopian societies in which we now lived would have never existed.

Surely, five hundred years is long enough for a race to get over a grudge.

*

“Are they going to draft me, like they drafted those kids back during the Ninety Year War?” I asked Jason.

“Oh, I doubt it, Phil,” he answered, looking into the sky. “Back then, there weren't enough humans to hold down all the planets we occupied, and we were fighting for our lives, although a lot of it was based on a misunderstanding. But now, there are ten billion humans, a billion each of the Trayaks, Grangers and Strangers, and almost two billion Kelvods, all somewhat warlike races, in their own way, and two of which claim direct contact with the Sleebbs.”

He hefted the sniper rifle in his arms lovingly. “With the humans and the Trayaks leading the way, and the Strangers acting as a medical corps, and supply lines from the Grangers and Kelvods – at least that's the way I'd set it up – we would probably win fairly easily. Especially since the Sleebbs don't know how many planets we occupy now. We got the hyperdrive from them, you know. From one of their abandoned ships in Terra's solar system.

“To answer your question, I think there would be enough volunteers to win. I know I'll volunteer. You could too, you know, and have your pick of assignments, with what I've taught you.”

I decided that I might participate, but only because the Sleebbs had attacked the scout ship *McRay*, not because of some centuries-old feeling of needing revenge. But I didn't really want to. The Sleebbs weren't attacking our worlds, now, were they?

*

After that discussion, Jason kept training me in all kinds of fighting tactics, along with new things he remembered from his training on Yurple. I learned how to make several different kinds of wilderness shelters, fashion weapons from primitive materials, make a bulletproof vest from items found in clothing and hardware stores, and properly kill, clean and cook a lot of small animals and fish.

One day I said to him, "If you know all this stuff, you could probably colonize a planet by yourself. You wouldn't need anyone's help, or any big shipments from some home base."

He laughed, and it quickly turned into a guffaw. He slapped me on the back, pretty hard. "Well, yeah, except for one thing. There's one thing I really don't know how to do."

When I looked at him with a big question mark on my face, he laughed heartily again. "Philipp, you have to have *women* to colonize a planet. The one thing I don't know how to do is have descendants by myself. That's one thing you have to have women for. I told you, they're better than we are. And it's the women who usually want the cities, and restaurants, and video, and all that stuff, at least at first. I'd be happy on a planet with just a few guys like us, who know how to shoot, and take care of ourselves. But when we died, it would all be over. We wouldn't have any descendants to pass our knowledge on to."

He looked me straight in the eye then. "You hang on to that jewel of a woman you've got there, Phil. You'll go places with her. She's smarter than most women, harder working than most men, and a better fighter than most people I know. Besides that, when you wake up in the morning, you'll have something pretty to look at. That's important, too. Yeah, you hang on to that one."

I looked at him, straight back in the eye. "I have every intention of hanging onto her."

*

In the early part of 2488 (Galactic Standard), I turned 18, and Harry reluctantly gave me all my papers. He had my birth certificate, colonization records, immunization records, and others. He said I could stay on with him, if I wanted to, until I found something better. I did stay there a little while.

Then Destiny turned 21, and graduated from Tarkin University with a degree in business. That degree gave her a significant raise with New Planet, and she began to have offers to transfer out to a bigger office on a more populated planet.

I talked about these offers with her, since I was reluctant to leave Persiphone. She disagreed.

"Philipp, you knucklehead," she chided me. "How are we supposed to rob more banks, if we're stuck on this planet? We'll have to move somewhere, eventually, if we're going to spend any of it, you know. Too many people know us here. If we're on a planet where no one knows who we are, we can buy a nice house, nice cars, expensive clothes, or whatever we want. We could even get that farm, on an empty planet, that you keep talking about."

Again, I had to agree that she was right – I was just too slow. I guess I'm one of those men who will never figure anything on his own. When it comes to the nuts and bolts of some particular thing, I can be a genius. I can plan a perfect bank robbery, build an a-grav unit from scratch, or run a business with the ledger books in the black. I think they call that “tactical thinking.” What I can't do is see the “big picture,” sometimes. I get locked into one mode of thinking and stay there. Destiny can't build – or even repair – an a-grav unit, or run a business without help, but she can see how the businesses, the bank robberies, the a-grav machines, and everything else fits together, in one giant economic plan.

When Destiny thinks of the Sleetbs, for instance, she doesn't see them as the race that attacked the *McRay*, or the beings who sacked Terra five hundred years ago. She wonders about their culture, their political organizations, and their level of technological development.

In fact, she should be the one writing this account. I could just give her the facts of my life before I met her, and some dates and places, and she could wrap it all up. I see my life as a series of events, while she sees my whole life as one thread in the giant fabric of space time.

At least, I think so. All I know is that she sees more than I do when she looks at something. That's how she beats me at chess, almost every time.

*

Norman Dester shipped out to join his father and older brothers. Mrs. Dester went with him, since some of the living quarters had been finished on the new space city, *Habdes I*, and she didn't like the idea of living without her husband for such a long period of time. That left Destiny alone with her house and small plot.

With Mr. Dester's permission, I moved in with Destiny that summer. Even though he was a very religious and moral man, he was still understanding. I think he knew that Destiny and I had been sleeping together, although the subject was never mentioned. He had never had a bad word to say to me, and in fact had written quite a nice letter of reference to Mike, when I first started working at the supermarket. Destiny and I were both working full time, we kept the house clean, and we tended to the garden. Occasionally we invited Harry and his fiancée (Marianne Waters, the mayor of Helmston) over for dinner. About once a week, Jason Quivers visited us, with Deneen, the girl he was dating – one of Destiny's classmates from Tarkin U.

Jason, Deneen, Destiny and I continued to spar, to hunt, and to speak philosophically about war, colonization, women, and other things. The four of us went on a few double dates and a few camp-outs in Persiphone's wild country. Deneen was a quiet young woman who obviously loved Jason very much. I think he was finally starting to get over his last lost love. I hoped so – I was starting to know too many people who couldn't make their relationships work. Harry: divorced twice. Jason: never married, but separated from his lover on Yurple. Mike (my boss): still married, but not happily.

It was good to see some of them hitting a streak of good luck for once.

*

One day, when Destiny and I were lying in bed in the cool of the evening, letting the night's breeze ruffle the curtains, she brought up the subject we had left alone for nearly two years. “Remember when you talked about marriage, Phil?”

Her head was nestled comfortably on my shoulder, and I could feel her eyelashes move when she blinked.

“Yes, my dear. I remember. You said that when you graduated, and I was eighteen, if I still thought it was the right thing to do, you would marry me.”

“Well, you’re eighteen now, and I’ve graduated.”

“So you’re asking if I still want to get married?” I looked down at her beautiful green eyes, looking up at me.

“No. I’m proposing. Will you marry me, Philipp Kaplan Bates? Because *I* want to.”

Very gently, I moved enough so that I could kiss her softly on the lips. “Yes. You have always been my Destiny, my Fate, and I will follow where you lead. When?”

“Ah. Not now. Not here. I mean after we leave Persiphone.”

“Still ‘yes’, dear. When are we leaving?”

Yes, I still wanted to stay on Persiphone. I wasn’t sure I could adjust to any other world. But I decided that I could put up with frigid winters or desert summers, high gravity or no gravity, hundred-hour days or ten-hour days, crowded city or empty planet – or any other conceivable condition, if it meant that Destiny would be by my side.

We stayed on Persiphone for the rest of the summer, long enough to be best man and bridesmaid at Jason and Deneen’s wedding. We would have attended Harry and Marianne’s wedding, but they had decided to put that off for a while, since they were both still in office, in different cities. I turned down Mike’s offer of promotion (he needed a new Dry Goods manager, since his present one went to manage his third store, in Batesville), telling him I’d look him up if I ever came back. I also reminded him that my parents had died somewhere between register 4 and register 7, near the kids’ candy stand. I made him promise never to forget.

Mike shook my hand, looking a little misty-eyed, for once. “Well, Philipp,” he said, “if I can’t lure you into staying with a promotion, then I guess I can’t lure you at all. But I know you’ll do well wherever you go. And if you ever need a reference, look me up. Thanks for all your hard work.”

I just nodded, a little emotional myself.

Destiny accepted a promotion from New Planet Spacelines, to go to Junxle, one of the seven oldest worlds. We sent a letter to her parents a few minutes before we boarded our ship, all of our hoarded money and weapons in her bags.

*

Even though Junxle is one of the oldest colonized worlds, her rotational period was nearly sixty hours, so she had never been heavily colonized, although the climate was fair to tropical. The fact that Junxle was so old meant that Junxle’s government was stricter than those I was used to (Persiphone and Justine) were. The fact that she was not too heavily populated meant that she was not nearly as strict as those of Tuf or Turner’s Planet – somewhere on the middle ground, as governments go. I had to have a passport (I had never had an ID before, except my birth certificate, from Tuf), but that was just for the sake of customs. Upon arriving, after two Jumps, my bags were run through a scanner, but not opened. Destiny’s bags were not checked at all. The man at the Customs Desk asked merely, “Do you have anything to declare?” after looking casually at my passport.

“No, sir. Unless my girlfriend is classified as a ‘planetary treasure’ from back home.” I pointed her out, standing near the New Planet desk.

He winked at me. “Maybe you’ve got something there, son. Stay close to her, though; there’s a lot of rough types around here.” He stamped the passport and we left the spaceport for our hotel.

*

The city of Farlaya, Junxle, was quite a change from Tarkin. When you’re used to a whole planet having less than a million people, one city with 1.5 million can be quite a shock. Since my toddler-hood, I had never seen a building higher than four or five stories. There were at least ten in Farlaya higher than a hundred stories, sprouting up into the sky, as if defying gravity to pull them back down. There were hundreds of others, looking as if they had been thrown together in a hurry. The streets of Tarkin, Persiphone, had been drawn out before hand, and all of them were as straight as surveying equipment could make them. In Farlaya, though, the main highways on the map looked as if a child had drawn them. In Tarkin, you could get along just by being friendly and hard working. In a city like Farlaya, it helps to have money too.

Well, money wasn’t really a problem for us.

Another thing that wasn’t a problem for us was the rotational period of sixty hours.

Destiny and I had gotten along on very little sleep for a few years by then, sometimes not sleeping at all for several nights. I found that I could easily stay awake for the forty hours of daylight, and sleep most of the twenty hours of darkness. Most businesses in Farlaya scheduled their employees for ten-hour shifts, splitting them into six shifts a day. Most employees worked two shifts each day, for the three-day week.

A Galactic Standard Year has 8,760 hours in it; that leaves exactly 146 Junxle days, which the Junxle government long ago divided into three-day weeks, making about 49 weeks per GS year. A lot of people (originally) had found it difficult to adjust to this, and took to sleeping twice a day. I met dozens of people who still did this; they slept once during the dark hours, and once again when the sun was straight up, keeping their biological clock more closely tuned to the human norm.

I wasn’t a normal human, I guess. Neither was Destiny. Very often, she would work her two ten-hour shifts in a row, then have forty hours before her next shift.

One thing that was unnerving for me was the amount of people. I had spent most of my childhood and adolescence living on a farm outside Tarkin, where I didn’t see anyone at all, except the other students at the small school. When I rode the bus into Tarkin, I had always thought of it as “going into the big city.” Later, when I lived with Harry in town, I grew used to seeing homesteaders coming into town to buy supplies or to get their farming equipment fixed. There were many businesses and shops in Tarkin, all of which had their employees. And all of those employees had homes.

But Farlayawas a different story altogether. Every where I turned, there were hundreds and thousands of people, scurrying about their daily business. The roads and skies were packed with vehicles of all kinds, and everyone constantly seemed to be in a hurry.

I got used to it, I guess, but I never liked it.

One thing that I did like was seeing so many Trayaks and Grangers. At first, I was curious –it’s not everyday that a person on Persiphone sees a blue-skinned man – but soon, I realized that they were people too, each of them trying to make a living, just like everyone else.

The fashions, of course, were different as well. Not as risqué as the comfortable nudity in Justine's resorts, but not as strict as on Persiphone either. Nudity was against the law, for both women and men, and the genitalia had to be covered. The courts had long ago determined that completely transparent clothing was the same as nudity, so that was also out. Other than that, though, quite a bit was allowed. I tried not to gawk at the women on the streets and in shops, wearing translucent tops or pants, or the women who wore completely clear blouses with body-paint underneath.

It helped that Destiny was with me. Even when she wore more conservative clothing, I felt like a king with her on my arm. If I had been alone, I think I might have turned into some kind of sex-crazed stalker. Eventually, though, I grew accustomed to the social norms of Junxle's society, and thought nothing of it.

*

Within two weeks, Destiny had settled into her new office at the spaceport, and I had bought two cars. One was a Cyr Luxury Sport – a few years newer than Destiny's old one we had left back home, and the other was a Grumman Cruiser LX, for me. To buy my car, I used my new Junxle ID card, which read Philipp Kaplan. For the other, I used my passport for identification, which read Philipp Bates. I figured that way the financial records would be a little harder to track down.

We bought the house under Destiny's name. It was nothing fancy, but definitely better than most people our age could afford. It was on a small plot by itself, on the edge of town: two bedrooms, two baths, a nice modern kitchen, and two sizable living areas. There were tall hedges all around the property, and two nice porches, one facing east into the sunrise and the other facing west, into the sunset. I had withdrawn all the money from my trust fund just before I left Persiphone, about 80,000nd worth, along with a couple of thousand from my personal savings account. I went around to several banks in Junxle, using the same trust fund paperwork to deposit 80,000nd in each one. In this way, I got rid of much of our extra cash. Destiny made several large deposits of her own, making sure we always had enough cash on hand at home to get us out of a sticky situation. I figured between the banks on Justine and the banks in Farlaya, we had about 9 million newdollars tucked away. And gaining interest too, at close to four percent, on average. Destiny used some of our money to buy some stock in the Cyr Corporation, now based on Persiphone. The Cyr family had been around for a few centuries now, and their business had prospered and grown the entire time. I bought some shares in the Colonial Commission, figuring that that could never be a bad deal, since the human race would never quit having babies and sending them to new planets.

*

There is a school of thought that claims criminals (like myself) are "victims of society." That may be true to varying degrees, depending on the criminal in question. There are others who blame traumatic events in the childhood years for an adult criminal life. Still others say people like me are just lazy, and are trying to "beat the system," finding an easier way to make a living. Maybe for some "criminals," all of these are true. If a certain boy experienced beatings from his father, and was constantly starved for attention as a child, then was "let down" by the government,

and still later found out how easy it would be to steal; it is conceivable that he would see crime as the only “way out.”

Many of these criteria apply to me, I know. My parents were taken from me. And stealing *is* easier than working. But I don’t think any of this is *true* for me, or for Destiny. We both came from good homes, although mine only lasted for thirteen years or so. We had both had good jobs on a fresh, empty planet, and found ourselves in high stations in life, with her father quickly becoming a multi-millionaire, and my “father” being the governor of Persiphone, and a good one at that.

And I don’t think the “lazy” part applies either. From as early as I can remember, I was working, either on the farm, on homework, or at the Supermarket. Destiny worked her way through Tarkin University (except for that small scholarship), and kept her job with New Planet when we moved. Greedy? Maybe a little; I could think of many things I could do with 9 million newdollars. But perhaps the main reason we got into the trade of bank robbing was the thrill, the excitement, and the blood-boiling adrenaline rush that comes when you’re stuffing millions of dollars into a bag. (Besides that, we were good at it.)

Our society really didn’t have a lot to offer in the way of excitement. No wars going on, until the Sleebb threat came along. No famines, plagues, or anything like that. Sure, there were video shows, sports of all kinds, casinos, nightclubs, strip clubs, amusement parks, and so on. But are there *really* any new plots available for these video shows? And do the professional basketball players ever come up with any innovative moves? Is there a casino where you won’t find homeless losers wasting their last dime? Are there any new pickup lines to use at the nightclubs? Is there anything at a strip club that I haven’t seen before? Not really. To me, these things were to be experienced once, just to see what they were like, and then they were old hat.

But robbing a bank gets my juices flowing every time, and I can tell that it does for Destiny, too. Her eyes light up, her cheeks get flushed, her breathing gets faster; she becomes even more beautiful – if that be possible – in the middle of a bank robbery. And afterward, she is always ready to celebrate in bed. It’s robbing banks that floats my boat, rings my bell, burns my toast, gets me off – whatever cliché you want to use. And to rob banks, you’ve got to do other things, like learn how to hide money, and disguise your spending. You have to plan, practice, and prepare (“Proper Prior Planning Prevents Piss-Poor Performance.”) You have to know your weapons, choose your escape routes, and expect the unexpected – like that one bank manager I found in the bathroom. And you might end up ending someone’s life, just to save your own or that of someone you love – like when I killed Donovan, and those other two cops in Tarkin.

Do I feel bad about ending three lives? (Four, counting Donovan’s son, but of course I didn’t feel bad about him!) Chief of Police Donovan was miserable, separated from his wife, his son a dead rapist, and himself a failed police chief. I may have done him a favor. The other two cops? One was single, and an alcoholic. The other was married, and cheating on his wife.

Better that she should suffer from his death in the line of duty than to find out he was banging some teenager from the outer farms. Besides, what happens after you die? According to science, the molecules of your body rejoin the dust from whence they came. According to Christianity, you’re either going to Heaven or Hell, based upon your own relationship with “God.” According to other religions, you may come back to be another living creature, or spend your days in Valhalla, or rowing along the Nile (whatever the “Nile” is.)

Either way, I didn’t feel too bad about putting them down. Besides, if they had followed police procedure, all of them would be alive today. Only occasionally

did I lament the fact that *I*, personally, had committed murder, and only because I knew my father would disapprove.

*

While *Destiny* worked, I studied. I don't mean I went to college. I mean I studied the criminal element that the Customs officer had been talking about. I had a reason for wanting to learn more about the "underworld." I didn't want to associate with them. I didn't want to be known as "hanging with that crowd." I wanted to buy a ship. And after all the trouble *Destiny* and I went through to cover up our car and house purchases, we didn't want to blow our cover by just calling up the Grumman Shimki Corporation, and ordering a space ship. I decided that the only way to buy a ship without some government agency finding out about it would be to go through a less-than-legal process. Especially with cash. Most of the major robbery crimes throughout history have been solved because the criminals in question spent their money badly.

At first, I just read the police blotter in the daily papers, looking for neighborhoods that had an unusual amount of crime. Then I got a bright idea. I visited several realty offices, and acted as if I was looking for a home. At each office, I asked about bad neighborhoods, saying I sure as hell didn't want to end up in any of them. At each office, the same answers were given.

I marked off two areas on a map as "bad places to raise a family."

Then I began hanging around in those areas, visiting local bars and restaurants, always looking sharp, always armed, always driving my new Grumman, but not always alone. Several times, I took *Destiny* with me. She knew why I was doing all of this, and congratulated me for thinking on my own. She said the only thing she was worried about was my safety. I assured her that after all that time with Jason Quivers, I wouldn't have too much trouble.

After only a few weeks, I began meeting people. I learned their names, addresses, vidphone numbers, type of vehicle – anything I could learn about them by just being observant and friendly. In return, I didn't give away much. Anyone watching could see that I dressed well for someone my age, and drove a new car. I always tipped well, and never said much. No one I met ever guessed I was only eighteen years old, since I did my best to give the impression of a refined gentleman.

For months, I spent at least three evenings a week in these areas of town, meeting all kinds of people, eavesdropping on conversations, making friends with waitresses and bartenders. The rest of my time I spent working around the house, checking out the list prices of new spacecraft, exercising, and scoping out the city's banks.

I found that a brand new space ship didn't really cost that much. A middle class family could (barely) afford an a-grav space yacht in which to tour the local solar system. A new ground car, on the average, cost about 10,000nd. One of these space yachts (a control cabin, a tiny bunkroom, a bathroom, and a galley) cost about 25,000nd. Of course, these ships were limited to the solar system, having no hyperdrive, but they made good vacation vehicles. The cheapest hyperdrive vehicles were barely larger than these a-grav yachts, but started at 200,000nd. This extra cost is for the hyperdrive itself, plus the powerful computer that keeps track of the planetary movements all over the galaxy, plus the huge tax most planets place on hyperdrive units. Small courier/cargo ships cost about 900,000nd. A medium-sized freighter was running about 2,000,000, and a small passenger ship could cost as much as 10,000,000nd. None of which would be a

problem for me. Except that I didn't want to get caught spending money that I wasn't supposed to have.

I thought about buying a used ship – most developed planets have a used shipyard somewhere, or a ship “graveyard.” In the end, though, I made a sad commentary on the state of affairs in our society by deciding that criminals were more trustworthy than used ship salesmen.

Also, during this time, Destiny and I got married. Several times. The first time, she became Destiny Kaplan (we always considered this to be our real wedding). The second time, she became Destiny Bates. The third time, I took her name, and became Philipp Dester. In other “marriages,” we switched up our names in other ways, sometimes hyphenating our surnames, or using “Kaplan” as my first name. In this way, we acquired several “legal” IDs.

Then my lucky break came; it was early in 2489 GS, sometime in the middle of Junxle's year. Destiny and I had been sitting in a restaurant, watching people and listening, when she got up to go to the bathroom. To do so, she had to go through the bar area, where she received several whistles. Neither one of us minded that very much. What I minded was the ugly brute who stood up from his barstool and headed toward the restrooms at that point.

When I saw him stop and wait, just outside the women's restroom, I got up and made my way toward him, walking at a normal pace through the half-empty establishment. I got to him just as Destiny made her exit from the bathroom. I wasn't looking for a chance to show off my fighting skills, I was merely making sure that my one and only love would not experience any unpleasantness.

“Pardon me,” she said to him, trying to squeeze past.

He moved, so that his bulk filled the tiny hallway. Then he said something to her that made her gasp (which I won't repeat here), so I tapped him on the shoulder. “Shove off!” he roared, and moved to help me along.

I grabbed his arm, and yanked him backward. “Look, mister. That's my wife you're talking to.”

He just grinned sloppily, and tried to move back into the hallway. “And what're you gonna do about it, punk?”

My hand shot out, just as Jason had taught me, and hit the right spot on the man's throat. And just as Jason had promised, the mountain of flesh sank to the floor, his eyes rolling up into his head. I glanced both ways to see if anyone had seen anything. No one had. I then called out, “Bartender! Please, help this man. I believe he's had too much to drink.”

Within seconds, several employees were dragging the limp man to the front door, where they dropped him on the sidewalk. I walked back to our table, with Destiny clinging tightly to my arm. “My hero. Again,” was all she said, in a tight whisper. After we had been sitting down for a few minutes, one of the other men that had been sitting at the bar put his cigar out, and meandered his way over to our table.

“Do you mind if I sit down, sir?” I noticed that he too was dressed nicely, and carried himself well.

“Not at all. Can I get you anything?” I studied him, and noticed that he was studying me in the same way. He looked to be about forty years old, short and wiry, with jet-black hair and eyes.

“No, thank you. I saw what happened to Dan, over there.” He looked in my eyes, without expression.

“And?” I kept the expression out of my face as well, trying to find out where he was heading with his line of conversation.

He glanced at Destiny, then looked back at me, raising an eyebrow. “Can we talk?”

“Go ahead. This is my wife, Destiny, and I am Philipp. And you are?”

“Oh. Pardon my manners. My name is Gwandon. James Gwandon. I saw you hit Dan. Where did you learn that?”

“That’s not important, is it? Maybe next time ‘Dan’ will learn to be more polite to a lady. And her husband.”

“Of course, Philipp. My point is this: if you are not presently employed, I think I may have a job for you.”

*

As it turned out, “Dan” had been a good friend of James Gwandon. Gwandon worked for one of the two main crime bosses in Farlaya, and was head of the bodyguard service. Dan had been a recent addition to the bodyguard crew, mainly because of his imposing size. I took the job, after a lengthy examination by Gwandon.

He tested my accuracy with several weapons, had the organization’s physician give me a complete check-up – which I passed with flying colors, and briefly tested my skill in hand-to-hand combat. Then he outlined my job duties: Never let anyone touch the boss, not even cops with warrants (unless the judge had personally called first.) While at home, the boss was not to be bothered, except by those on a short list. While the boss was traveling, or visiting “business” contacts, I was to keep my eyes peeled for possible members of the opposing organizations or secret police. The boss was The Boss; if he told me to get coffee or clean the toilet, that was my job. I was to be paid 200nd a week, plus a 1,000nd bonus for every assailant I personally apprehended.

After all that rigmarole, I found myself playing cards most of the time. I learned that The Boss stayed at home most of the time, and that the home pretty much guarded itself. There were dozens of security cameras, which I took turns watching and there was a high wall around the place, with a security mesh overhead (to keep cars from flying over the wall.)

Once in a great while, I took a turn standing with another goon outside the Boss’s door, and on even more rare occasions, I played a game of chess with Gwandon.

Then I began asking around about a ship.

Seven.

Destiny didn’t like the fact that I was working for a known criminal figure, and let me know it. She said crime bosses always have cops of some kind watching them. I agreed with her, of course, but I felt it was the best way to buy a ship of our own. We had a few “disagreements,” because she thought I should be able to buy a ship without being in his employ. Maybe she was right – I don’t know. Once, she even said that maybe we shouldn’t get a ship, if it meant I had to get that close to the police. After several months, I was ready to quit, myself, when I found the ship I wanted. I had worked for “The Boss” for about a year, known to him only as “Philipp Dester.”

For one million newdollars, I bought a 150-foot barque, from a contact I had met while working for the Boss. The chassis had begun as a Shimki-made scientific cruiser, hence the clear bubble dome on the upper side. It had since been refitted

as a luxury yacht, with back-yard type deck furniture replacing scientific instruments under the dome, and a game room and a spa replacing other equipment inside.

I paid a little extra to have further refitting done; I took out the game room and added a wide back door. This created a small cargo area, and the door was large enough to drive a large car through. I also upgraded the ship's meager defense system. It had been equipped only with COWS (Close Object Warning System), and the AADS (Asteroid Avoidance or Destruction System). To these, I added several rocket launchers and a new program for the AADS, which allowed the lasers to aim at other space ships or objects besides asteroids.

*

It wasn't long after buying the ship (and several well-faked registrations) that I quit working with Gwandon and the Boss. I quit without hard feelings, and remained in contact with Gwandon who continuously tried to get me to rejoin.

Maybe I got a little greedy, but I got the idea into my head that Gwandon could help us in our own trade. After discussing it thoroughly with Destiny, we let Gwandon help us with our next robbery. I was a little nervous about it, but I made sure that we never met him at our home, and that neither of us had been followed. The only reason that Destiny agreed to let him in on our scores was the fact that he had always been very discreet, and she didn't think he was the type of person that would leak any information.

Destiny drove the car, while James and I went inside the bank in Pleasure City, Junxle. We made three million newdollars and gave James one million. That was in late 2489. By early 2490, the three of us had robbed three more banks, always giving James a third of the take.

When Destiny got another promotion and transfer (to Tuf), James Gwandon made a tough decision. He quit working for the Boss, and came with us. I thought it would be an easy decision, since we were making so much money, but I didn't take into account that he had been working for the same man for more than twenty years.

We sold our house and Destiny's Cyr Sport car, bringing the Grumman Cruiser along, in the new hold of our ship, which we named the S.S. *Baron*. Destiny became New Planet Spacelines' youngest office manager ever, at 23, in the spaceport at Tabumb, Tuf. James took a nice apartment in Otok, and made several contacts with the organized crime syndicates there.

So, after twenty years, I had come full circle. I was living in the very city in which I had been born. I spent the first few weeks in Tabumb going to some of the sites, and even took a tour through Jerth, the ancient capital city of the Trayaks. The old throne room, where Kthorpa had made his treaty with the People's Ruling Council is now a tourist spot, with plaques and photographs commemorating that historic time – the end of the Ninety Year War.

*

After a few months of vacationing and touring humanity's oldest colonized planet, I began planning more robberies. With James' help, and the help of some of his new friends, we robbed banks in Tabumb, Otok, Jingbill, and other towns across the planet. Of course, we paid off those who had given us computer help, and inside information, but the three of us kept most of the earnings, and James and I made a special trip in our ship, to Justine, where we deposited a lot of the money. Destiny and I decided that it really was easier to rob banks with more

people. With computer hackers on our payroll, we could walk into the bank, already knowing the combination of the safe, and the general layout of the place. With a paid getaway driver, we didn't have to worry about one of us staying with the car. Extra guns meant that we were less likely to get shot.

Still, though, Destiny and I made our own getaway plans, every time. We never walked into a bank, without having a backup plan. Just because you're paying someone, doesn't mean you can trust them.

After James bought his own ship – slightly larger than ours, he set off on his own, robbing several jewelry stores and banks in Otok, with his own crew. I think he had just stayed with us long enough to learn the trade, knowing the whole time that he wanted to work on his own. I heard, through the grapevine, that he wasn't paying his partners nearly as much as we had been, and so his personal fortune was growing much faster than ours was.

Then he got caught, along with two of his accomplices.

*

The court in Otok sentenced him to fifteen years on Taak, the smaller of Tuf's two moons, thinking he was the "Robber Baron" that so many planets were looking for. It was reported in the papers that he had named "Philipp Dester" and "Destiny Bates" as accomplices in earlier robberies, in an attempt to get a lighter sentence. On the evening holovision news, an anchorman said that Gwandon's sentence would only be shortened if his two accomplices were caught.

So, we destroyed all documents bearing those two names, and considered moving. James had also given the police accurate descriptions of us, nearly matching the descriptions released on Persiphone, years earlier, by the Tarkin Police Department.

Destiny was brought in for questioning, because her first name and description matched those given by Gwandon. However, there was no other evidence incriminating her except the fact that she had lived on Persiphone at the same time as the other robberies years before. And, in those years, the police forces on different planets weren't cooperating much with each other. She told the police that she had once dated a "Philipp," but that his last name hadn't been Dester. The detectives seemed to believe her when she told them that she had broken up with that Philipp on Junxle, and hadn't seen him since. She also denied knowing any "James Gwandon." Destiny proved to the Tuf Planetary Security forces that her real name was Destiny Dester, not "Bates." After making sure that she was indeed the office manager at the Tuf division of New Planet Spacelines, they let her go. There were quite a few other women named "Destiny" that they needed to question. The cops attempted to get warrants for her banking records, but Destiny surprised them by showing up with paperwork in hand. She showed them only one account, of course, the one that matched the name she had given them. The account's activity matched her current salary. She also showed them other financial statements, showing car payments on her Cyr Luxury Sport and house, all in accordance with her recorded earnings.

I saw on the news that police on Junxle were looking for me on Junxle and Persiphone. Nothing ever came of it. I was glad that the Great Separation hadn't quite ended yet. If it had not been for that, they might have caught up with us. Later, the police quit looking for me, deciding that Gwandon had merely been trying to get a reduced sentence by naming some people he had met on Junxle.

Destiny got a letter from her father, saying he had been questioned briefly about the two of us. He had called Harry Bates (now in his second term as governor

on Persiphone), who had put an end to the investigation on Persiphone. Harry even went the “second mile,” and wrote a letter to the heads of government of Tuf and Junxle, telling them that Philipp Kaplan Bates was his own adopted son, describing the entire situation of my parents’ death. He also informed them of the trust fund that I had closed on Persiphone, so they would know that I was financially able to drive a nice car, or live in a nice home.

Things settled down for a while.

After that little scare, though, I always kept the news on, wherever I happened to be. If at home, I kept the holovision set tuned to the all-news channel. I bought a police scanner, and a wireless earphone. That way, if I had to leave the house for any reason, I could still know what was going on. In the car, I listened to the police scanner in one ear, and kept my other ear tuned to the all-news channel on the radio.

I wanted to be ready, if we were really in trouble.

*

By 2492, the older planets had come to terms once and for all, and the Second Galactic Rim Federation came into being. Otok, Tuf, became the capital of the new Federation. Word was sent out by special couriers to all other colonized planets, and a special delegation from the new Federation met with the leaders of the Colonial Commission, still the most powerful organization in the known Galaxy. A new age was dawning for mankind, an age of interplanetary cooperation and great economic expansion. Those of us who had lived through the Great Separation were finally going to find out what it was like to live under an all-encompassing government.

Persiphone’s population finally passed the one million-mark. In 2491, Golian had joined the ranks of incorporated planets, choosing a “complete and total” democracy. Every citizen on Golian was provided with a special “voter’s computer,” with which to help control the planet. Every issue for the entire planet was debated by and voted on by every citizen who wished to participate.

The people of the new planet Wederr elected to be ruled by a constitutional monarchy, while Jalla took the popular route of a representative democracy.

Talks continued with the newly discovered Sleebb people, and the new Federation began a flashy ad campaign, in an attempt to build a new Federation military force. The spokesmen for the new Federation military announced plans for a small Space Navy, for scouting, transporting, and planetary defense forces. In addition, the new Federation Infantry was planned, for any ground fighting that could be expected in a future war.

People who read too much novice science fiction, or who like to watch the older, Terran video movies, can easily be fooled into thinking that a space war will actually be fought *in space*. This is only rarely true. I’m not really speaking from experience here, just from logic. Spaceships cannot possibly fight like the sea ships of old did. Space is not like the oceans, where two fleets of ships can draw up a battle line, and fire salvos across the waters. Space is simply too *big*.

Yes, I know, many of our larger ships are equipped with laser weapons, and missiles of different kinds, to ward off pirates. And, once in a great while, these weapons will actually be used. But it is not an efficient way to fight an interstellar war.

For instance, if I were the leader of a military organization that wanted to take over a certain planet, I would not try to shoot down their ships. If my fleet comes out of the Jump near a solar system, my main goal is going to be to land my troops

on the planet. Even if that planet's fleet was in orbit around her, defending the planet, the ships would be spaced too far out. Do you know how many ships it would take to set up an orbital defense screen?

For one thing, the average inhabited planet is about 7,500 miles in diameter. That makes her circumference – the distance around the planet at her equator – about 23,500 miles. That makes her surface area about 175 million square miles. But we're talking about ships in orbit, right? Say the ships are a thousand miles from the surface of the planet. That makes a new, imaginary sphere, with a surface area of almost 285 million square miles. Now, how far apart did you want to place your ships? Do you see what I mean? To defend your planet with to any reasonable degree, you'd need thousand – perhaps millions – of warships.

Besides, I don't want to conquer the space *around* your planet; I want the planet itself. So, I'm going to land ground troops, after first attempting to bomb your main defense installations.

The point of all this is to say that a space war will not be fought between ships in space. It will be fought between invading ships and ground-based defenders, at first, and then between two opposing ground forces. The space fleets will be comprised mostly of troop carriers and bomb platforms. And both sides would use the bombs sparingly, since no one wants to take possession of a ruined planet. And that's what the new Federation wanted, a force that could successfully defend or conquer a planet, without devastating it.

New taxes came into effect, for the planets under the new Federation. In addition to any planetary taxes, the Federation charged every citizen exactly five percent of their annual income, unless they made over 30,000nd per year; then the tax jumped to nine percent.

The Cyr Corporation received the government contract for all ground fighting vehicles – tanks, boats, a-grav attack ships – and their stock went through the roof. The Shimki Corporation got the contract for the Space Navy ships – mostly troop carriers, and moved their headquarters to Tuf. Grumman, the other major vehicle builder, did not get any government contracts. But, of course, they didn't need them: they still held the contract for the Colonial Commission's spacecraft.

*

Throughout the years, Destiny and I kept a diary of our exploits, listing every bank, every city, every planet, where we did what we did best. We kept the diary in a safety deposit box in a – you guessed it – in a bank. After every score, we would retrieve the diary, make our entry, and then return it to its resting-place.

Let it suffice to say that after the Federation came into being, we tripled our number of false IDs, and false ship registrations. We robbed banks on Tuf, Tiffany's World, Yavin, Junxle, Willsworld, Aurora, Johnny's World, Garbage, Paradise, Maze, Ibeen, Leech, Mars II, Bliss, Blrange, Earth II, Graph, Bleen, Gooley, Blown, Yurple, Moonworld, Fod, Habachi, Malachi, Old Yeller II, Poois, Reblown, Yink, Flekzedge, Orblu, Blabrow, Grack, Pred, Reenuy, Orblack, Mouwor, Yeblink, Brink, Feebellight, Laust, Skledge, Pinky II, Wotfrov, Pluto III, Saivalaurie, New Earth, New Luna, Hemm, Saturn II-C; Turner's Planet, Glucose, the nine worlds of the Jagg-Mall system, and others.

At first, we decided not to rob any banks on Justine, since that's where most of our accounts were handled, but we thought that it would be awfully suspicious if we didn't, so we held two small and "amateur" heists there.

We visited Persiphone in 2494, the year of their "Monarchy" elections, using New Planet Spacelines for travel accommodations. Destiny traveled as herself –

an employee – and I traveled in a separate cabin, under a different name. While there, we robbed two banks.

During that same trip, acting as ourselves, we visited *Habdes I*, her father's increasingly crowded and wealthy space habitat in the asteroid belt. I didn't really like it there, even though it was neat, clean, and well organized. I guess I'm more of a planet type person.

I spent a lot of time with Harry, on the surface of Persiphone. He was trying to get out of the government business, while at the same time, the people of the planet were trying to vote him in as their first "Monarch." Just after we left, they succeeded, and Harry gave in, accepting a 20-year term as the First Constitutional Monarch of the Kingdom of Persiphone.

While traveling with Harry, I went with him to Basplace, and met Michael Hubbard Cyr again. He seemed amused when I told him that Destiny had bought stock in his company. In fact, he was so amused that he pulled a sheaf of papers out of his desk.

"How many shares did you say your wife owns?" His eyes smiled at me.

I looked back at the richest man in the galaxy, noting his athletic form and active manner. "About twenty, I think. Just the basic shares."

He handed me the sheaf of papers. "Here's a hundred executive shares. Worth about a thousand newdollars apiece right now, but quickly rising. I was going to give them to Harry here, but that would be illegal, since he's the ruler of the planet. Someone might think it was bribery. But I guess it's okay to give them to his son." He signed over the shares, and gave them to me.

*

Throughout all of this, Destiny kept her job with New Planet, getting good deals on tickets for us, and making enough money to afford wherever we lived. We transferred to Turner's Planet, then to the NPS home offices on New Earth, in 2496. I was twenty-six years old, and Destiny was twenty-nine. That's when she suddenly decided to have a child. We talked about that a while, since I wasn't so sure.

"So are you considering giving up our prime occupation, dear?" I leaned back in my deck chair under the bubble dome on the topside of our ship, looking into her still-beautiful eyes.

"You mean robbing banks?" Her eyes twinkled at me from across the table. "I don't think I *can* give it up, Philipp."

We just looked at each other for a while, the stars shining brightly through the reinforced plexiglas dome, dimly lighting our deck.

Finally, she put her elbows on the table, and looked down through the glass table top at the deck below. "I guess there's just some instinct inside me that wants to raise a kid. You know, to bring a real, live miracle into existence, and raise him or her to maturity, teaching values, loving a vulnerable, helpless being, and helping to make it into an invulnerable, loving being in its own right."

"You've obviously given this a lot of thought, baby. Have you given any thought as to what kind of parents we might be?"

She sighed. "Philipp, you sound like you're starting to feel guilty about what we do. I mean, we've stolen half a billion newdollars, faked our IDs, falsified our ship's registration several times over, hurt people, killed people, falsified bank records to hide our money, lied to police investigators, carried illegal weapons, and other crimes I can't even think of right now. I guess you have a right to feel a little guilty. But I don't. Or, if I do, I suppress it really well."

“Not guilty, really, Destiny. But I do wonder if it’s right to bring a child up under that kind of environment. Of course, it would give me something to do, while you’re at work.”

She laughed at that. “Yes, Philipp, you’ll be the ‘housewife.’ And we don’t have to tell our kids that we rob banks, do we? At least, not until they’re older. And by that time, maybe we can retire.” She winked at me. “I still remember all those times you talked about wanting to move with me to some empty planet, where we can raise our children and homestead in peace.”

*

Ten months later, in the middle of 2497, Destiny took a week off from work to bear our first child. A lot of clinics on New Earth were offering minor genetic manipulation, to make sure a child would be born healthy and strong, and giving choices of eye color, hair color, etc. We just did it the old fashioned way, the way our bodies were intended to reproduce.

Our son, to whom we gave the name Philipp Howard Dester Kaplan, was born weighing nine and a half pounds, and was twenty-three inches long. He had dark brown eyes like my own, and brown hair.

A month later, we took him to the Hollis System, so his grandparents could dote over him like grandparents have a habit of doing, and he even made a planetary newscast there. He was descended from the “Monarch” of Persiphone (legally), through my relationship with Harry. Not only that, he was the grandchild of the Desters, one of the richest families in that star system. Besides, he was unique in the sense that both his parents had been raised from childhood on Persiphone, and he had been born off-planet. The newscasters made a lot of supposed historical connections and showed live pictures of little Philipp for about ten seconds.

Then we were off, back to New Earth, to our sprawling estate in the rolling hills of the Newer York region. Destiny returned to work in her office in Newer York City, while I stayed at home with my son.

Shortly thereafter, we hired a full-time nursemaid (Destiny was a major executive by this time, and we could afford it, legally). Our son’s caretaker was a small dark woman, named Isabelle.

At first, she was just a single woman looking for a job, who answered our ad in the newspaper. After a while, though, we came to think of her as part of the family. When she had slept over at our house several times, Destiny and I invited her to move in with us, to take care of our child around the clock. For that, we increased her pay, charged no rent, and fed her for free. Destiny made sure that Isabelle got one full day off, every week, and at least one evening, during the week, so she could have a social life. That way, Isabelle wouldn’t feel too tied down with us.

*

Three months after we hired Isabelle, I took the S.S. *Baron* to Justine’s new shipyards, where I had her old nuclear reactor replaced with a fresh one, had new seals installed in the airlock, and got a complete inspection. Then I took her to Nubase, where a small shipyard helped me install several hidden compartments in her, for caching weapons or other valuables. Days later, Destiny and I robbed two more banks on Saivalaurie in the same day. On the way back to New Earth, I overtook and cleaned out an armored transport in open space. We had a lot of

inside info on that one, for which we paid top dollar, but it was worth it, seeing that it was our largest cash score, up to that point.

*

Early in 2498, when I was twenty-eight, the war finally broke out between the Federation and the Sleebb Empire. The ten years of the popularly titled “War of Revenge” are what I’ll call my “good ole days.” Not only were they the best years of my son’s life (toddlerhood, early childhood, first day of school, etc.), but a lot of the best cops and security guards joined the Federation military forces. That left a lot of banks wide open.

In addition to all this, with a good private space ship like the *Baron*, I could make my own forages into the Sleebb systems, and bring back valuable information to the Federation. I found a willing officer in the ranks (Jason Quivers) who was authorized to pay for any information that resulted in successful military action. I had found out from Harry where Jason was stationed, and contacted him myself. I never told Jason how I received my information; I just told him to trust me. If I told him I had a private ship, he would wonder how I had gotten enough money for it, and I didn’t want to lie to him. So I just told him that my sources were confidential. That was true enough.

Those trips were the most dangerous enterprises that I ever engaged in, but I found that it got my juices flowing, just like robbing banks. Not only did I make a little money from selling information to the Federation, but I also destroyed a few Sleebb ships of my own. And twice, I made bombing runs on one of the Sleebb home worlds.

*

The spaceliner business had a hard time of it during the war years, so Destiny had a lot more time off from work. We spent a lot of time with little Phil and, and robbed quite a few banks. Toward the end of the war, I got a part-time job with the Federation forces on New Earth, teaching hand-to-hand combat, again through the influence of Jason Quivers. He sent a letter of reference to the base there, telling them that I was completely learned in all of the necessary fighting skills. By 2500, partially due to the unified war effort, the Second Galactic Rim Federation had encompassed most of the colonized planets, and the war was going well.

I spent two years in part-time employment with the Federation, from 2502 to 2504, then quit, to enter full-time criminal enterprise. When I was at home, I taught little Phil (who was seven years old, already) some basic self-protection moves, and we went camping on a few weekends. I found I enjoyed being a parent more than Destiny did. Even with my lack of higher education, my son asked many questions to which I actually knew the answers. He liked to talk about guns, cars, rocks, farming, animals, video shows, his friends’ pets, food, and a lot of other things that I knew a lot about. At least, it seemed to him that I did.

He was beginning to look a lot like I had, at his age, and it made me proud. I assured him that I had been just as skinny when I was younger, and that he would fill out soon enough. I think he had his mother’s brain though, because he caught on to most things more quickly than I had.

In 2505, Destiny and I had our second child, a daughter, which I insisted on naming after her mother. Destiny Samantha Bates Kaplan was born on my birthday. Little Phil, then almost eight years old, helped out a lot with Sam’s care, and our

nursemaid, Isabelle (who was still living with us), took a big raise to stay on and watch both of them.

*

I picked the right time to buy my own planetoid. It had been popular for years for a rich man to build his own space habitat to retire into. Others, like Michael Cyr, had bought a small continent on a new planet. But selling used-up asteroids became a wholly new market.

I saw an ad in a newspaper, from a mining company that was selling hollowed out asteroids, small ones for twice the price of a new home, and up to a million newdollars for a big one. The add read:

Buy Your Own Planet!

CHEAP

**If you tire of the Colonial Commission's offers...
If you realize that every empty planet will soon be full...
If you don't want to pay income taxes ANY MORE...
Then...**

Buy Your Own Planet!

The advertisement gave the mailing address of the company, and the galactic coordinates of their home office.

I went (in my own ship) to the space-based offices of this company, and told them I was the representative of a certain well-known business executive in that system. They really didn't care what name I gave – they just had to fill out a receipt. Once the planetoid was mine, they didn't care what I did with it. I selected a large planetoid, almost perfectly spherical, and about forty miles in diameter. It had already been completely drained of every mineral known to be worth mining, Gravity generators had been installed on it, for the comfort of the workers, as well as a small living quarters, with a kitchenette, a bunkroom, and a supply room. The office manager said that all the quarters and equipment would be left on the asteroid, for the buyer. It would have cost the mining company too much to clear all that out.

I accepted the offer of one of the company big wheels to ride through the asteroid in a small maintenance craft. He had the pilot show me through several immense caverns from which iron ore and other minerals had been extracted, and the maze of tunnels that connected the caverns.

For two million newdollars, I bought the whole planet, lock, stock, and barrel. Of course, in the past, the mining companies had always just abandoned their used up asteroids, leaving their living quarters in place. Now, with a higher percentage of the population looking for a way to get away, and more people coming up in the financial ranks, the mining companies had seen another opportunity to make money.

When a mining firm sets up camp on an asteroid, they are required to set up a "planetary charter" with the local star system's government. That charter says that the company in question owns the planetoid, and can do with it whatever they wish, except move it or destroy it. Moving the larger asteroids can cause orbital

problems, and destroying one creates millions of tiny asteroids, which are dangerous for passing ships. Otherwise, the rock is theirs.

I thought it would be a wonderful place to retire. For once, I saw the big picture in my head. I envisioned the planet after I poured some more money into it. There would be lakes, parks, farms, animals, houses, etc. And it would all be mine.

I bought several spare gravity motors from shipyards on Mouwor, and installed them on my planet, which I named Destiny's World. With the help of a computer expert at Destiny's office, I selected a good computer to use on Destiny's World, and bought it, getting the same man's help to install it for me. He then helped me to work the computer to set up the desired gravity fields. The reason I needed multiple gravity fields was this: I wanted a normal field for the surface of the planet, pulling toward the center ("down") at about 0.9 gravities. In this way, we could walk on the surface, and an atmosphere would stay around – if I could figure out how to acquire an atmosphere. But, for all the caves and tunnels inside, a gravity field pulling toward the center of the planet just would not work. So each tunnel and cavern had a gravity field of its own, not necessarily pulling in the same direction as any of the others.

I bought three nuclear reactors and a large power cell unit, to power the gravity fields, the computer, the lights, etc. And I put in a hyperdrive motor: as far as I know, it was the first hyperdrive ever installed on a planet. Then I pulled the greatest caper of my life, and one that no one else could ever explain. I had figured out how to acquire an atmosphere.

The inhabitants of Jalla never knew exactly what happened. A lot of them suddenly noticed a fifth moon in the sky, hanging just a few hundred miles above them. The Jalla Planetary Protection Service immediately dispatched interceptors to apprehend the inhabitants of the new planet. Then the new moon disappeared. Only the most astute and observant scientists noticed a very minute change in the air pressure of the planet on Jalla.

From a full-sized planet, I had stolen enough air to coat Destiny's World to a depth of about two thousand feet. I then went to *Astropolis IV* and bought a load of seeds and farming equipment, which I used to seed DW. I bought animals: cows, horses, pigs, geese, rabbits, earthworms, etc.

And I did all this without Destiny knowing a thing about it. So, when the new Federation Investigative Bureau (FIB) announced on the galactic news service in the later days of 2506 that they were onto us, I had a place where we could go.

*

Somehow, several agents tracking bank robberies on different planets had collaborated, and decided that a lot of them had many things in common. A long-haired female, usually driving the getaway car. The getaway car was always either recently stolen, or bought used, the day before. And the car was always found abandoned the next day. A bulky male, sometimes alone, sometimes with a smaller partner, always wearing bulletproof armor. Every member of the team wore masks, gloves, armor, etc. Those banks with visible cameras always had the power cut first. Many times, the vault combination had been discovered through computer hacking; other times, the robbery had occurred when the vault was known to be open. Security guards were always hit with dart guns, and knocked unconscious.

Then, these investigators dug into the old investigations, and found the names: Destiny, Philipp, and James Gwandon. Gwandon was out of prison by then, and still sticking to his story. He told investigators that the "Destiny" he knew had

worked for one of the Spacelines. And they plastered it all over the evening news, on New Earth. The Second Galactic Rim Federation had been our demise.

I began to wish that we had never found the Sleebbs. I thought to myself that if the Sleebb threat had never come about, then the Federation would not have drawn together so quickly. And if the planets had remained divided, their law enforcement agencies would not have been working together. Even so, it had happened, and we had to deal with it. But I was ready for that day.

I watched Destiny cringe as the news anchor named Persiphone as the planet of the “Robber Baron’s” origin. They posted a picture of both of us, from our high school days, and a computer enhanced photo, showing what we could possibly look like now. The new pictures looked remarkably like us. We would have to leave, and soon. The spacelines – Destiny’s employers – knew where she lived, and they would soon turn the records over to the authorities.

That’s when I told her about my new planet, Destiny’s World, that I had bought and fixed up for her. She looked up at me. “Philipp, have I told you lately that I love you?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, Destiny. I think you were hollering just that phrase late last night.”

She took a playful swing at me, which I parried, and then I took her down in a judo hold. We wrestled a little bit on the floor, and soon Phil and Sam rushed in, to join the fray. The happy bank-robbing family wrestled for a few more minutes, until Isabelle entered the room.

Destiny extracted herself from the human pile on the floor, and held a hurried conversation with our baby-sitter/housekeeper/maid. She explained to Isabelle that we were going to move, and we were going to move now. She told her that she was welcome to come along, but that she would not have time to gather many possessions. When Isabelle asked where we were going, Destiny didn’t tell her. Isabelle said she’d rather not go, if she didn’t know where we were going.

I continued to play with my eighteen month-old daughter and nine year-old son for a few minutes, during that conversation, then I got up.

It took maybe fifteen minutes to dump our most important valuables (pictures, souvenirs, a couple of favorite weapons, and a couple of favorite toys) into bags, then we dumped the bags into the trunk of the car – my new Grumman Cruiser. As we packed, Isabelle helped us, then changed her mind, and decided to go with us.

“I guess I don’t have to know where we’re going,” she said to Destiny, as they piled my wife’s clothing into a packing case. “I don’t have a good reason to stay here, you know. And I love all of you.” She was a selfless woman, that Isabelle.

Fifteen minutes later, we were driving in through the private ship-owner’s gate at the Newer York City Spaceport, under false names. Our kids were a little confused, but they could sense the excitement and tension in the air, and were jabbering away in the back seat.

When the *Baron* was in sight, Destiny flipped the remote control, and we saw the rear door open up, and I drove our cruiser up into the ship, watching the door close behind us.

Destiny ushered the kids up into the living area while I rushed for the control room, slipping on my Captain’s headset.

I heard Destiny’s voice in my ear, “Honey, I’m on the deck, and the news is on. The police are arriving at our home as we speak. Let’s get out of here.”

“Powering up, dear.” I was pushing buttons and flipping switches while listening to her. The ship’s power system began to hum, and I called the tower.

“S.S. *Grover*, calling tower, Captain Blordan speaking.”

“Tower to *Grover*, go ahead.”

“Requesting permission for take off. Quickly, if possible, my wife’s just received word of her father’s death. Over.”

“Sorry, *Grover*, the city police have shut down the space port. Please hold until we contact you again.”

I grimaced, and cut off contact with them. Then I heard Destiny’s voice. “Honey, there are squad cars coming this way. They must’ve just talked to the guys at the gate. Someone must have ID’d the car.”

I couldn’t believe that they had found us so quickly. “All right. We’re out of here.”

I noted on the screen that there was an overhead suppression field, of about 50-g’s. Well, I didn’t have the power to get through that, and the field domed all the way over the spaceport. I would just have to do what no one does. I keyed my hyperdrive control pad.

Isabelle’s head poked into the control cabin. “I see you’re in some kind of trouble, Philipp,” she said calmly. “Are you the Robber Baron?”

I twisted my head back at her. “Maybe. Do you want out?”

She looked me in the eyes, sensed my confidence. “If I stay, we’ll be safe?”

I nodded. “They’ll never find us.”

“Okay, then,” she said, and smiled. “I’ll watch the kids.” She slipped out of the control cabin.

I turned back to the hyperdrive control pad – we’d have to Jump out of the spaceport, which was patently dangerous. Jumping from inside such a deep gravity well was almost unheard of, but it was our only way out.

After checking my power levels, I aimed for a spot near the edge of the galactic rim, several light years between planets, knowing I would end up far from there. I hit the Jump key, and New Earth disappeared. Most pilots would consider such a move to be suicide. When you’re that close to a gravity field as large as that of a planet, you just don’t Jump. I did.

I felt and saw the heat at the same time; we had come out too close to a sun. Without recalculating, I Jumped again, heading for the edge of the Milky Way. We made it, appearing in open space, about a hundred light years from the edge of the galaxy, which is not too far. Really, the only way to tell that you’re outside the Galaxy is that all the bright stars are on one side of your ship, and all the dim ones are on the other side.

I checked the power levels again; by a curious phenomenon, we had picked up an outrageous amount of power by appearing close to and Jumping away from that Sun. So I Jumped my way back to where I had left Destiny’s world, in the asteroid belt of the Hollis System. After checking my coordinates, it took about six hours to get to our planetoid. The kids had gone to bed by New Earth time, even though it was mid-morning by ship’s time – our ship, like all others, was run on Galactic Standard time.

Destiny gasped when she saw her world; the biggest present I’ve ever given her. Although the atmosphere was only two thousand feet thick, there were small clouds, and a close look showed that it was snowing on the surface.

Within minutes, I had parked the Baron next to the small living quarters on Destiny’s World and gotten the children inside.

While Destiny explored the meager living area that the mining company had left for us on the planetoid, I went into the office/control room, and piloted the planet out of the system, using the hyperdrive systems, heading for Gabriel, the gas giant of Banard’s Star System. Once there, I hid Destiny’s World among the

many planetoids that circled Gabriel. I set the planet on a rotational period that would fit the kids' sleeping habits, and went to find Destiny.

*

That was in late 2506. Over the next two years, I turned Destiny's World into a virtual paradise, although if my power ever went down, it would all be over. I got two more nuclear reactors, and hooked them into my central computer, for backup systems. I also backed up the gravity generators that I already had. I put ten communication booster satellites up around the world, so anyone anywhere on the surface could communicate with anyone else by a low power radio. Then I put up remote control cameras on high poles in various places around the surface, to keep track of my kids, animals and farms.

I made all these purchases on lightly populated colony worlds, and ship-repair space stations, using false names, disguises, and always paying with cash. Since a description of the S.S. *Baron* had been given out, this was risky. But it wasn't too difficult to repaint the ship, and to change the transponder signal. The only people who actually *saw* the *Baron* were dock workers, who were either too glad to help a known criminal or could be bribed.

We began to build luxurious quarters inside the large cavern nearest to the old mining quarters. Inside the cavern, the heat could be more easily controlled, and besides that, we could park the *Baron* inside. There was no weather inside the cavern, so the housing could be open to the air.

Wearing lavish disguises and using fake ID cards, we went to the planets where our money was hidden away, and closed accounts, one by one. We used this money to buy the building materials for our home and I bought a small freighter to transport all the supplies to Destiny's World. The freighter was five times the size of the *Baron*, and helped us avoid further risks.

By mid-2508, when the "Revenge War" ended, we had finished our home, and I had regular animal herds growing on my own planet. Water, I had obtained from catching ice crystals that made up most of Gabriel's rings, and melting them. We had regular lakes and rivers on the surface of Destiny's World, and irrigation systems watering our farms.

We intercepted news broadcasts being sent from Tuf to the outer scientific outposts, so we could keep up with what was going on around the Federation. On Aurora, Destiny bought a load of schoolbooks and holographic teaching robots, so our children could continue their education.

*

For a while, the authorities offered a reward for our capture, but no one ever saw us again. Or at least, no one saw us looking like ourselves, until after the interest faded away. Two unauthorized biographies were published, one of which I bought on my next trip to Justine. *The Unauthorized Biography of Philipp Kaplan & Crew: The Greatest Bank Robbers Ever*. I read it, mainly for amusement.

According to this book, supposedly based on official records, bank security cameras, and anonymous tips, I was a bitter man, trying to punish society for taking away my parents. The author insinuated that I had used my position as Howard Bates' son to cover early criminal activities, and to meet "high society contacts." I had accumulated a veritable gang of nearly 20 people, from computer

experts, to hit men, to weapons dealers, and I had a harem of 10 to 15 young girls, which I used to satisfy my enormous sexual appetite.

I felt good after reading the book, because it let me know to what depths I could have fallen, and reminded me that I wasn't really too bad of a person. But the "harem" part intrigued me... Who had made up that part? Gwandon? Was he really so jealous of my success that he had tried to make me look so bad?

I couldn't imagine having a harem – it would be too much trouble, I think. My wife Destiny more than satisfied my sexual needs, and my needs for companionship. And when she was busy elsewhere on the planet, or off making a purchase in one of our ships, Isabelle was a good friend – very intelligent and good-natured. And I always behaved circumspectly around her, whether Destiny was present or not, even though she was attractive. I did not allow myself to get into a position where either of us would be tempted to betray Destiny's trust.

If I wrestled with the children, Isabelle would not join in. If she were playing, I would watch from a safe distance. Say what you will – a harmless touch is not cheating, some have said. But I've seen the holo-shows. I know that a "harmless touch" can soon lead to an affair. And I couldn't bear to think of the consequences.

Howard Bates, still in his first term as Monarch of Persiphone, publicly rebuked the author of the book, and brought up old films to be played on Persiphone newscasts – the "hero" films. He tried to remind his public that I had done the best with what I could, and said, "...even if he has committed these alleged crimes, I'm sure he never killed anyone out of malice, or hate. I stipulate that it was self-defense... No, I am not endorsing criminal activities of any kinds. I am merely defending the character of my adopted son. I never knew him to be anything other than a levelheaded, hard-working kid. And people everywhere should remember that he served as a valuable information gatherer during our recent war with the Sleebb people. Without men like him, risking life and limb to find out strategic and tactical information, the war may have gone on for years more, and maybe even with a different outcome. Not only that, I am told that he voluntarily took part in training some of our Federation soldiers. So if you read these books, or listen to some of these news reports, take it with a grain of salt."

I know he must have been hurting inside, though, knowing that at least some it was probably true. I made a mental note to visit him when it was possible, and tell him my side.

We laid low for quite a while, and finally explained our secret to our son Philipp. He just thought it was great. In 2510, when little Phil turned 13, I turned 40 (!), Destiny turned 43, and Sam turned five, we robbed another bank. This time, we went in without masks or gloves, but armed to the teeth. With the new needle guns (the smaller version of the old tranquilizer dart guns), we just walked in and put everyone down.

When we stepped out onto the street, someone hollered out, "Hey! It's that guy! Philipp Kaplan, the robber baron!"

Before anyone could get close, I dumped the contents of my bags onto the sidewalk, and Destiny and I flew up into the air, using my new-and-improved a-grav vest. We made nothing on that haul, and didn't expect to, we just did it to get our juices flowing again, which it did.

That one job did so much for our self esteem, that we kept doing it that way for a while: no masks, no gloves, no disguises, just knock everyone out, and dump the money on the street. Of course, when we took the Colonial Commission's armed transport, we kept the 15 million Colonial Credits.

Every now and then, we'd keep some of the money from one of the banks to buy something we needed, but most of it we just dumped. Sometimes, we'd wait

to dump the money until we were high over the city, so the bills would spread out a bit as they fluttered down.

Then Destiny got pregnant again, It was in the early weeks of 2515, I was 45, Destiny was 48, Little Phil was 17½, and Destiny Samantha was almost 10. They really didn't need Isabelle by that time, but she stayed with them anyway, teaching Phil how to run the computer that controlled our planet's ecosystem.

Three months into Destiny's pregnancy, we robbed the First Central Commercial Interplanetary Bank and Trust in Charta, Turner's Planet. Or, rather, tried to.

*

On my way out of the vault, laden with four moneybags, I looked up at the male teller in front of me. Just as I was thinking he looked vaguely familiar, Jason Quivers jumped me. I hadn't seen him in nearly 11 years, so it had taken just a split second for me to recognize him. That was all he needed.

I found out later, reading the papers in prison on Meela, that Jason had been hired by the FIB, specifically to bring me in. Old records on Persiphone showed that I'd taken his classes there, and military ledgers noted that he'd been my contact when I was selling information to the government, during the Sleebb war. So they had called him in.

But Jason Quivers was smarter than a lot of people gave him credit for. And much more loyal.

He had somehow read a pattern into my robberies, and showed up at the right place and at the right time, He disarmed me and held me until the police arrived.

He's probably the only person in several systems that could have pulled it off. I had paused, while trying to figure out who he was, and that momentary advantage was all he needed. Besides the fact that my hands were full.

As he held me to the polished marble floor of the bank, he whispered, "Tell me where Destiny is, Phil, and I'll get you out of this. Just make it worth my while."

I realized then, that he was only doing his job, a job that he didn't want to do. He was protecting his self-interests.

"I know you're living off-planet somewhere," he continued in a hoarse whisper, talking quickly, glancing at the front door of the bank. "I'll go there, get Destiny, and break you out."

So I told him. I didn't tell him where Destiny's World was, in case he was wearing a recording device. But I told him that Destiny was parked two streets over, in her a-grav car, waiting for me to exit the bank.

Then the cops busted in.

So that's how I ended up being sentenced to two years in the Meela Penitentiary, at the ripe age of forty-five.

*

I was there for just over a year, until the Meela Penitentiary caught fire, and burned itself to destruction. And then, as far as anyone else was concerned, I was dead.

*

I know, I started writing this account for the prison psychiatrist. And I gave him the first part, up to and including my first two or three robberies. The rest of it, I have written for my own interests, for future generations.

Let me say this. I do not approve of crime, generally speaking. Just because I made my fortune as a criminal, doesn't make it right. I know that many young people, reading the other books about me, seeing the movies based on the books, or even, perhaps, reading this one, will get funny ideas. Some people will think I'm a kind of "anti-hero," or the "good" bad-guy.

Don't do it, please. For one thing, it's against the law. And laws are in place for a reason –most of them. For another, you'll live the rest of your life looking over your shoulder, wondering when the cops are going to come looking for you.

*

Oh. One last thing: Don't come looking for Destiny's World in Gabriel's rings. Don't think that after all these years of being so careful, that I would screw up and tell you where to find me. I promise, if that's where you look, you'll be very disappointed, indeed.

Eight.

There is so much more to tell, but I've got to get on with living my life, and leave this document behind. I've got grandchildren to think about.

Quickly, I mention that I *did* get that chance to return to Persiphone, to visit with my stepfather, Howard Bates, just after his 20-year term as Monarch ended. I met with him in 2520 GS, at a secluded campground, with his wife Marianne and their 20-year-old daughter Tabitha.

I didn't tell him everything, naturally.

But I told him that I was done robbing banks. I described Destiny's World to him in detail, though, explaining all the work that had gone into it, and how I was trying to landscape it to look like the ancient maps of Old Home Terra. I told him that Jason Quivers, his wife, and children were now living with us there.

At first, he spoke little, his disappointment evident on his face. It took Marianne and Tabitha to help him come around. I think Tabitha had had a crush on me ever since she was a young teenager, seeing my pictures on the news. She and her mother convinced Howard that I was still his son, the hard-working, bright-eyed guy who'd lost his colonist parents in a bus wreck at Mike's Supermarket.

It was actually Marianne who suggested that they come live with us. Howard had been working as a consultant for the new Monarch of Persiphone, giving advice and writing laws, for enormous fees, but he was ready to retire. Marianne said it sure would be nice to live on a world without all the clutter – Persiphone was home to more than 40 million people by that time, and starting to feel crowded by colonial standards.

I told them they were welcome, and Tabitha smilingly decided at once that she'd come.

Howard was slow to decide, but finally did.

"But no more bank-robbing?" he asked me.

"None," I told him. "My oldest son's an adult now, going to college on Tuf. He's engaged to be married. And my daughter's 15 – she'll be going off to college in two or three years. Both of Jason's kid's are in college on Turner's Planet. All

of them use assumed names, of course, when they're not on Destiny's World. They think it's fun. But, to protect them, I've had to stop robbing banks."

After some thought, and several wonderful meals, he made up his mind.

Maybe I shouldn't mention it, but Tabitha tried to seduce me one night, after Howard and Marianne had gone to bed. I was sitting up on the couch in the cabin's common room, watching late-night holovision, when she came in and sat next to me, warm and cuddly. It was quite flattering, I assure you, for a 50-year-old man to be approached sexually by an attractive 20-year-old. But I stopped her.

"You don't even know me," I told her, my hands on her shoulders, pushing her back in the warm darkness. "And I would never consider betraying Destiny's trust."

She managed to look hurt for a moment, then smiled. "I've read those books about you," she said. "You don't really have a harem?"

I shook my head. "Just my one true Destiny."

"You *could* have a harem," she told me, trying to slip closer to me. She smelled good. "I could be in it."

I shook my head again. "No, Tabitha." She sat back. I continued, "You're very beautiful – obviously you take after your mother. But it's not in the cards."

She looked so hurt that I hugged her. "Don't feel bad, girl," I told her as we embraced. "I still want you to be a friend of our family, and come with your parents to live with us. But I can't give myself to you."

She nodded against my shoulder, and sniffled. "Okay."

Then I kissed her. That's why I didn't want to mention it. I don't want anyone speculating as to whether I was fighting off a desire to cheat. I wasn't. My head was clear the whole time – I desperately wanted to get back home, to take my wife to bed. I kissed her to make a dream come true – as I've said, Tabitha had been infatuated with my criminal persona for a long time.

So I kissed her, for several minutes, and not too chastely, either. But I kept her hands from roving, and my hands stayed on her face or shoulders.

As soon as I was home, I told Destiny about it, and she told me I was a wonderful man.

"But why didn't you sleep with her?" Destiny asked me later.

That's the way my wife was – no guile, completely innocent of jealousy.

I don't know that I'll ever understand her that way. But I love her for it. I could not imagine my life without my blonde-haired, green-eyed beauty. When I try to, it's just depressing. I might have been a career grocery man, working for Mike. Or I might have been a minor bureaucrat in Harry's government on Persiphone. Or something else, who knows. Surely, I would not have been "the galaxy's most infamous bank robber." But I might have been worse – a druggie, or an alcoholic, like so many failed colonists. And I don't think I would have ever been happy.

*

So Harry and his family moved in with us on Destiny's World. It took them several months. Harry had to slowly withdraw himself from politics on Persiphone, and close down his minor business ventures. Slowly, quietly, he and Marianne sold off the property they had accumulated over the years. While they did this, Tabitha left them early, and moved into our cavern on the asteroid. She helped Jason and I build her parents' mansion, and worked faithfully on our landscaping projects.

Finally, all of them were there.

*

Destiny also visited her parents, in *Habdes I*, where her father still ran the system's largest and most prosperous asteroid mining venture. Her brothers had all gone to college and returned with business degrees and wives. Norman had begun his own manufacturing firm, a subsidiary of his father's larger corporation. All of the Desters were wealthy.

But none of them wanted to hear Destiny's "excuses" or any part of her story. She had gone alone to visit them, and she came back alone.

"They've disowned me," she said with a smile. "I guess I should have seen that coming."

I held her tightly as we talked, sitting on a blanket on the perfectly green grass of our cavern habitat. "I didn't see it coming," I whispered to her.

"They were all thoroughly investigated," she said with a faraway look in her eyes. "They've had trouble getting back into the 'social circles,' as my mother calls them. The whole business culture in that system knows their daughter is the wife of Philipp Kaplan, the infamous bank robber. Fortunately, for them, the investigators could find nothing. They thought my parents were using their corporation to launder our money. My dad proved that it was all legal money, but he says he'll be watched by the Federation until the day he dies, unless I'm caught."

She cried a little that night, but not as much as I'd cried after my parents' death. Then she never mentioned them again. In fact, when she learned I was writing this account, she suggested leaving them out of the story completely, but I couldn't do it.

Just like my parents, her mother and father are an integral part of who we are. They were good people, and are not at fault for what Destiny and I accomplished. But they can't be left out entirely.

*

In the early days of 2521, Destiny surprised me one last time.

"Why don't we marry Isabelle?" she asked me one night, as we walked along the park-like exterior of Destiny's World.

"What?" I stopped walking, my brain locking up.

In the silence that followed, we could hear crickets chirping, and small animals bedding down for the night. Nocturnal predators were scrunching through the underbrush, readying for their night's work.

She grinned wildly, and embraced me, kissing me on the mouth.

"She's been with us for all these years, beautiful, loving, and athletic. And she's been so good to our kids. You could give her some of her own, Philipp."

"But—" I was flabbergasted. "But I love *you*, Destiny Kaplan Bates!"

She laughed again. "I know, baby. And you're so cute when you're doing it, too." She kissed me again, running a hand up my thigh. "But we love Isabelle too, right?"

I nodded. "But not like that, Destiny. She was our child care employee, and now she's our friend – an equal partner in this asteroid. But not a... Besides, that's illegal."

Destiny's hand found a comfortable nesting place below my belt, as he held her lips softly on mine. "You're so dense, my husband. There isn't one single law on this planet. *You're* the government now. There's no law against polygamy here."

She was right, of course. And even some of the planets that *did* have laws permitted multiple marriages – the oldest example being Paradise, where some marriages were known to include as many as 16 people.

“But,” I began again, still not understanding, “I don’t think Isabelle will go for it. And I’m not attracted to her like that.”

Destiny shook her head slightly, rubbing her face against mine. “You will be. Ask her tomorrow night. She’ll say yes.”

I’d never willingly gone against Destiny’s wishes. When we had differences of opinion, we’d always discussed it, and I always gave in. A major exception had been when I bought my starship, and when we’d brought other accomplices in on our crimes. Those times, she’d just shut up and let me make my mistakes. But when she held her ground, I always caved in.

The next night, after dinner, I invited Isabelle to come on a walk with Destiny and I. We talked about old times, reminiscing. Then, with the rings of the gas giant lighting up our night sky, I took one of Isabelle’s hands.

She started in surprise, and even more when Destiny took her other hand.

“Uh...” I started off nervously.

“What, Philipp?” she said, looking back and forth between us.

“We’d like you to marry us,” I said, feeling foolish. “Destiny and I want you to be my, er, *our* wife.”

She paused for only the smallest of seconds. “I’d love to,” she said.

That night, Destiny slept in Isabelle’s room while I had my second honeymoon, and became intimate for the first time in my life with someone besides Destiny Dester.

I required several months before I was comfortable with the arrangement, but both women were much more cosmopolitan than I, and took to it right away. I realized that Destiny’s decision had made me – if possible – happier than before.

If either of my wives should die before me, my life would be considerably more empty than I could imagine. But if I die first, I have a feeling they’ll get over it.

*

So, back to the original question. *Why* did I do it?

The thrill? Certainly.

The money? Well, it’s a nice perk.

To sidestep the government? Yes, there’s something to be said for individual accomplishments, and no one should be dependent on that faceless, heartless mass known as government, but that was not my intention.

For Destiny?

They say that love will make a man do unprecedented things, and that’s certainly true in my case. Without love, the galaxy would be a dark and dreary place. And without love, I – Philipp Kaplan Bates – would be a depressed, bitter old man. Maybe I did grab that first bundle of cash out of love for Destiny. And I certainly stepped into that next bank with not much on my mind besides pleasing her.

I suppose now that I would have been happy without the life of robbing financial institutions, as long as Destiny was by my side. I wanted nothing more than to please her.

And I could see that she felt the same way about me.

It only made matters more enjoyable to spread the love around a little more. As the famous Terran historian once said, “Love is all you need.”

Epilogue.

Year: 2525 GS

Location: Destiny's World

Nestled deep in the picturesque rings of Gabriel – perhaps the most beautiful gas giant in the known galaxy – finding her home among the ice crystals and rocks, lies a tiny world.

Viewed from several miles away, this minuscule planet looks very similar to old maps of Old Home Terra, and indeed it has been landscaped to look that way. Roaming the surface of this hidden paradise are hundreds of species of animals, ranging in size from the Kingloz elephant and Zarnian black whale to earthworms and ants, all of them thriving in the carefully controlled and terraformed climate.

Wild grasses, bushes and small trees now grow wild on what used to be cold, hard stone. Orchards and farmland are spread across the land area of Destiny's World.

Deep inside, in an even more carefully controlled climate, in a mile-wide cavern near the center of the planet, abides a lush garden Utopia. An artificial sun on the ceiling of the cavern provides the perfect amount of radiation for the humans, animals and plants that occupy this hidden place. Amidst the deep greens and browns of the well-fed vegetation, several sprawling mansions can be found, with neat little footpaths between them.

The structures have large windows with no glass, for the climate is perfect, and the light, artificial rain comes at controlled times. Between the scheduled rains, the retractable roofs are opened to the “sun” above.

In the largest of these mansions resides Philipp Kaplan Bates, along with his family. He is now 55 years old. His first wife, Destiny Dester Kaplan, is 58. Their three children are living with them: Philipp Howard Dester Kaplan, 28, Destiny Samantha Bates Kaplan, 20, and Jason Jeffrey Kaplan, 10. His second wife, Isabelle Kaplan, is 51. They also have two children, Peter Kaplan, 4, and Gennifer Kaplan, 2.

Jason and Deneen Quivers and their two children occupy the next house. Markan Howard Quivers, the oldest child, is 32, and Jeannie Taryn Quivers is 25.

Still a third house holds an aging Howard Wingate Bates III and his darling wife Marianne, and their one daughter: Tabitha Marie Bates, 25.

Abbreviated planet list for *Robber Baron*

Tuf — first planet colonized by humanity, in 2010; home planet of the Trayaks
— major cities: Otok (capital), Tabumb, Kahput
— Year: 310 days, Day: 26 hours, Gravity: 0.89, Climate: Terran

Turner's Planet — one of the Seven Old Worlds, colonized by Nora Turner, in 2010
— home planet of the Grangers and Strangers
— major city: Chatta (capital)
— Year: 380 days, Day: 33.6 hr, Gravity: 1.12, Climate: warm Terran

Junxle — one of the Seven Old Worlds, colonized circa 2011
— major city: Farlaya (capital)
— Year: 625 days, Day: 60 hours, Gravity: 0.81, Climate: Terran

Paradise — one of the Seven Old Worlds, colonized circa 2012
— major cities: Paradise City (capital), Aqua, New Tokyo, Milkido
— Year: 324 days, Day: 19.2 hours, Gravity: 0.98, Climate: tropical Terran

Persiphone — third planet in the Hollis System, colonized circa 2473-4
— major cities: Tarkin (capital), Batesville, Kleenair
— Year: 364 days, Day: 23.7 hours, Gravity: 0.99, Climate: Terran

New Earth — an Old World, colonized circa 2015 (previously colonized by Trayaks)
— major city: Newer York
— Year: 363 days, Day: 24.1 hours, Gravity: 0.98, Climate: Terran

(All years are measured in Galactic Standard Days – 24 hours per day. All days are measured in Galactic Standard hours – 3600 seconds per hour. All dates are Galactic Standard dating – previously known as “AD”.)

Robber Baron Characters:

Philipp Kaplan Bates: “The Robber Baron”

2470, born in Otok, Tuf

2475, emigrated to Tarkin, Persiphone, Hollis System

2483, both parents killed in bus accident in Tarkin

Destiny Dester: Philipp Kaplan’s wife

2467, born in First City, Sixxle

2475, emigrated to Tarkin, Persiphone, Hollis System

Howard Wingate Bates III: Philipp Kaplan’s adopted father

2442, born in Nubase, Tuf orbital city

2474-2484, head of Persiphone under Colonial Commission

2484-2494, Governor of Persiphone Republic (two 5-yr terms)

2494-2514, Monarch of Kingdom of Persiphone (one 20-yr term)

Jason Quivers: Philipp Kaplan’s martial arts trainer

2498-2508, officer in Federation military

2515, chief figure in Philipp’s capture

James Gwandon: chief advisor for Mafia boss in Farlaya, Junxle

2489-2491, Philipp Kaplan’s partner in bank robbing

2491, captured by police, on Tuf, sentenced to fifteen years on Taak

2506, released from prison

Human-colonized Space:

Circa 2100: forty Class-1 worlds, about 25 Class-2 worlds

Circa 2500: 150 Class-1 worlds; 210 class-2 worlds

Monetary Conversion Specs:

One newdollar = 0.75 Colonial Credits

One newdollar = \$3 (2003 value)

One Colonial Credit = 1.33 newdollars

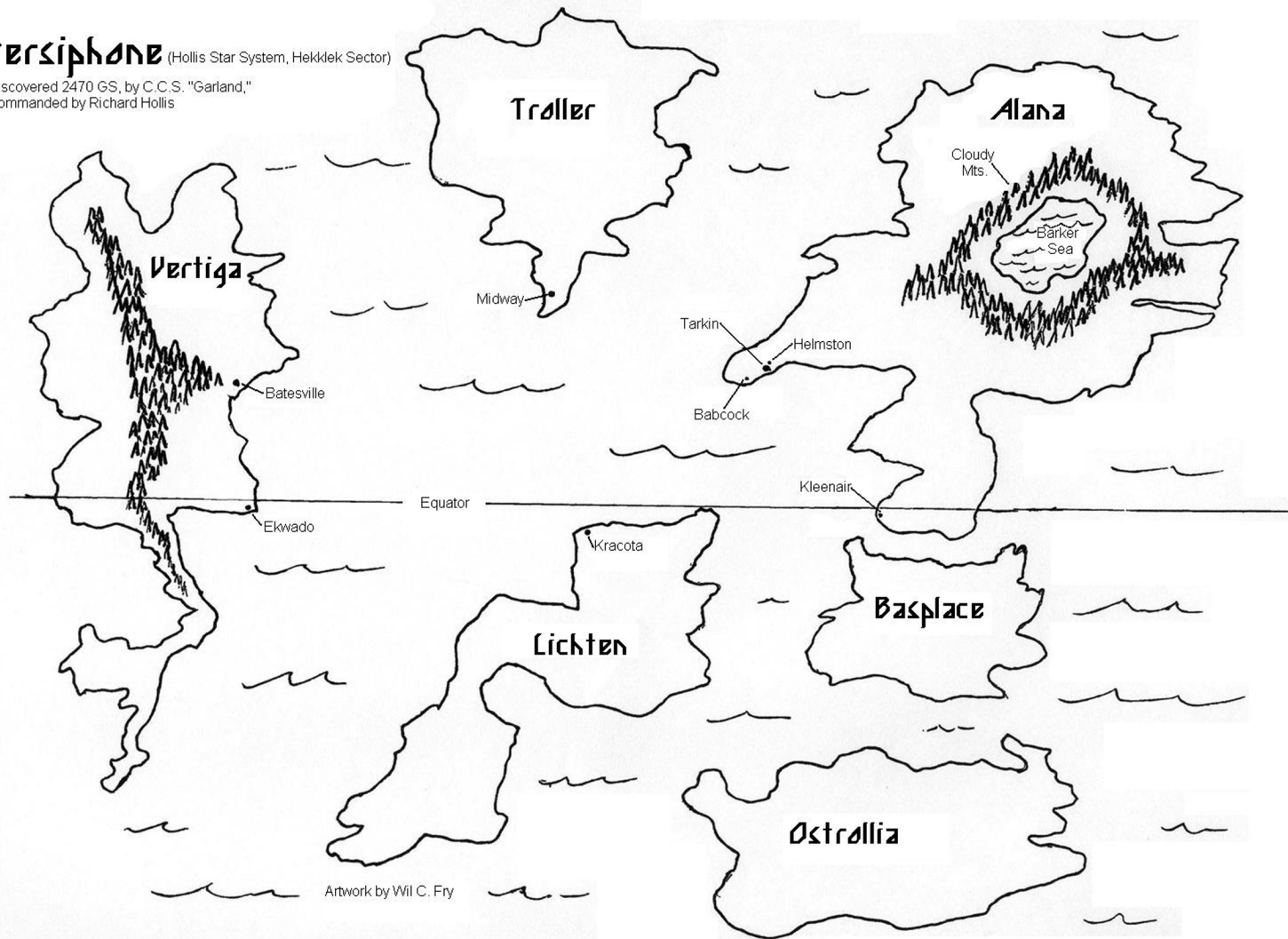
One Colonial Credit = \$4 (2003 value)

One 2003 dollar = 0.25 colonial

One 2003 dollar = 0.33 newdollars

Persiphone (Hollis Star System, Hekklek Sector)

Discovered 2470 GS, by C.C.S. "Garland,"
Commanded by Richard Hollis



Artwork by Wil C. Fry