

"Carver is a strong SF writer, with a good feel for both the hard SF elements and the people he populates them with."

—C. von Rospach, *Amazing Stories*

SEAS OF ERNATHE

JEFFREY A. CARVER

The author of *The Rapture Effect* and *The Infinity Link*



Seas of Ernathe

by

Jeffrey A. Carver

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Seas of Ernathe

Jeffrey A. Carver

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Dedication

For Dad

Books by Jeffrey A. Carver

The Star Rigger Universe

(in chronological order in the future history)

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Note For The E-Reads Edition

Seas of Ernathe is the first-written of my novels of the Star Rigger Universe (and my first novel period). But it falls *last* in the chronology of stories told in the Star Rigger future history, thus guaranteeing confusion in lists forever.

This E-reads edition is the first since the book's original print publication by Laser Books in 1976. In going through the text, I have made some corrections in spelling and punctuation, and tightened up the wording in a few places. Mostly, though, I have let it stand just as the younger me wrote it—complete with the fondness for apostrophes, madeupcompoundwords, and other youthful exuberances. It seemed good to me at the time. Why should I argue now?

Herewith the beginning (or is it the end?) of the Star Rigger saga. Enjoy!

—Jeffrey A. Carver, 2000

Introduction

by Terry Carr

There are probably more good new writers in the science fiction field today than at any time in the history of the genre. I'm not completely sure why this should be, though obviously such factors as the burgeoning quality and popularity of science fiction have a lot to do with it: not only are there more people reading sf today (and hence becoming interested in writing it), but the stories they're reading must be providing higher standards at which to aim than did such stories of earlier eras as, say, *Captain Future and the Space Emperor*.

Whatever the reason, I find that I get a lot of manuscripts from new writers that would make the established professionals of science fiction's pulp era flush green with envy. And whenever I get a manuscript that shows so much talent, whether or not I feel I can buy it for one of my anthologies, I try to let the writer know I appreciate what he or she has done, and I ask for more stories.

Jeffrey Carver was one of these writers: a couple of years ago I received two stories from him that raised my eyebrows. Neither struck me as completely successful, but as I read them I became intensely aware that I was meeting a writer of real talent; and when I regretfully returned the manuscripts I said, "What I like in these stories are your descriptive powers, which are considerable; you can *see* and *feel* these scenes." I asked where he'd sold stories so far, and was surprised to get a letter in return saying that he was just beginning and hadn't sold anything yet.

Since then Jeff Carver has sold articles and stories to such markets as *Fiction Magazine* and *Galaxy*; and now he's written a full-length novel that fulfills all the promise of his early stories, and then some.

Seas of Ernathe shows Carver's descriptive powers at their best: he brings the people and places of an alien world to life on the page and presents us with a well-thought-out alien society in conflict with visitors from Earth. He has an engrossing story to tell, too.

Science fiction is a strangely hybrid field of writing, as its very name suggests. *Science*: rationality, logic, the belief that all of reality can be understood in these terms. *Fiction*: imagination, wonder, the realization that strange things will happen in an infinite universe.

If we want to, we can polarize sf writers according to which end of the description their work usually fit. Heinlein, Asimov, Clement and Clarke are at home in the rationalists' camp; at the other end are people like Vance, Brackett, Zelazny and Norton. Talented writers all—and popular ones, too.

I think Jeffrey Carver's name will soon take its place among the latter group of writers: he imagines wonders, and allows us to share his vision. *Seas of Ernathe* is one such vision, and I think you'll enjoy it.

—Terry Carr

Chapter One

The starship labored in the uncertain currents of flux-space. Its course took it through unknown realms, bypassing the emptiness between the stars, until, in nearing the end of its journey, *Warmstorm* had effectively dodged seventy-four light-years of normal-space distance from the Cluster Central Worlds. But the journey, if quick by the standards of interstellar distances, was perilously draining. *Warmstorm* had strained to the limits of its endurance by the time, finally, that it wrenched free of the queer existence of flux-space and leaped, like a terrified fish bursting over a dam, into normal space.

A sculpted drop of quicksilver, *Warmstorm* hurtled on through the dark of space toward the golden sun Lambern and its second planet, Ernathe, where a troubled colony awaited assistance. From the darkened control pit, communication channels grumbled forthrightly between starship and colony as the ship decelerated toward orbit. With due concern for identification, the colony demanded and received clearance codes; then *Warmstorm's* master was advised that planetary defenses had been neutralized and that the ship was free, to approach. *Warmstorm* slowed and orbited.

Ernathe turned slowly on the control pit viewscreens: a misty planet, a world of spiderweb land masses, glistening clouds and green and blue seas. Ernathe the sea-planet. Somewhere in the clouds and the maze, tracked by signal but lost to the eye, were the tiny twin settlements, Lambrose and Lernick. They were the only human claim to this world but an important claim, indeed, to warrant planetary mission from the busy Central Worlds.

Silent in the gloom of the control pit, Pilot Second Seth Perland monitored his screens and made ready to assist the Pilot First as the latter began the approach and descent sequence. Noting a red spark crossing his mainscreen, the Pilot Second signaled the Captain to advise him of imminent danger—and then allowed himself a breath of astonishment.

Warmstorm had been fired upon. A pulse-packet attack burst, apparently from the colony, was streaking out of the atmosphere toward the starship.

The Captain's voice murmured in his earset; and the Pilot Second touched two parted fingers to two plates on the control panel.

The starship's weapons-fire streamed sparkling across the emptiness of space and rained lazily into the closing pulse-packet pinwheel. *Strange*, the Pilot Second thought, *that if they're going to attack at all they should launch only a single burst.* He watched the deadly play on his screen and remained ready to double his fire if necessary.

The pinwheel brightened, absorbing the defensive fire. It overloaded white . . . blue . . . pulsing indigo . . . then flared into a harmless nova and faded silently into space.

The danger had passed, with scarcely a word spoken aboard ship. While *Warmstorm* hovered though, the communication channels came alive. Pilot Second Perland keyed in and listened. "Ernathe, explain, explain!" The Captain himself came on the circuit: "You will tell us, Ernathe, what in *hell* is going on!"—and the only answers were more confusion and consternation. The officers held the ship at battle readiness—prepared, if necessary, for pinpoint bombardment. Did an enemy hold the colony?

"Please hold, *Warmstorm*, please hold! We are trying to get you an explanation, we do not know why you were fired upon!" The explanation, when it came, was no explanation at all. It had been an accident, a mortifying fluke—a *prank*, the Ernathene operator stammered, on the part of a native life form. "We do, repeat do have full control over systems again. All weaponry has, ah, been disconnected from power. You are cleared, repeat cleared to land!"

The Pilot Second shook his head in disbelief—anger was impossible, that would imply belief—and waited while the Captain presumably mulled the situation over. He merely shrugged to himself.

when the order was given to resume the landing approach, with all weapons at ready.

~~Its journey nearing an end, the starship flashed gleaming through the planet's atmosphere, over seas glowing in the sun, and down finally to an uneventful landing on the Lambrose-Lernick spaceport. If there was an enemy waiting to greet the ship, he remained hidden. Only welcoming and profuse apologetic Ernathenes came forward to greet the starship crew.~~

So began *Warmstorm's* planetary mission on Ernathe.

* * *

Seth Perland sat against the rocks of the seashore and stared wonderingly out to sea, his thoughts torn between delight at the view laid open before him and bewilderment over the words he had just heard. He grunted unbelievably. "The sea-people simply strolled into the defense battery when no one was looking, set off an orbit-burst, and wandered back out? No one watching, when there's a blood *starship* landing?" He looked dubiously at the speaker, and turned his gaze back to the water. The sea was clear and empty and green, stretching from the ragged shore, and flat beneath the airborne tufts of sea-mist that glittered in the sun here and there across the expanse. A few kilometers out, another arm of the coast jutted across the water to break up the open view.

The sea-people. The "Nale'nid." According to the Ernathenes, they moved before one's eyes like shadows of fish beneath the water, like the tricky play of golden Lambern over the sea.

"Well, nevertheless it seems to be true," answered Seth's Ernathene guide of the last two days. "If we understood how and why the Nale'nid do what they do, we wouldn't have had to ask the Cluster Council for help. We were doing quite well without it, until recently."

Racart Bonhof was a small fellow—tan complexioned, with dark straight hair and intelligent green eyes that flashed brightly at Seth, then veered away with a far-off, dreamy intensity. He struck Seth as being a capable man among a capable people; and yet their difficulties here were so strange as to require help from the Central Worlds. Well, they deserved it. For Seth himself, it was pure coincidence that he had drawn a mission to a planet and colony whose activities were so close to his heart.

Seth rocked thoughtfully on the spray-smoothed stone, stretching. He was a young man, perhaps a year or two older than Racart, but he did not feel it at the moment; forty-some days in a starship had left him sadly in need of outdoor exercise, and the several kilometers they had hiked from the settlement had only begun to loosen his muscles. He rubbed his short brown hair, smoothed his hands on the cool stone surface, and stared into the sea. It was misty emerald. The rocky bank was visible beneath the surface for some distance, sloping steeply, startlingly into the depths. Nothing moved except a few bits of floating detritus and the translucent fuzz of the plankton.

"I'm going to have to see these Nale'nid soon," Seth declared. He was anxious to accomplish something; the *Warmstorm* mission crew under Captain Gorges and Planetary Mission Officer Richard Mondreau was still up in arms about the attack on the ship. But even just seeing the Nale'nid might be a difficult problem; according to Racart, one saw the sea-people solely at their own pleasure. Even the Ernathenes could say little about them with certainty—except that until recently they had been a pleasant but harmless enigma of this world, rarely appearing at all, and never entering the human settlements. What had caused the change no one knew; but whatever the reason it was disastrous to the functioning of the colony.

Seth wanted, indeed, to see these curious marauders. It could be called duty—now that he was under the orders, strictly speaking, of the Planetary Mission rather than Captain Gorges—but it was really a matter of his natural instinct for a mystery.

Racart slapped his arm. "Let's hike farther up the coast, then. The chances will be better there. With that, he set off, Seth wincing and trying to favor both legs at once as he followed. Hiking up the coast was no simple matter. The terrain was torturous, a maze of lagoons and promontories and pools, bridged and framed by rock and weatherworn *krael* growth. Everywhere they walked, sea-mist floated just above the water or land, twinkling like fallen bits of cirrus cloud and making it impossible to see the overall landscape at a glance. The sea-mist, Racart had explained, was very common at these southern latitudes, disappearing and reappearing at a whim or a wrong word. Where there was no mist, Lambert glowed amber and red upon the rocky network and shone glassily upon the water. A handful of the brightest stars was visible in the sky.

Racart led the way with practiced ease, but Seth lagged behind frequently, nervous at treading the slippery rocks. At one point he skidded, and yelped as one foot landed with a cold splash in a pool. He stepped back onto dry surface, chagrined; but as he plodded after Racart—who had grinned but not said a word—he congratulated himself for not having fallen headlong. Not that he was so sure he wouldn't the next time.

They wound inland, and then back toward the sea, making a gradual path northward from Lambrose. They stopped again near the end of a raised promontory, which they reached by scrambling up the side of a high, steep outcropping. The vantage point was excellent and the view superb—which Seth appreciated once he had stopped wheezing from the climb. The mist, for the moment, had disappeared.

"There's the Lambrose pier," Racart said, pointing back southward to the left. A small hump was visible in the distance, but that was all that could be seen of the unloading facility for the plankton harvesters that operated out of Lambrose. Hidden completely was the processing facility, where the plankton was processed for food and synthetics, and for the precious drugbase *mynalar*. The *mynalar* and the several derivatives of the drugbase exported to Rethmere and from there to other worlds of the Cluster, were the reason for the colony's very existence, and the crux of the current difficulty. Seth looked, and nodded.

Southward, toward the mouth of the bay, was a large moving dot: a harvester making its slow way east to the port of Lambrose.

And to the north: Racart said, pointing, "It becomes wilder and hotter as you move toward the equator. That area was explored at one time, I suppose, but no one's been far up that way since the early days of the colony. No *mynella*. Somewhere in that direction, we think, is the homeland of the Nale'nid—another reason for our not meddling." Most of Ernathe, he explained, was unsuited for settlement—too hot and too little land vegetation. Ernathe was an old world, not nearly as full of life as in the past; but this was in part due to an unstable, variable sun, whose fits and flares and fluctuations raked the planet from time to time with fearsome radiations. The remainder of the planet, largely intertwined ocean and barren land, belonged to whatever wildlife existed—and to the Nale'nid.

A pair of *skrells* squawked high in the air, circling and shouting at one another as they roamed in search of prey. Shrieking, one following the other, the winged creatures banked and plummeted like missiles into the water. A moment later they erupted into the air, one with a mouthful of wriggling fish and the other with a howl.

"I assume there will be a search for the Nale'nid's home," Racart said abruptly. "What will happen then?"

Seth gestured ignorance. "I'm not in charge of the mission."

"But an attack on a starship is not apt to go unpunished. Not to mention the sabotage in Lambrose and Lernick," Racart said, sounding surprisingly bitter. "Isn't that true?"

Seth showed his surprise. "Probably—but I think you overestimate our capabilities. The ship

weaponry, which is probably what you are thinking of, is designed mainly to protect the ship. Besides, ~~are you defending the Nale'nid now, after they've ruined your entire production? And senseless endangered lives?~~" According to the settlement's reports, not a week had gone by in the last year without the Nale'nid causing one or another kind of disruption. However intrigued Seth might be by the stories of the sea-people, he hardly thought they were in need of sympathy. Why should Racart, whose people had suffered far more, feel differently?

Racart did not face him. "I don't know. I don't know why they left us alone for so many years, and then suddenly started all this trouble. I just don't. Dammit, we don't know *anything* about them—except that this is really their world, not ours. We may have upset a natural balance of some kind."

Seth acknowledged without answering. Racart normally worked aboard a harvester at sea, and whether his ideas were typical or not Seth did not know, though he would certainly find out. Then, to Seth's surprise, Seth had his own personal interest in seeing the production of *mynalar* restored—but his thoughts at the moment were more on the sea-people themselves, the puzzle. "Perhaps," he said to Racart, "I want of an answer. If you have, the ecologists haven't noticed, and everyone else is stumped. I guess we'll have to ask the Nale'nid."

Racart grunted.

Seth knelt and peered cautiously over the edge of the rocks to the water below. The sea welled beautifully downward to a deepening and finally impenetrable green. Salt smell washed into the air, cool moist vapors faintly tart with the odor, somewhere, of seaweed. He wondered if the precious phytoplankton *mynella* were present in this water. Instead of voicing that question, however, he asked, "How deeply has this part of the sea been explored?" There were submersibles at Lambrose, he knew.

Receiving no answer, he looked up. Racart was standing very still, gazing to the northwest over the water. "Look," he said softly, raising his arm to point.

Seth followed his gaze. A front of dense sea-mist was gliding across the water toward them. There was no apparent breeze, but it lapped silently against the shore in eddies of silvery smoke. There was a scent of rock-dampness and sea-moss in the air, as if driven by the fog. "Sit down and keep your eyes open," Racart advised, and Seth obeyed without hesitation. The fog swept quickly toward the promontory, its forward edge curling under like a willowy, ghostly half-track.

The bank surrounded them, troops massing in the quiet afternoon. Seth felt instinctively for the security of the rock beneath him, as mist swirled tickling about his ears and nose. His sight was obscured momentarily, and then it opened again as the front passed, leaving patches of visibility over the flat gray water.

He squinted through the wafting scud and sat upright, stunned. Across the water, several darkish shapes were moving within the silvery earthly nebula like shadows of trees or persons. They were vague, roving figures, which without being distinguishable made him think instantly of the sea-people. His blood pounded with curiosity as he hunched forward, staring intently until the bank coalesced again and blocked his view. "The Nale'nid?" he asked Racart. His voice sounded wiry and strange against the solitude of fog.

The answer was slow, in an awed and amused voice thinned as if by distance. "Perhaps. Keep watching."

The mist paled, whitened, robbing the world of its last remaining color—and then it broke and shifted, and with a swirl reopened. Three distant but distinct figures moved across the water: two men and a young woman, human-figures but slenderer, smoother, fairer, and clad in the simplest fashion with dark glittering scales. They danced upon the water, stopped, twirled, and winked at him—and then the men whirled while the girl winked again. Seth was captured by astonishment and infatuation; they were distant as stage players set in another world, but every movement leapt to his eye as

fractured and magnified through a crystal. *How could he see so clearly?* They glided like skaters over the water, their blades the thinnest slips of mist. Laughter tinkled softly, distantly, as if spilled from the lips of others beneath the waves. They moved maddeningly fast, with the grace of deepwater fishes.

However lucid Seth had felt earlier, he now stared as if in a dream, rapt by the vision of the sea-girl, of her men turning about her in nodding circles. Before Seth could breathe and decide if he were entranced in a hallucinatory vision, the mists closed again and moments later reopened—revealing soft, driftglass green water, and moving beneath it, closer now, three shadows like courtly humanfish. The silhouettes slowed for a moment of still-life, two sea-men and one sea-woman, who then danced in a lyrical flurry and fled, leaving only the green-glass memory of their presence.

Too astonished to move or make a sound, Seth stared at the empty water and tried to hold the fading image in his mind. Its vividness vanished with the mist, and by the time he had sorted the impressions from his expectations he was hardly sure that he had seen anything at all, shadows of people. His hands pressed the rock, cold with airy dampness; the mist tickled again as its tail drifted past, and then suddenly it too was gone, receding across the water to the south. Seth slouched in the golden sunshine, letting its warmth drench his skin before he finally sighed, and turned to his friend. "They—"

His words stopped in his throat. He blinked. Racart was gone.

Now where? Seth twisted around to look, but his friend was nowhere on the promontory summit. "Racart!" He scrambled to his feet, walked along the edge of the summit, and looked down and around in all directions—but there was no sign of the Ernathene. "Racart!"

Was this a prank? It would hardly befit Racart. Could he somehow have fallen into the water? No; Seth would have heard a splash. "Where are you?" he bellowed.

The answer was a sigh of air over the water, and the soft lap of the sea against the rock face below. The outcropping tumbled to water on one end and to rock and moss on the other; Seth could not see any likely place of concealment. Kneeling at the seaward end, he gazed down carefully into the water, probing it with his eyes. There were no obstructions, so even if Racart had fallen he should have been uninjured and able to swim clear. An uncertain fear nudged Seth's mind, and sweat began to trickle down his neck as he swayed, standing. "Racart!" The call rang across the water and died.

A lone skrell freewheeled into view, circled above the water at Seth's height and cried mournfully. Why would he be hiding, testing him? No, it was preposterous to consider that. Could the Nale'nid have done something? Perhaps, but what?

He climbed down from the outcropping and scouted in a semicircle around the base of the promontory, inspecting every crevice and break in the rock. Something, he decided, must have happened to Racart—but nothing so simple as falling from the rocks. Uncertainty tugged at him, feeling that there was something he was failing to consider, some danger he was overlooking. He was kilometers from the settlement. He could probably find his way back alone—but what would he do if he found Racart seriously injured . . . or would he be able to return in time with a proper search party?

Damn it, had the *mist* snatched him away?

Seth moved through the maze of pools and channels to the landward of the promontory, looking into each pool one by one, into each stream, as if he might find the grinning face of his friend, laid to rest by some dreadful assassin. He saw only dark-bottomed and mossy-edged pools, and cutting flows of water seeking the sea. He slipped; one knee banged hard on the rock, and his leg was soaked again. Water sopped coldly in his shoe, and his knee ached fiercely as he straightened it. Determinedly, he ignored the pain.

He called, again and again. No answer . . . and the appearance of more sea-mist made even the

attempt seem hopeless. Lambern turned a deeper gold as it sank lower in the sky, and he realized grimly that ~~he would probably have to return alone and simply hope for the best~~—either that Racart would make his own way back or that a search party would find him.

For a last look, he scrambled back onto the outcropping and searched anxiously in all directions. "Racart!" He stared, puzzled and frightened, into the water; the reeling sensation of depth reminded him curiously of his vision of the Nale'nid. There was no evidence that the sea-people were involved, but as a starpilot he depended professionally on intuition. A feeling that could not be ignored . . . and with a moment's reflection on it he was possessed of a strange peace of mind amid his disquiet.

He moved down from the outcropping. Whether his friend was safe or not—and with the sea-people, who could tell?—it was past time to start the trek back.

Chapter Two

Finding the way back to Lambrose was not easy. The broken, indented shoreline and the drifting bits of sea-mist made it impossible to get a clear view of where he was going; Seth felt he was trying to negotiate a maze with bleary, sleep-filled eyes. He detoured inland to skirt a rugged lagoon, and then hesitated, unsure whether to angle back toward the sea where he could keep the Lambrose pier in sight, or to keep inland to avoid blind avenues onto outjutting peninsulas. He wished he had paid greater attention to the route when he had been with Racart.

He turned seaward to follow the line of the shore; it seemed wiser to keep his destination in view as much as possible. But the groundrock dipped and rose in a clay-sculpture profile, so even that route provided a challenge. Perseverance brought him near to the actual coastline and directly into a silver-thick mass of sea-mist. *Again?* he wondered uncomfortably—but he shrugged and moved on along his path into the fog, changing his gait to a slow, cautious shuffle. His skin tingled, sensitive to the touch of the flowing mist, as if a mild electric current were charging the mass. The sounds of his shuffle were clear but muted. He stooped and strained forward with all his senses to detect any obstacles or pitfalls before his feet.

He thought about Racart, who might be anywhere. Soon he was so lost in contemplation, and keyed to the sound of his own movement, that when he heard other sounds he straightened with a start. *Pat, pat* of footfalls, a ripple of faint laughter like the chortle of a stream. The sounds were quiet, but very clear and very close. It seemed he was being shadowed. He stopped instantly and strained his ears to hear more.

Nale'nid?

There was no further sound. Hesitantly, he called out, "Hello? Who's there? Hello!" Silence answered. He tried again and received the same answer. Sea-mist had made the world a fuzz of soft gray, the landscape an indistinct montage of darker shapes. He looked around slowly, taking care not to lose his bearings. "Racart! Racart!"

When he gave up and moved on, he was more uncertain of his position than ever. Someone was playing a game at his expense, but he could not tell whether it was a malicious game or a friendly one. There was little else to do but continue walking. He heard the *pat, pat* of feet once more, and—his thought—a murmur of voices. Breaking through the mist once was a bright female voice, just a bit too fluttered, a bit too quick to be like any of the human voices he knew. The brief flurry of words, "words" were what they were, fell in a strange tongue, enchanting—and he felt a sudden urge to abandon his path, to seek the voice's source. Could it be the girl he had seen earlier, could she know something of Racart?

He caught himself in the act of moving that way—and firmly set his feet back on his own path. He called again, however—several times. When there was no response, he decided it would be useless to blunder after someone who did not wish to be seen, and he forced himself to move on.

The sounds continued with him for a good distance, until the veil of mist shimmered with sunlight, and thinned, and finally parted to reveal the calm sea and the flattened path of rock along its edge. Lambrose glowed golden and brown upon the coast, but it was lower in the sky than Seth had expected and he hurried along the shore path—feeling both anxiety and relief at the sight of Lambrose still several kilometers distant. He glanced quickly about, but all that was visible beneath the sky were the rocks, the sea, and mist in scattered fluffs. The mysterious sounds were gone.

Here the path was familiar; it ran in a ledge just above water level, alongside an uplift to the left, and then ahead some distance it curved around the seaward side of a massive granite outcropping like

the one from which Racart had disappeared. Seth was breathing hard, jogging now, but he did not slow as he rounded the outcropping. He slammed headlong into someone coming the other way, flailed off balance, and toppled toward the water.

An arm shot out to grab him, and before he could utter a cry Racart had pulled him back to safety.

"Ahh!" Seth stumbled against the granite face and clutched hard for support. "Racart!" He stared at his friend in astonishment. "What?"

Racart slumped wearily and returned Seth's look of amazement; then he leaned against the granite himself, stared out to sea; and chuckled. "Ho, brother! I was afraid I'd have to bring the whole town out looking for you—but you do pretty well, for a space pilot."

"Where the hell have you been? You mean you took off—"

"No," Racart interrupted softly. "I did not leave you on purpose. At least not *my* purpose."

"Then the Nale'nid—"

"Yes. And beyond that I don't know what to tell you." The calm left his face, to be replaced by an expression of pain, of confusion badly masked by his distant and intense gaze over the sea. When Racart turned to face the pilot, Seth saw the exhaustion drawn in the lines of his friend's face; Racart's eyes seemed as misty as the sea, and wearily unfocused. "There were others," Racart said dully, "not just the three you and I were watching. They came in the fog and took me . . . places . . . before they left me—farther up the way."

Seth hesitated, wanting to ask *where* and *how* and a dozen other questions, but uncertain if he should press. "What places?" he said finally, softly.

"Don't ask. Not yet." Racart looked at him for a long moment, then tossed his head southward and said, "Let's head back. It's starting to get chilly."

Seth nodded and fell in behind him, or beside him when the path allowed. They walked mostly in silence; but when Racart asked if he had had any difficulties of his own, Seth described his search for his hike, and the sounds he had heard from the Nale'nid. "Different people," Racart declared firmly, but beyond that he would not go.

Seth was concerned about Racart's reticence, but was afraid to disturb him further. Nevertheless, as they approached the Lambrose perimeter, the dwellings and shops and conversion-plants a welcome sight ahead, Seth reflected that the story would have to be heard, and soon. The *mynalar* problem involved not only Ernathe but the entire Cluster—and in the end that problem meant the Nale'nid. The decision of what to do would demand every available bit of information.

He watched Racart swinging his small torso in a long, easy stride, his mouth set in a curious grimace, his eyes set straight ahead. Something Racart knew did not speak lightly of the Nale'nid, and that was too bad, because Seth would have preferred to believe that they were a friendly people. The memory of the sea-woman fluttered through his mind. He firmly tried to ignore it, to chase it away.

The perimeter watch strolled by to greet them as they passed into the town, and with a gesture of exaggerated officiality checked their names off against the outbound list. They headed immediately for shelter and food.

* * *

"You're really sure, are you, that this *mynalar* is so important?" Racart asked furiously. He smacked the table with a fist and ale sloshed over the rims of the two mugs . . .

Seth looked around the bar with a wary eye, hoping no one would heed them. Tired and aching, he

had suggested relaxing in the bar, with the intent of drawing Racart out on the afternoon's mysterious events. Instead he had elicited anger. Against all visible logic, Racart was defending the Nale'n against the presumed danger of his own people. He seemed wholly unaware of the real importance of the colony, of the reason his people were here at the Cluster Council's expense. But then, he had been born here and had never had to concern himself with such matters.

"Yes," said Seth.

"Why? Just so the elite on a dozen worlds can be treated to longer lifetimes than the rest of us have?" Racart asked sarcastically. He snorted and drank from his ale.

"No." Seth kept his face purposely expressionless. "Only the *mynalar-e* is used for the nerve regeneration—though you're partly right, it was originally the only *mynalar*. It's valuable, sure, and it's not used *only* for the old and the elite, by the way. But the truly important drug is *mynalar-g*." Racart looked blank. "It hasn't actually been used successfully yet."

"So?"

"It's a—hallucinogen. An unusual, and actually rather mild hallucinogen." Seth chose his words very carefully, trying to explain in a straightforward manner. "All right, let me go back a bit. You know that we, and I mean the council as well as the Transport Guild, have been trying to duplicate the old techniques of star-flight. Or maybe you don't know. Our flux-drive ships do the job, they tie some of the worlds together—but they're terribly, terribly inefficient. They bludgeon and struggle their way between the stars like fish trying to walk between streams.

"The Old Cluster had a better way—starship-rigging. Most of the actual technology has been preserved, but it's really the art that was lost, not the science. And what an art—sailing huge vessels on the winds and tides and currents of flux-space, guided by nothing more than the pilot's mind! It was graceful and efficient, *and we don't know how to do it*."

"We need it, Racart—we need to learn it again, it's the only way we can bring all the worlds of the Cluster back together."

"Need?" Racart asked doubtfully. "Or *want*?"

Seth breathed sharply and looked straight into his friend's eyes. "*Need*. There are only fourteen star systems joined now, and shakily at that, by the biggest fleet we can manage. Fourteen, out of nearly a hundred before the entropy wars—and that in the Cluster alone, never mind the Beyond. We've been to other systems, many of them still civilized if not spacefaring. Most of them would like to join the Cluster or could be persuaded, but we haven't the strength to bring them together, the distances are too great."

"You spoke of *need*," Racart reminded him. His mouth and brows were set in stubborn resistance, barely softened by the gloom of the bar.

"Yes—because *if we don't do it now we may never have another chance*." Seth was frustrated; he knew he was speaking of something that seemed to be beyond Racart's world. But it *did* matter to Racart and to Ernathe. "I don't know how much history or news reaches you here, but there are bad relations in the Cluster—races that would like us to fail. Holdover from the entropy wars, I suppose. The Lacenthi, who were human-friends in the Old Cluster, aren't anymore. And the Querlin have always been enemies—not just of humans but of all mammaloids. Racart, in not too many years the universe is coming alive in full bloom again, and *we'd* better have some accord when it happens—and not be just dozens of scattered worlds."

Racart stared at him thoughtfully, his eyes not denying Seth's words, but also not yet conceding their importance. He clenched his mug with interlocking fingers and lowered his eyes to the table. "The council protects us here on Ernathe, doesn't it?"

"There is a Lacenthi system only half a dozen light-years from here," Seth said, shrugging.

"Okay, so maybe the Cluster has to be reunited—don't ask me, mind you, Ernathe is the only place I know—but supposing you're right. What does that have to do with us, with *mynalar*, with the Nale'nid?" Racart's eyes were directed into his ale, and his voice was low, seeking.

Seth frowned, realized he had lost his original track. "*Mynalar-g* may be the answer to starship rigging—or at least a part of it. The drug, itself, sets the mind free to ramble and blunder about in a fantasy world. And according to what we know that's the beginning of learning to fly a rigger-ship."

He hesitated. The real argument had been made. Did Racart want to hear, now, about starpiloting? "It was the pilot who counted in those ships, Racart—not a machine, but a man who reached into the flux with his own mind through a sensory net, a sail. He visualized the tides between the stars and steered like a sailor on the sea, with rudder and keel and oars. He flew by building a fantasy—a image so real that it matched the real currents and storms of flux-space. That's all the flux is, Racart—a deep, unbottled fantasy that happens to be real.

"You couldn't take any man and teach him to fly—no, he had to have the gift of imaging, he had to be crazy enough and sane enough to run in the fantasy and carry a ship on his back. And it worked—that's how this Cluster was settled, and how the galaxy beyond it was settled!" Seth's eyes blurred. A painting vibrated in his mind, a painting from a gallery on Venicite: a gleaming graceful ship of the past, gliding gull-like, submarinelike through the flux that underlay the cold and the empty blackness of space itself.

"Ah!" Racart said, his face suddenly alight, his brows furrowed with interest. He stabbed with his finger at Seth's heart. "Then I can forget this stuff about the Cluster and we can talk about the important things. You want this *yourself*, don't you?" He nodded to his own question, not expecting Seth to answer. "Have you taken the drug yet?" His eyes flashed bright, green, intent upon Seth's.

The pilot was startled by Racart's bluntness. He should have guessed—Racart wanted to hear about a friend, not about politics out among the worlds. "Yes," he said, "I have taken it. I'm not sure how to describe it. Frightening, terrifying. Exhilarating. Mind-twistingly strange." He frowned, lost again in the powerful, disturbing memories of the drug: tumultuous visions hurled bright against the black emptiness of space, dashed against the diamond maelstrom of stars; soul-aching longings fulfilled for the briefest of moments and then wrenched away to leave bare, cold sweating reality.

He nodded. "I've taken it, and it failed for me. At least it failed in what we wanted it to do—but not hope not forever. One day a man will find a harness for that drug, and the techs will harness *him* into a ship's rig—and we'll have our new way to fly the stars. And then another man will learn to do that without the drug. And maybe I'll get a chance, again, and maybe all those other things will happen too." He tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the table. "After that—who knows?" He drank his lukewarm ale, suddenly embarrassed by his own speech.

Racart was silent, pondering; but he was obviously impressed. When he spoke, his voice was so soft that Seth had to strain to hear. "I have always had a good feeling toward the Nale'nid, and I guess I still do." He smiled faintly, his expression changing. "But you'll have to know what happened today, you and we are to decide where to go from here. *Mynalar* means our way of life, too, though I think we could find a way of life without it, if necessary. I don't know why the Nale'nid are keeping us from the *mynalar*, but I do know that we've a people out there whom we must understand." His eyes flickered across Seth's gaze and took on their more usual dream-reflecting intensity.

His next words were drowned in a clatter.

A stutter of pulsed air-bursts rocked the lounge, echoed through the street outside: *pok-a-pok-pok-a-pok!* The bar was instantly still, a dozen faces staring at one another from the crouched or flattened positions that every person had taken instinctively. The stutter repeated itself and whined on to the sound of a dying pulse-generator. A border-weapon coughed, and then the air was still. Seth

looked at Racart in astonishment and horror—and received in return a gesture of bewilderment. Someone near the exit crept to the door and cautiously peered out. "Looks okay," the man said. "People are moving out into the street." He glanced back, shrugged, and went outside himself.

Seth and Racart followed, looking carefully up and down the street. The sun was liquid red just above the western horizon, and the street awash in its glow suddenly began filling up again with the people of Lambrose. Two uniformed perimeter guards made their way down the street, one of them shouting reassuringly, "The Nale'nid set off the perimeter defenses! No one was hurt, and we're back under control!" That seemed to satisfy most of the Ernathenes, who apparently were used to this sort of thing. But Seth saw several of the starship personnel staring about in disbelief, and he had to share their feeling; it seemed that anytime a defense battery went off in this town it was the Nale'nid who were doing the shooting. Perhaps, he thought, the solution was simply to dismantle the defenses.

The worry on Racart's face told him that not every Ernathene was satisfied. And his own officers, he knew, would be incredulous at this new episode.

"I think it's time we checked in," he said, and nudged Racart in the direction of the Planetary Mission's headquarters. Racart could tell his story to everyone at once.

What he found when he arrived, though, was not ready and willing listeners, but more disturbing news.

Chapter Three

"The Chief-of-arms says the confusion was so widespread, he's relieved that only one Nale'nid was killed. The guard apparently only wanted to frighten it away, but the shot caught the creature squarely. He said another sea-person distracted him as he was firing a warning at the first." Richel Mondreau sighed grimly. He was a tall, stiff-featured man; the hard lines of his face met in acute angles, running in jigsaw fashion from his cheekbones down to the scrape-shaven chin, and up again through the zigzag mouth and sharp nose to the bronzed-gray eyes, which settled in turn upon each of the younger men. The eyes left Seth, finally, and fixed upon Captain Jondrel Gorges, master of the *Warmstorm*. "We'll send these two off to inspect the damage, then, and have a look at the body, eh, Captain?"

Seth started to speak, but held back when Gorges nodded slowly in approval and addressed him in a tone that was grave and yet managed at the same time to sound sleepy. "You will of course inspect things closely, Pilot Second, before you go to sea. Richel here has the greatest confidence in you, though he would never admit it to himself." Mondreau scowled at the latter remark.

To sea? Seth wondered queasily. He answered, "Very well, Captain. But before we go—" and he glanced at Racart, standing gloomily beside him—"perhaps we, Racart especially, should explain something that happened earlier today. We feel it may be important."

Mondreau swung to face Seth. "Fine," he said shortly. "Later, though. You're leaving on a harvest ship in two hours, traveling as observer. Mr. Bonhof has been assigned by his people to help you learn how things operate around here. We'll tie in anything else you know later."

Seth nodded uncomfortably. He supposed Racart's story could wait. "We'll head over to the planet then," he said, and motioned to Racart. The Ernathene said nothing until they were in the street again, then with a few short words he cursed the killing of the Nale'nid. Seth sympathized. "This is hard going to create a climate for diplomatic understanding."

Racart answered, "That wasn't what I was thinking of. I don't think the Nale'nid themselves will be too upset about it. I'm worried about its effect right here—among your people, and especially among mine. It's going to raise havoc with our good intentions. People who have been tolerating this trouble will feel that the dam has been broken, that a violent precedent deserves a violent follow-up. Others will say, 'Now we've done it, we have no legitimate claim here so let's get out before the Nale'nid rightfully explode.' " Racart walked quickly, in this agitation. He rounded a corner abruptly and Seth had to hurry to follow.

"Which point will you take?" Seth asked, catching up.

Racart shot him a glance that told nothing and marched straight ahead. "Hah!" he muttered fiercely. His brows were furrowed and his eyes narrow and determined. His previous mood of intimacy had vanished altogether.

They walked through the clustered, radiation-shielded family domes, and down the main harbor avenue among the shops and public gathering houses. There were many pedestrians in the street but almost no vehicles, except for an occasional utility van. Lambrose was laid out neatly in small town fashion, expanding away from the harbor according to the whim and variegation of the land. Homes and recreational buildings were grouped generally in a northeasterly fan, while the *myrella* and food conversion plants were set inland at a southerly angle. The spaceport, planetary defense batteries, and satellite control all were located at the end of a road to the east—the third point in the triangle comprising Lambrose and Lernick.

Seth and Racart turned left near the harbor and headed back inland along the "industrial park

The sun had already set over the water, and its fading light left a sheen in the sky, a mottled orange and red backdrop for ship silhouettes. Stars were prickling into view in a few cloudless patches, making Seth wish for just a few minutes of completely clear sky, so that he might see the entire spectacle.

The *mynella-mynalar* facility was the final segment of a long plankton receiving and conversion plant. At the wharf was the loading pier where the harvesters emptied their slurry-cargoes. Separators divided the *mynella* organisms from the others; then the conveyor line split, the larger one carrying the bulk of the harvest for food and synthetics conversion, and the smaller one carrying *mynella* to the drug-extraction facility at the end of the line. This was a flat-roofed building surrounded by roads and several stands of carefully nurtured trees. Early evening floodlighting cast a pleasant aura about the building.

They were met at the door by a security man. "You'll be wanting to see the Nale'nid first, imagine." He led the way past rows of great stainless vats, mixers, and centrifuges. Another man joined them—Andol Holme, Crew-Exec of *Warmstorm*, a lean but hulking blond. Seth was glad to see him; Holme was one of his closest friends and advisors.

"Have you seen Richel and the Captain yet?" Holme inquired.

Seth nodded. "They're not happy. Mondreau's starting with a scattergun survey—he's sending me off on a harvester as soon as we're done here, and I gather he has some of his researchers just about everywhere right now."

Holme clucked, nodding. "You'll be busy, all right—we all will—and this sight is not going to make you feel easier." His face curled into a grimace, and as they swung into a side corridor, Seth saw why. His stomach knotted. Racart exhaled with a whisper.

The Nale'nid stretched on the floor was a fair, slender-faced man who, but for the sleekness of his face and mossily smoothed hair, and the translucent fronds draped about him as garments, could have been mistaken for any man in the settlement. His face held a curious mixture of expressions; his forehead was silk smooth, peaceful, but his mouth was twisted in gruesome pain. His left side was cratered and fused black by the explosive heat of a pulse-weapon. The flesh, fatally destroyed by the single burst, had been so instantly cauterized that the visible damage was confined to a fifteen-centimeter concave mass of char; a severed garment frond was neatly scorched on either side of the wound. The smell of burnt flesh forced Seth to choke back a retch.

He finally looked away, up at the Crew-Exec. Holme grunted an appreciation of his feelings and said, "No one knows why the weapon was set for a full charge, least of all the guard who was using it. Possibly with all the fooling around one of the Nale'nid themselves might have changed the settings—but that hardly makes sense does it? But then what sense for them to come in here in the first place and to take over the border defenses and shoot off all the weapons into the air? Nothing about the whole thing makes much sense so far."

Racart stirred but kept his silence. Seth glanced at him nervously, saw that he was strangely calm. Seth asked his question of Holme, however, and of the guard, who was standing silent. "Then they get control of all the defense systems again?" He shook his head at what that implied about the defense security—and yet he knew that security had been tightened considerably after the incident with *Warmstorm*.

"They seem to . . . just appear when you're not looking . . . whether you're actually looking or not," the guard said, talking to no one in particular. His eyes glazed with recall. "Even when you *think* you're being watchful, they sneak by as if they were made of air. One walked right in front of me, and he was nearly past before I even noticed him."

"Yes," Racart said, startling Seth. "They do that, don't they?"

"Though I've never seen one hurt a person," the guard concluded. Racart's eyes clouded at the thought, but he shook his head and gave Seth a glance that said, *not now*.

"Let's make that tour, shall we?" Holme suggested. The guard nodded and gestured to two others who had arrived to sense-record and remove the body. He led the three men back through the plant, past the primary reducers where the incoming slurry of *mynella* was thickened and ground to a paste. Workers were clustered around the wide tanks, inspecting beneath cowlings and under the tank lids. The supervisor glanced up at their approach and shook her head; everything there was normal. Seth and Holme poked about for a moment, then followed the others down the line, to the first of the chemical-process converters. Here, also, a work crew was checking, and drawing out material for testing. So far, nothing was wrong.

"So where's the problem?" asked Seth.

"Patience," said the guard. "We already know there's a foul-up at the end—I just wanted to see if anything more had been found." They passed the secondary reducers and came to the *mynalar* end of the facility where the crude drug was refined and purified before packaging and sealing. Here a number of people were gloomily examining a powdery material in a small stainless vat. A middle-aged woman, a chemist, told them what had been found.

"This batch has been ruined. We don't know yet about the others. And we don't know how it was done. We never know how it was done." She looked tired, but when Seth glanced questioningly at the chemical plumbing she anticipated his query. "There's nothing wrong with the equipment. The batch was half run, and doing fine, when the Nale'nid came."

Seth stepped closer to inspect the equipment, and listened casually to the conversation of the workers nearby. He was startled to hear them discussing, not the loss of the drug batch, but the death of the Nale'nid. *They're really getting used to this business*, he thought, *but not to people getting hurt over it. Do they know what this could mean to their whole future here?* The mood was one of anxiety, of bewilderment, of concern about the reaction of the Nale'nid people to the death of one of their own.

"There may be people asking for shutdown of operations. Or of the defense batteries," the guard said, unhappily.

Racart answered without hesitation. "It won't matter, either way." He looked at Seth probingly. "It won't matter at all."

Seth shook his head. It had to matter. But it could hardly be to the general good.

* * *

Seth and Racart returned to their respective quarters to pack sea-bags, then parted with Andromeda and Holme in the *Warmstorm* compound. Before heading off to make his report to Gorges and Mondrea, Holme had offered Seth a bit of advice: "Listen to these sailors. If anyone can tell you how the Ernathenes feel, it will be them—none of this official falderal. And they'll probably tell you more than you want to know about the Nale'nid, too." With that, he had given Racart a pleasant nod and Seth a slap on the back, and the two had headed for the docks.

The activity there was quiet but constant; supplies for up to twenty days at sea were being loaded, though the average run was only three to five days. *Ardello* was a great broad-nosed floating allostere, an iceberg, filtering systems and holding tanks constituting much of its bulk, with the crew's quarters located on the upper decks. While Racart went in search of an officer to assign them quarters, Seth stood at the rail amidships, looking down at the water slapping between the wharf and the hull. He had been on only one sea-going ship in his life—a huge stabilized liner on the Sladar Ocean of Rethme—and the prospect now of a week on a rumbling work ship was enough to make him wish he were

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