

SNOWBANE

“Let him enter,” came a sharp, commanding alto voice. Grinnage drew back the steel door, the ship gave a rebellious lurch, and Gordon staggered into a large stateroom. The door slammed behind him; he performed a fast entrechat, a twist, and a shuffle-step to avoid parting his skull on a large silvery sculpture, and beheld a gorgeous woman.

She wore a black slipsuit that fitted her closely as she moved. Gordon had trouble looking her in the eyes. He quickly stuffed his metal egg in his waiter’s pants pocket, where to his annoyance and embarrassment it bulged suggestively.

“I’m Cordelia Snowbane. You’re the new tenor?” the woman asked. Her resonant voice had carrying power.

“No, I’m not. I’m – ” Gordon searched his brain for one of his regular pseudonyms. All were in hiding. He clamped his mouth shut.

“Ah, the new baritone, then. Come over here, big man. We’re going to have trouble fitting you for the part. Wharton, hah, well, he was half your size.”

“I’m –” Gordon glanced at the statue, which appeared to be a woman of brushed steel, turning with her umbrella in a fairy pirouette. Her metal skirt floated high around her well-turned legs.

“Don’t worry, I heard your audition track. Nice work, but you’ll need to beef up the lower register. The usual baritone problem.” She ran a hand down his arm, and said to herself, “Sleeves close to a meter if he’s an inch. My God. MILLSTONE!” The last word went into Gordon’s ear like a driven stake, and he leaped away.

“Goodness, you’re jumpy! Settle down! We’ve got just six hours before we’re on stage at Manton L4 with Pirates, and your costume’s got to be blown up like a supernova.”

“Yes, Director?” A solid, crease-faced man appeared beside Gordon. He had the longest hands Gordon had ever seen, even on the piano-playing genemods.

“Millstone, can you get the Pirate King costume ready for this guy in time for Manton?”

Millstone looked Gordon over. “Wow. Sure, if you’ll lend me Whingell’s simionts to go with mine.”

“Look,” Gordon finally broke in, “I’m not a baritone! I’m not a tenor! I’m a counterespionage agent, and I’m on the run!”

“You know perfectly well Whingell won’t let you use his simionts. He says they stitched his fly shut after the last time. All his flies, in fact.” The woman smiled appraisingly at Gordon, her fingers busy with a seam on his waiter outfit. He stared around the room for an exit. Women as beautiful as this one always got him in far worse trouble than they were worth, and not just because of their own impulses; he always helped out. Come to think of it, he had almost as much trouble with women as the Tyrakians did.

“Well, I can get the costume done if you’ll just lend me this guy and he stands still while I drape and cut it.” Millstone stood back. “And I’ll need to rip up that officer’s uniform from Pinafore.”

“Coun-ter-es-pi-o-nage,” Gordon enunciated loudly, with decreasing hope.

“Oh, no! You can’t!” The woman looked beseechingly at Millstone. “That’s my favorite one of all!” She turned to Gordon. “He and I need to talk about this. You go. Left out the door, third door on the left, lower bunk. Watch the gravity changes. Grinnage will find you some things for off-shift, and he’ll show you the galley. Script’s on your bunk, learn the god-damned lines. That’s why we lost a Pirate King out an airlock once. Go.” As Gordon passed her, she patted the bulge of the egg in his pocket and added, “Nice touch.”

Grinnage beckoned. “You’ll be rooming with Freefall -- that’s Fenton Freestone -- and I think you should be a bit careful when waking him up. Otherwise, he’s an excellent roommate, and he won’t disturb you at all. Very respectable.” Gordon followed, his mind on ways to get off this ship at Manton L4 and escape.