



The Human Thing

by Kathleen H. Nelson



<http://www.dragoonmoonpress.com>

click here to order *The Human Thing* from Amazon.com

“Sorry, Jillie-Jill,” he said, as he collected the pieces of his cast-off clothing and started dressing, “but you didn’t give me a chance to tell you. I’ve got some work to do this afternoon.”

“What kind?” When he didn’t answer immediately, her intuition kicked in. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with that old barge you found, would it?”

He shot her a troubled look. “You know about that?”

“Nothing escapes me for long, lover. So what’s the dish?”

“I won’t know for sure until I’ve spent some time in the archives,” he said. “But I have this high-velocity feeling that the union’s in serious trouble.”

“Then hand the scat over to Barim,” she said. “That’s what we pay him for.”

“If I’m right,” he replied, glancing furtively toward the door, “Barim could be part of the problem.”

“Sweet, suffering mother!” She didn’t know what to think about that! But one thing was for sure: she didn’t feel like being on her back anymore. She dove for her clothes. As she did so, a wrist-wiz pinged.

“Relax, it’s mine,” Denny said, and answered the page. “What is it, Trevor?”

“Time, Capt’n,” came the reply. “You wanted me to remind you.”

“Right. Is the shuttle ready?”

“Just finished fueling her up myself.”

“Thanks. I’ll be there in ten.” He turned to Jillian, who was now hastily stuffing herself back into her one-piece. His expression was one of amusement and rue. “Just because I have to go doesn’t mean that you have to hurry off,” he told her. “Take your time. Stick around if you want. If all goes well, I could be back before breakfast.”

“Like I really want to spend a third of my three-day moping around on this grungy bucket of bolts,” she jeered, and then began to pull on her boots. “I’m going with you.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, Jill,” he countered. “I could be sitting on a live round here.”

She mocked him with her most lecherous grin. “Ooh, an element of danger. I like that. It’ll make the sex afterward that much better.”

“You’re impossible,” he accused.

“What’s your point?”

He rolled his eyes, then strode over to his desk-slot. He eased it open, but only for a second; and as it slid back into the wall, she saw him slip a small, blackened disk into a vest-pocket. “Well,” he said then, “since you’re determined to tag along, let’s get going. We’re working with a small window of opportunity here.”

“I’m right behind you,” she said. As they navigated the maze of corridors that led to Riff-Raff’s shuttle bay, Jillian fingered her thoughts like worry beads. Barim, involved with piracy? It just couldn’t be! He was the president—the freakin’ patron saint, according to some—of the Spacer’s Union. But Denny wasn’t the type to voice accusations lightly. If he suspected Barim, it was for damn good reason. And although she had downplayed the dangers that came with playing cloak-and-dagger games, she was not so

foolish as to think that they did not exist. Indeed, watching his back was one of her primary motives for tagging along. That, and it beat moping around Calypso. “So,” she said then. “What was that thing you slipped into your pocket anyway?”

“A memory disk that I recovered from the ark’s auto-log,” he told her. “It was damaged rather badly during the raid, but I’m hoping that it might still be able to tell us a thing or two.”

“And where on Circe’s II are you going to get the hardware to run something that primitive?” she wanted to know. “Ark stuff is ancient, lover.”

He twitched a smug little smile at her. “As it so happens, the new data-library in Odysseus’s Union Complex has a collection of antique computers on permanent display. And as it so happens, I’ve bribed the archivist to let me use one of them.”

“Sneak,” she said, in admiring tones, and then leap-frogged to her next thought. “But if you don’t know what’s on the disk yet, where’d the SU connection come from?”

They were closing in on the shuttle bay now. He sucked in a breath only to expel it again as a sigh. “I’ll tell you all about it once we’re moonbound, OK? For now, let’s just say that space junk can be very telling.” Jillian harumphed: once at the cryptic remark, and then again as the bay’s doors slid open and she caught sight of Riff-Raff’s grimy work-horse of a shuttle.

“Speaking of space junk,” she said.

“Just because your shuttle can do everything but give birth doesn’t mean that you can bad-mouth mine,” he told her. “Besides, this baby’s a classic.”

“So sell it to a guy’s-only museum.” She followed him into the cockpit, then flopped down in the co-pilot’s chair. The bioplastics in the seat conformed with her contours, creating an adaptable safety seal. As Jillian shifted, trying to adapt the seat’s grip to her liking, he brought the shuttle’s engines online. A high-pitched screech filled the cabin, then waxed ultrasonic. A moment later, the floor began to vibrate to a deep, synchronized thrumming. The sensation danced its way into her bones through the soles of her feet. It was an annoying little tingle. “All systems green,” she said, checking the monitors. “And all kidding aside, Den, this baby needs some work.”

“I know,” he said, and then jabbed at his wrist-wiz. “Henderson, this is Latimer,” he said, as soon as the man responded. “I thought I ordered a tune-up for the shuttle.”

“You did, Captain,” came his crewchief’s reply. “And I put Marty Conrad on it. He said he’d have it done in time for your trip.”

“Well, he lied. The number two resonator is still squealing like a pig in shit.”

“Want me to ping him for you?”

“Hell, no! I want you to fire him.”

“SU won’t like that,” Henderson warned.

“Fuck SU,” Denny fired back. “They should never have certified the lazy bastard in the first place. You get him off my ship now, you hear, Frank? If he’s still here when I get back, you’ll be swabbing out the septic tank by hand.”

“Wait a minute,” Jillian said then. “Are we talking about a big, blocky guy with red

hair and a spanking new facial scar?" Denny nodded. "He was barreling down the walkway just as I was coming in."

"He was probably on his way to meet some tart," he grumbled, and then switched back to his crew-chief. "You hear that, Frank? He left the ship without my leave. That's desertion. And that's a firing offense, even in the SU's book. So it's heave ho and off he goes, mate."

"I hear you, Captain," Frank replied, sounding much more chipper all of a sudden. "Want me to send someone down to fix the resonator?"

"Negative. I can't spare the time right now and it's still reading green, so I'll just live with it asis until I get back. Latimer out." An instant after he closed the connection, he pinged the bridge. "Trevor, this is Latimer. Do I have clearance yet?"

"That's a roger," came the reply. "Station Control has cleared you for a holding pattern over J-sector, and advises you to standby for your lane assignment to Cee-Two. Have a nice flight, Captains."

Denny flashed her a conspiring wink, and then eased the throttle into drive. With a gut-wrenching lurch, the shuttle surged forward out of the bay and into the velveteen blackness of space. The first thing that spanned across the viewplate was the moon. Save for a small, white, polar tonsure, its face was brown and featureless—hardly Jillian's idea of how the most glamorous port in the galaxy ought to look. But Circe's II was the 'new' center of the galaxy; and it was power rather than appearances that fueled her glamour. Odysseus, the capitol, was home to the Galactic Council, planetary ambassadors, and the SU's high command. These people, plus their legions of flunkies and hangers-on, supported a city of service providers whose success encouraged droves of new arrivals who dreamed of striking it rich. Jillian shuddered at the thought of all those people living in one place. It might be good for business, but brr! She needed more room to breathe.

The shuttle was swinging into its assigned holding pattern now. As it came about, a sliver of Circe's Moon I came into view, and then Circe herself; a gas giant, sullen and red. Although her hub star was a distant pinprick, she radiated just enough heat to keep her two moons from turning into solid chunks of ice. And although her surface was pure poison, she was the only 'friendly' planet in the solar system. And then there was Calypso. On the grand scale of things, the station was nothing, just a flyspeck of debris in orbit. On a human scale, though, it was the umpteenth wonder, like the Great Pyramids come to space. It was so big and vast, it made the ships that were moored to its spokes look like cosmic sucker fish. And those ships were classed by the gigaton. When Jillian thought about where she stood in this scheme of things, she felt very small indeed.

A robotic voice spilled into the cockpit then, accompanied by a ration of static. "Riff-Raff shuttlecraft," it intoned, "this is Station Control. You have been cleared for Lane 2B to Circe's Moon II. Please observe the posted speed limit. The penalties for noncompliance are steep."

"That damned chipwit could've cleared me ten minutes ago," Denny complained, as

he angled the shuttle away from J-sector and toward its assigned zone. There's hardly anyone out here.

"Except that big asteroid-eater," she said, pointing to a huge, slow-moving blip on the surveillance screen. "And we wouldn't want to get in that big boy's way, would we?"

His only reply was a grunt. The view shifted from station traffic to Circe's II. Nothing, it seemed, stood between Riff-Raff's shuttle and that plainfaced moon. A smile crept across Denny's mouth like a crack in thin ice. And as soon as they cleared regulated space, he let the throttle out all the way. The shuttle shot forward with a throaty roar, prompting Jillian's seat to tighten its grip. She laughed—this was vintage Denny! When it came to going fast, he couldn't help himself. But her amusement was shortlived. An indicator flared suddenly yellow, and then began flashing red. "I'm reading a twelve percent impulse power loss," she said.

"Is it the resonators?" he asked.

"Negative," she replied. "It looks like a problem with the thrusters—a clogged converter, maybe. Loss is up to eighteen percent now. Are you sure your monitors are trustworthy?"

"I'm sure," he said, and pulled back on the throttle. The ship did not respond as much as it should have. "Damn it," Denny said, as he turned back toward Station. "It's going to take me days—not to mention another bribe—to set up another meeting with that archivist."

"Oh, well," she said, trying to sound casual in spite of the uneasy feeling that was creeping through her gut. "I'd rather stay in a pleasure suite on the hub than a moonside resort anyway. Power loss at twenty-five percent now, and still climbing. We're starting to stray."

The station was expanding across the viewplate now. But even as the shuttle cruised toward it, she could feel their trajectory's quickening decay in her bones. If they continued to lose power at this rate, they were going to wind up in full freefall through Station traffic, and that was an accident just begging to happen.

"Where's that big boy?" Denny asked then, as if he'd been listening in on her thoughts.

"Closing," she said. And a monster like that wouldn't be able to steer clear of a wayward shuttle—not in such tight quarters, on such short notice. "Regular traffic seems to be picking up, too. Power's down to forty percent and still falling, by the way."

He sighed. "You'd better call Station Control and arrange for a tow."

"Roger that," she replied, already punching in the priority code. "This is Riff-Raff shuttle," she said, as soon as she made contact. "We have a situation here.

"State the nature of your situation, Riff-Raff shuttle," a robotic voice intoned.

"Our thrusters are failing. We cannot maneuver. We request an immediate tow."

A maddening moment of silence ensued. She passed the time by glancing from the neon green blip that was the asteroid eater to the flashing red power readout. The shuttle was losing direction as well as speed now. Denny had just set his third sightline, and his

grip on the steering U was white-knuckled. As hard as he tried, though, he could not contain the drift.

The commlink crackled then, Station clearing its voice. “Riff-Raff shuttle, your request has been approved. Our calculations have you passing over Service Portal DT-4 in three minutes, seventeen seconds. We will commence towing at that time. Power your vessel down now. Upon touching down at the portal, report directly to Security.”

“They’re going to fine your ass off for taking this hazard into public space,” Jillian gloated, giddy with spite and relief. “They’re going to fine you, and I’m going to watch.” Then she reached into an overhead compartment and grabbed a pair of safety helmets. “Which one do you want?” she asked him. “The one with the loose chinstrap, or the one that smells of rancid sweat?”

He scoffed at the offer. “We’re just being towed, Jillie.”

“A tow beam could shake this heap to pieces,” she said.

“Yeah, right.”

She didn’t try to argue with him. She simply jammed the smelly helmet onto his head. He grumbled, but made no move to take it off. The viewplate was all Station now—a vast expanse of sculptured metal. At their current velocity, its surface appeared as a blur encrusted with solar collectors and utility towers, cannon bunkers, ducts and cables. As she watched, a portal opened topside like a flower unfurling at high speed. A moment later, a fat band of brilliant blue light came streaking across the void. The shuttle shuddered as the EM-beam slammed into its underside. An instant later, it began to buck and pitch like a wild thing that was on its way to be broken. Jillian swore. Her seat gave her a series of little squeezes. But Denny just sat there and laughed like a man gone mad.

“W-w-what’s s-s-so d-d-damn f-f-funny?” she demanded.

“N-n-nothing,” he replied. “J-j-just enj-j-joying m-m-myself.”

Crazy bastard, she thought. But she had to admit the ride wasn’t nearly as bad as she’d expected it to be. The bioplastic seats were absorbing most of the abuse. And at the rate they were being hauled in, they’d be down in record time. Which was funny in a way, since Station would never have allowed a shuttle to come in this fast under its own power. As she watched, they went scudding past the station’s outer crust and through the open portal. The altimeter read fifty meters, then forty. She flashed a smile at Denny.

“M-m-must be a Union t-t-tech r-r-running the beam,” she joked.

“Un-n-n-ion?”

“Yeah, one w-w-with a c-c-caffeine b-b-break coming up.”

He started to laugh again only to be jarred sober by a bone-rattling shudder. An instant later, an enormous fireball came roaring into the cockpit. It hit them head-on, and kept on going.

They both had time to scream before the viewplate exploded.