



I

Despite its miserable climate, Tan-ith was an important world. It was first a convenient dumping ground for Earth's disinherited: the rebels, criminals, malcontents, victims of administrative mistakes, and the balance of the wretched refuse of a civilization that could no longer afford misfits; and it was the main source of borloi, which the World Pharmaceutical Society called "the perfect intoxicating drug."

Few men knew that Tanith was also important because many of the borloi plantations were owned by the CoDominium Space Navy, and profits from the drug trade were important in keeping the Fleet in being after the Grand Senate began wholesale cuts in the Navy's budget.

Heat beat down on sodden fields. Two hours before the noon of Tanith's fifteen-plus hours of sunshine the day was already hot; but all Tanith's days are hot. Even in midwinter the jungle steams in late afternoon. In the swamps below the regimental camp Weem's Beasts snorted as they burrowed deeper into protective mud. In the camp itself the air hung hot and wet, heavy, with a smell of yeast and decay.

The Regiment's camp was an island of geometrical precision in the random tumble of jungles and hill-tops. Each yellow rammed-earth barrack was set in an exact relationship to every other, each company set in line from its centurion's hut at one end to the senior platoon sergeant's at the other. A wide street separated Centurions' Row from the Company Officers' Line, and beyond that was the shorter Field Officers' Line, the pyramid narrowing inevitably until at its apex stood a single building where the colonel lived. Other officers lived with their ladies, and married enlisted men's quarters formed one side of the compound; but the colonel lived alone.

The visitor stood with the colonel to watch a mustering ceremony evolved in the days of Queen Anne's England when regimental commanders were paid according to the strengths of their regiments, and the Queen's mustermasters had to determine that each man drawing pay could indeed pass muster—or even existed.

The visitor was an amateur historian and viewed the parade with wry humor. War had changed and men no longer marched in rigid lines to deliver volleys at word of command—but colonels were again paid by the forces they could bring into battle.

"Report!" The adjutant's command carried easily across the open parade field to the rigidly immobile blue and gold squares.

"First Battalion present or ac-counted for, sir!"

"Second Battalion present or ac-counted for, sir."

"Third Battalion present or ac-counted for, sir!"

"Fourth Battalion four men ab-sent without leave, sir."

"How embarrassing," the visitor said *sotto voce*. The colonel tried to smile but made a bad job of it.

"Artillery present or accounted for, sir!"

"Scout Troop all present, sir!"

"Sappers all present, sir!"

"Weapons Battalion, Aviation troop on patrol. Battalion present or accounted for, sir!"

"Headquarters Company present or on guard, sir!"

The adjutant returned each sa-lute, then wheeled crisply to salute the colonel. "Regiment four men absent without leave, sir."

Colonel Falkenberg returned the salute. "Take your post."

Captain Fast pivoted and marched to his place. "Pass in re-view!"

"Sound off!"

The band played a military march that must have been old in the Twentieth Century as the Regiment formed column to march around the field. As each company reached the reviewing stand the men snapped their heads in unison, guidons and banners lowered in sa-lute, and officers and centurions whirled sabers with flourishes.

The visitor nodded to himself. No longer very appropriate. In the Eighteenth Century demonstrations of the men's ability to march in ranks, and of the noncoms and of-ficers to use a sword with skill, were relevant to battle capabilities. Not now. Still, it made an impres-sive ceremony.

"Attention to orders!" The ser-geant major read from his clipboard. Promotions, duty schedules, the daily activities of the Regiment, while the visitor sweated.

"Very impressive, Colonel," he said. "Our Washingtonians couldn't look that sharp on their best day."

John Christian Falkenberg, III nodded coldly. "Implying that they mightn't be as good in the field, Mr. Secretary? Would you like an-other kind of demonstration?"

Howard Bannister shrugged. "What would it prove, Colonel? You need employment before your regiment goes to hell. I can't imag-ine chasing escapees on the CoDo-minium prison planet has much at-traction for good soldiers."

"It doesn't. When we first came things weren't that simple."

"I know that too. The Forty-sec-ond was one of the best outfits of the CD Marine Corps. I've never understood why, it was disbanded instead of one of the others. I'm speaking of your present situation with your troops stuck here without transport—surely you're not intending to make Tanith your life-time headquarters?"

Sergeant Major Calvin finished the orders of the day and waited patiently for instructions. Colonel Falkenberg studied his bright-uni-formed men as they stood rigidly in the blazing noon of Tanith. A faint smile might have played across his face for a moment. There were few of the four thou-sand whose names and histories he didn't know.

Lieutenant Farquahar, a party hack forced on him when the Forty-second was hired to police Hadley, but who'd become a good officer and elected to ship out after the action . . . Private Alcazar, a brooding giant with a raging thirst, the slowest man in K company but he could lift five times his own mass and hide in any terrain ... dozens, thousands, each with his own strengths and weaknesses, add-ing up to—a regiment of mercenary soldiers with no chance of going home and an unpleasant future if they didn't get off Tanith.

"Sergeant Major."

"Sir!"

"You will stay with me and time the men. Trumpeter, sound Boots and Saddles, Full Equipment, and Ready to Board Ship."

"Sir!" The trumpeter was a griz-zled veteran with corporal's stripes. He lifted the gleaming instrument with its blue and gold tassels, and martial notes poured across the pa-rade ground. Before they died

away the orderly lines dissolved into masses of running men.

There was less confusion than Howard Bannister had expected. It seemed an incredibly short time before the first men fell back in. They came from their barracks in small groups, some in each company, then more, a rush, and finally knots of stragglers. Now in place of bright colors there was the dull drab of synthetic leather bulging over Nemourlon body armor. The bright polish was gone from the weapons. Dress caps were replaced by bulging combat helmets, shining boots by softer leathers. As the Regiment formed Bannister turned to the colonel.

"Why trumpets? I'd think that rather out of date."

Falkenberg shrugged. "Would you prefer shouted orders? You must remember, Mr. Secretary, mercenaries live in garrison as well as in combat. Trumpets remind them they're soldiers."

"I suppose."

"Time, Sergeant Major," the adjutant demanded.

"Eleven minutes, eighteen seconds, sir."

"Are you trying to tell me the men are ready to ship out now?" Bannister asked. His expression showed polite disbelief.

"It would take longer to get the weapons and artillery battalion equipment together, but the infantry could board ship now."

"I find that hard to believe—of course the men know this was only a drill."

"How would they know that?"

Bannister laughed. He was a stout man, dressed in inexpensive business clothes with cigar ashes down the front. Some of the ash floated free when he laughed. "Well, you and the sergeant major are still in parade uniform."

"Look behind you," Falkenberg said.

Bannister turned. Falkenberg's guards and trumpeter were still in their places, their blue and gold dress contrasting wildly with the grim synthileathers of the others who had formed up with them. "The headquarters squad has our gear," Falkenberg explained. "Sergeant Major."

"Sir!"

"Mr. Bannister and I will inspect the troops."

"Sir!" As Falkenberg and his visitor left the reviewing stand Calvin fell in with the duty squad behind him.

"Pick a couple at random," Falkenberg advised. "It's hot out here. Forty degrees anyway."

Bannister was thinking the same thing. "Yes. No point in being too hard on the men, it must be unbearable in their armor."

"I wasn't thinking of the men," Falkenberg said.

The Secretary of War chose L Company of Third Battalion. The men looked all alike except for size. He looked for something to stand out, straps not buckled, anything to indicate an individual difference, but he found none. Veteran or recruit? Veteran. Bannister approached a scarred private who looked forty years old. With regeneration therapy he might have been half that again. "This one."

"Fall out, Wiszorik!" Calvin ordered. "Lay out your kit."

"Sir!" Private Wiszorik might have smiled thinly, but if he did Bannister missed it. He swung the packframe easily off his shoulders and stood it on the ground. The headquarters squad helped him lay out his nylon shelter cloth and Wiszorik emptied the pack, placing each item just so.

Rifle: a New Aberdeen seven-millimeter semiautomatic, with ten-shot clip and fifty-round box magazine, both full and spotlessly clean like the rifle. A bandolier of cartridges. Five grenades. Nylon belt with bayonet, canteen, spoon, and stainless cup that served as a private's entire mess kit. Greatcloak and poncho, string net underwear, layers of clothing

"You'll note he's equipped for any climate," Falkenberg commented. "He'd expect to be issued special gear for a non-Terran environment, but he can live on any inhabitable world with his gear."

"Yes." Bannister watched interestedly. The pack hadn't seemed heavy, but Wiszorik kept withdrawing gear from it. First-aid kit, chemical warfare protection drugs and equipment, concentrated

field rations, soup and beverage powders, a tiny gasoline-burning field stove . . . "What's that?" Bannister asked. "Do all the men carry them?"

"One to each maniple, sir," Wiszorik answered.

"His share of five men's community equipment," Falkenberg explained. "A monitor, three privates, and a recruit make up the basic combat unit of this outfit, and we try to keep the maniples self-sufficient."

More gear came from the pack. Much of it was light alloys or plastic, but Bannister wondered about the total weight. Trowel, tent pegs, nylon cordage, a miniature cutting torch—more group equipment for field repairs to both machinery and the woven Nemourlon armor. Night sights for the rifle, a small plastic tube half a meter long and eight centimeters in diameter ... "And that?" Bannister asked.

"Antiaircraft rocket," Falkenberg told him. "Not effective against fast jets but it'll knock out a chopper ninety-five percent of the time. Has some capability against tanks, too. We don't like the men too dependent on heavy weapons units."

"I see. Your men seem well-equipped, Colonel," Bannister commented. "It must weigh them down badly."

"Twenty-one kilograms in a standard G field," Falkenberg answered. "More here, less by a lot on Washington. Every man carries a week's rations, ammunition for a short engagement, and enough equipment to live in the field."

"What's the little pouch on his belt?" Bannister asked interestedly.

Falkenberg shrugged. "Personal possessions. Probably everything he owns. You'll have to ask Wiszorik's permission if you want to examine that."

"Never mind. Thank you, Private Wiszorik." Howard Bannister produced a brightly colored bandanna from an inner pocket and mopped his brow. "All right, Colonel. You're convincing—or your men are. Let's go to your office and talk about money."

As they left, Wiszorik and Sergeant Major Calvin exchanged knowing winks, while Monitor Hartzinger breathed a sigh of relief. Just suppose that visiting pan-jandrum had picked Recruit Lat-terby! Hell, the kid couldn't find his rear without looking for ten minutes.

II

Falkenberg's office was hot. It was a large room, and a ceiling fan tried without success to stir up a breeze. Everything was damp from Tanith's wet jungle air. Bannister thought he saw fungus growing in the narrow space between a file cabinet and the wall.

In contrast to the room itself, the furniture was elaborate. It had been hand carved and was the product of hundreds of hours' labor by soldiers who had little else but time to give their commanding officer. They'd taken Sergeant Major Calvin into a conspiracy, getting him to induce Falkenberg to go on an inspection tour while they scrapped his functional old field gear and replaced it with equipment as light and useful, but hand carved with battle scenes.

The desk was quite large, and entirely bare. To one side a table in easy reach was covered with papers. On the other side a two-meter star cube portrayed the ninety stars with inhabited planets. Communication equipment was built into a spindly-legged sideboard which also held whiskey. Falkenberg offered his visitor a drink.

"Could we have something with ice?"

"Certainly." Falkenberg turned toward his sideboard and raised his voice, speaking with a distinct change in tone. "Orderly, two gin and tonics, much ice, if you please. Will that be satisfactory, Mr. Secretary?"

"Yes, thank you." Bannister wasn't accustomed to electronics being so common. "Look, we needn't spar about. I need soldiers and you need off this planet. It's as simple as that."

"Hardly. You've yet to mention money."

Howard shrugged. "I haven't much. Washington has damned few exports. Franklin's dried those up with the blockade. Paying for your transport and salaries will use up what we've got. You know this, I

suppose—I'm told you have access to Fleet intelligence sources."

Falkenberg shrugged. "I have my ways. You're prepared to put our return fare on deposit with Dayan, of course."

"Yes." Bannister was startled. "Dayan? You do have sources. I thought our negotiations with New Jerusalem were secret. All right, we have arrangements with Dayan to furnish transportation. It took all our cash, so everything else is contingency money. We can offer you something you need, though. Land, good land, and a permanent base that's a lot more pleasant than Tanith. We also offer—well, the chance to be part of a free and independent nation, though I'm not expecting that to mean much to you."

Falkenberg nodded. "That's why you—excuse me." He paused as the orderly brought in a tray with tinkling glasses. The trooper wore battle dress and his rifle was slung across his shoulder.

"Will you be wanting the men to perform again?" Falkenberg asked.

Bannister hesitated. "I think not."

"Orderly, ask Sergeant Major to sound recall. Dismissed." He turned back to Bannister. "Now. You chose us because you've nothing to offer. The New Democrats on Friedland are happy enough with their base, as are the Scots on Covenant. Xanadu wants hard cash before they throw troops into action. You could find some scrapings on Earth, but we're the only firstclass outfit down on its luck at the moment. What makes you think we're *that* hard up, Mr. Secretary? Your cause on Washington is lost, isn't it?"

"Not for us." Howard Bannister sighed. Despite his bulk he seemed deflated. "All right. Franklin's mercenaries have defeated the last organized field army we had. The resistance is all guerrilla operations and we both know that won't win. We need an organized force to rally around, and we haven't got one." Dear God, we haven't got one. Bannister remembered rugged hills and forests, weathered mountains with snow on their tops, and in the valleys were ranches where the air was crisp and cool. He remembered plains golden with mutated wheat and the swaying tassels of Washington's native corn-like plant rippling in the wind. The Patriot army marched again to the final battle.

They'd marched with songs in their hearts. The cause was just and they faced only mercenaries after defeating Franklin's regular army. Free men against hirelings in one last campaign.

The Patriots entered the plains outside the capital city, confident that the mercenaries could never stand against them—and the enemy didn't run. The humorless Covenant Scots regiments chewed through their infantry, while Friedland armored squadrons cut across the flank and far into the rear, destroying their supply lines and capturing the headquarters. Washington's army had not so much been defeated as dissolved, turned into isolated groups of men whose enthusiasm was no match for the iron discipline of the mercenaries. In three weeks they'd lost everything gained in two years of war.

But yet—the planet was only thinly settled. The Franklin Confederacy had few soldiers and couldn't afford to keep large groups of mercenaries on occupation duty. Out in the mountains and across the plains the settlements were ready to revolt again, and it would only take a spark to arouse them ...

"We've a chance, Colonel. I wouldn't waste our money and risk my people's lives if I didn't think so. Let me show you—I've a map in my gear."

"Show me on this one." Falkenberg opened a desk drawer to reveal a small input panel. He touched keys and the translucent gray of his desk top dissolved into colors. A polar projection of Washington formed.

There was only one continent, an irregular mass squatting at the top of the planet. From twenty-five degrees North to the South Pole there was nothing but water. The land above that was cut by huge bays and nearly landlocked seas. Towns showed as a network of red dots across a narrow band of land jutting down to the thirty-to fifty-degree level.

"You sure don't have much to live on," Falkenberg observed. "A strip a thousand kilometers wide by four thousand long—why Washington, anyway?"

"Original settlers had ancestors in Washington State. The climate's similar too. Franklin's the companion planet. It's got more industry than we do, but less agricultural land. Settled mostly by Southern United States people—they call themselves the Confederacy. Washington's a secondary

colony from Franklin."

Falkenberg chuckled. "Dissidents from a dissident colony—you must be damned independent cusses."

"Independent enough that we're not going to let Franklin run our lives for us! They treat us like a wholly-owned subsidiary, and we will not take that!"

"You'll take it if you can't get somebody to fight for you," Falkenberg reminded him brutally. "Now. You offer us transport out, a deposit against our return, minimum troop pay, and land to settle."

"Yes. You can use the return deposit to transport your noncombatants later. Or cash it in. But it's all the money we can offer, Colonel." *And be damned to you. You don't care at all, but I have to deal with you. For now.*

"Yeah." Falkenberg regarded the map sourly. "Are we facing nukes?"

"No. They've got some, but so do we. We concealed ours in Franklin's capital to make it a standoff."

"Uh-huh." The situation wasn't that unusual. The CD Fleet still tried to enforce the ban though. "They still got those Covenant Highlanders that whipped you?"

Bannister winced at the reminder. "God damn it, good men were killed in that fight and you've got no—"

"Do they still have the Covenanters, Mr. Secretary?"

"Yes. Plus a brigade of Friedland armor, and another ten thousand Earth mercenaries on garrison duty." Falkenberg snorted. No one thought much of Earth's cannon fodder. The best Earth recruits joined the growing national armies. Bannister nodded agreement. "Then there are about eight thousand Confederate troops, native Franklin soldiers who'd be no match for our Washingtonians on home ground . . ."

"You hope. Don't play Franklin down. They're putting together the nucleus of a good fighting force, Mr. Bannister—as you know. It is my understanding that they have plans for further conquests once they've consolidated their hold on New Washington."

Bannister nodded carefully. "That's the main reason we're so desperate, Colonel. We won't buy peace by giving in to the Confederacy because they're set to defy the CoDominium when they can build a fleet. I don't understand why the CD Navy hasn't put a stop to Franklin's little scheme, but it's obvious Earth isn't going to do anything. In a few years the Confederates will have their fleet, and be as strong as Xanadu or Danube, strong enough to give the CD a *real* fight."

"You're too damn isolated," Falkenberg replied. "The Grand Senate won't even keep the Fleet up to enough strength to protect what the CD's already got—let alone find the money to interfere in your sector. The shortsighted bastards run around putting out fires, and the few senators who look ten years ahead don't have any influence." He shook his head suddenly. "Not our problem. O.K., what about landing security? I don't have any assault boats, and I doubt you've the money to hire *those* from Dayan."

"It's tough," Bannister admitted. "But blockade runners can get through. Tides on New Washington are enormous, but we know our coasts. The Dayan captain can put you down at night here, or along there . . ." The rebel War Secretary indicated a number of deep bays and fiords on the jagged coast. "You'll have about two hours of slack water. That's all the time you'd have anyway before the Confederate spy satellites detect the ship."

III

Roger Hastings drew his pretty brunette wife close to him and leaned against the barbecue pit. It made a nice pose and the photographers took several shots. They begged for more, but Hastings shook his head. "Enough, boys, enough! I've only been sworn in as mayor of Allansport—you'd think I was governor general of the whole planet!"

"But give us a statement," the reporters begged. "Will you support the Confederacy's rearmament plans? I understand the Smelter is tooling up to produce naval armament alloys—"

"I said *enough*," Roger commanded. "Go have a drink." The reporters reluctantly scattered. "Eager

chaps," Hastings told his wife. "Pity there's only the one little pa-per."

Juanita laughed. "You'd make the capital city *Times* if there was a way to get the pictures there. But—it was a fair question, Roger. What are you going to do about Frank-lin's war policies? What will hap-pen to Harley when they start ex-panding the Confederacy?" The amusement died from her face as she thought of their son in the army.

"There isn't much I can do. The mayor of Allansport isn't consulted on matters of high policy. Damn it, sweetheart, don't you start in on me, too. It's too nice a day."

Hastings' quarried stone house stood high on a hill above Nanaimo Bay. The city of Allansport sprawled across the hills below them, stretching almost to the high-water mark running irregularly along the sandy beaches washed by endless surf. At night they could hear the waves crashing.

They held hands and watched the sea beyond the island which formed Allansport Harbor. "Here it comes!" Roger said. He pointed to a wall of rushing water two meters high. The tide bore swept around the end of Waada Island, then curled back toward the city.

"Pity the poor sailors," Juanita said.

Roger shrugged. "The packet ship's anchored well enough." They watched the hundred-and-fifty-me-ter-long cargo vessel tossed about by the tidal force. The bore caught it nearly abeam and she rolled her guts out before swinging on her chains to head into the flowing tidewater. It seemed nothing could hold her, but those chains had been made in Roger's foundries, and he knew their strength.

"It has been a nice day," Juanita sighed. Their house backed onto one of the large common green-swards running up the hill from Allansport, and the celebrations had spilled out of his yard, across the greens, and into the neighbors' yards as well. Portable bars manned by Roger's campaign workers dispensed an endless sup-ply of local wines and brandies. To the west, New Washington's twin companion Franklin hung in its eternal place. When sunset brought New Washington's twenty hours of daylight to an end it passed from a glowing ball in the bright day sky to a gibbous sliver in the darkness, then rapidly wid-ened. Reddish shadows danced on its cloudy face. Roger and Juanita stood in silent appreciation. Allansport was a frontier town on an un-important planet, but they loved it.

The inauguration party had been exhaustingly successful. Roger gratefully went to the drawing room while Juanita climbed the stairs to see to the children. As manager of the Smelter and Foundry, Roger had one of the fin-est homes on the Ranier Peninsula, a big stone Georgian mansion with wide entry hall and paneled rooms. His favorite was the small conver-sation-sized drawing room, where he was joined by Martine Ardway.

"Congratulations again," Colonel Ardway boomed. "We'll all be be-hind you." The words were more than the usual inauguration-day patter. Although Ardway's son Jo-hann was married to Roger's daughter, the colonel had opposed Hastings' election, and Ardway had a large following among the hard-line Loyalists in Allansport. He was also commander of the local mi-litia, while Johann held a captain's commission. Roger's own boy Harley was only a lieutenant, but in the regulars.

"Told Harley about your win?" Ardway asked.

"Can't. Communications to Van-couver are out. Matter of fact, all our communications are out right now."

Ardway nodded phlegmatically. Allansport was the only town on a peninsula well over a thousand ki-lometers from the nearest settle-ments. New Washington was so close to its red dwarf sun that com-munications loss was standard through much of Washington's fifty-two-standard-day year. They'd been planning an undersea cable to Preston Bay when the rebellion broke out, and now that it was over they could start again.

"I mean it about being with you," Ardway repeated. "I still think you're wrong, but there can't be more than one policy about this. I just hope it works."

Roger stretched and yawned. "Excuse me. Been a hard day, and it's a while since I was a rock miner—was a time I could dig all day and drink all night! Look, Martine, we can't go on treating the rebels like traitors. We need 'em too much. There aren't many rebels here, but if I enforce the

confiscation laws it'll cause resentment in the East. We've had enough bloody war."

Ardway shrugged. Like Hastings he had once been a miner, but unlike the mayor he hadn't kept in shape. He wasn't fat, but he had become a large, balding, round man with a paunch that spilled over his wide garrison belt. It spoiled his looks when he wore military uniform, which he did whenever possible. "You're in charge, Roger. I won't get in your way. Maybe you can even get the old rebel families on your side against this stupid imperialistic venture Franklin's pushing. God knows we've enough problems at home without looking for more. I think—what in hell's going on out there?"

There was a disturbance in the town below. Someone was yelling.

"Good God, did I hear shots?" Roger said. "We better find out." Reluctantly he pushed himself up from the leather easy chair. "Hello—hello— what's this? The phone is out, Martine. Dead."

"Those *were* shots," Colonel Ardway said. "I don't like this ... rebels? The packet came in this afternoon; you don't suppose there were rebels aboard her? We better get down and see to this. You sure the phone's dead?"

"Very dead," Hastings said quietly. "Lord, I hope it's not a new rebellion . . . Get your troops called out, though."

"Right." Ardway took a pocket communicator from his belt pouch. He spoke into it with increasing agitation. "Roger, there is some-thing wrong! I'm getting nothing but static, somebody's jamming the whole communications band . . ."

"Nonsense. We're near per-iastron. The sunspots are causing it." Hastings sounded confident, but he prayed silently. Not more war. It wouldn't be a threat to Allans-port and the Peninsula—there weren't more than a handful of rebels out here—but they'd be called on for troops to go east and fight rebel areas like Ford Heights and the Columbia Valley. It was so damn rotten! He remembered burning ranches and plantations during the last flareup. "God damn it, don't those people know they lose more in the wars than Franklin's merchants are costing them?"

He was already speaking to an empty room. Colonel Ardway had dashed outside and was calling to the neighbors to fall out with military equipment.

Roger followed his friend outside. To the west Franklin flooded the night with ten thousand times Luna's best efforts on Earth. There were soldiers coming up the broad street from the main section of town.

"Who in hell—those aren't rebels," Hastings shouted. They were men in synthileather battle dress, and they moved too deliberately. Those were regulars.

There was a roar of motors. A wave of helicopters passed overhead. Roger heard ground effects cars on the greensward, and at least two hundred soldiers were running purposefully up the street toward his house. At each house below a knot of five men fell out of the open formation.

"Turn out! Militia turn out! Rebels!" Colonel Ardway was shouting. He had a dozen men, none in armor, and their best weapons were rifles.

"Take cover! Fire at will!" Ardway screamed. His voice carried determination but it had an edge of fear. "Roger, get the hell inside, you damn fool!"

"But—" The advancing troops were no more than a hundred meters away. One of Ardway's militia fired an automatic rifle from the house next door. The leatherclad troops scattered and someone shouted orders.

Fire lashed out to rake the house. Roger stood in his front yard, dazed, unbelieving, as under Franklin's bright reddish light the nightmare went on. The troops advanced steadily again and there was no more resistance from the militia.

It happened so quickly. Even as Roger thought that, the leather lines reached him. An officer raised a megaphone.

"I CALL ON YOU TO SURRENDER IN THE NAME OF THE FREE STATES OF WASHINGTON. STAY IN YOUR HOMES AND DO NOT TRY TO RESIST. ARMED MEN WILL BE SHOT WITHOUT WARNING."

A five-man detachment ran past Roger Hastings and through the front door of his home. It brought

him from his daze. "Juanita!" He ran toward the house.

"HALT! HALT OR WE FIRE! YOU MAN, HALT!"

Roger ran on heedlessly.

"SQUAD FIRE:"

"BELAY THAT ORDER!"

As Roger reached the door he was grabbed by one of the soldiers and flung against the wall. "Hold it right there," the trooper said grimly. "Monitor, I have a pris-oner."

Another soldier came into the broad entryway. He held a clipboard and looked up at the address of the house, checking it against his papers. "Mr. Roger Hastings?"

Roger nodded dazedly. Then he thought better of it. "No. I'm—"

"Won't do," the soldier said. "I've got your picture, Mr. Mayor." Roger nodded again. Who was this man? There had been many accents, and the officer with the clip-board had yet another. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Lieutenant Jaimie Farquahar of Falkenberg's Mercenary Legion, acting under authority of the Free States of Washington. You're under military detention, Mr. Mayor."

There was more firing outside. Roger's house hadn't been touched. Everything looked so absolutely or-dinary . . . somehow that added to the horror.

A voice called from upstairs. "The wife and kids are up here, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Monitor. Ask the lady to come down, please. Mr. Mayor, please don't be concerned for your family. We make no war on civilians." There were more shots from the street.

A thousand questions boiled in Roger's mind. He stood dazedly trying to sort them into some order. "Have you shot Colonel Ardway? Who's fighting out there?"

"If you mean the fat man in uni-form, he's safe enough. We've got him in custody. Unfortunately, some of your militia have ignored the order to surrender, and it's go-ing to be hard on them."

As if in emphasis there was the muffled blast of a grenade, then a burst from a machine pistol answered by the slow deliberate fire of an automatic rifle. The battle noises swept away across the brow of the hill, but sounds of firing and shouted orders carried over the pounding surf.

Farquahar studied his clipboard. "Mayor Hastings and Colonel Ardway. Thank you for identifying him: I've orders to take you both to the command post. Monitor!"

"Sir!"

"Your maniple will remain here on guard. You will allow no one to enter this house. Be polite to Mrs. Hastings, but keep her and the children here. If there is any at-tempt at looting you will prevent it. This street is under the protection of the Regiment. Understood?"

"Sir!"

The slim officer nodded in satis-faction. "If you'll come with me, Mt Mayor, there's a car on the greensward." As Roger followed numbly he saw the hall clock. He had been sworn in as mayor less than eleven hours ago.

The Regimental Command Post was in the city council meeting chambers, with Falkenberg's office in a small connecting room. The council room itself was filled with electronic gear and bustled with runnels, while Major Savage and Captain Fast controlled the military conquest of Allansport. Falkenberg watched the situation develop in the maps displayed on his desk top.

"It was so fast!" Howard Bannis-ter said. The pudgy Secretary of War shook his head in disbelief. "I never thought you could do it."

Falkenberg shrugged. "Light in-fantry can move, Mr. Secretary. But it cost us. We had to leave the ar-tillery train in orbit with most of our vehicles. I can equip with cap-tured stuff, but we're a bit short on transport." He watched lights flash confusedly for a second on the dis-play before the steady march of red lights blinking to green re-sumed.

"But now you're without artil-lery," Bannister said. "And the Patriot army's got none."

"Can't have it both ways. We had less than an hour to off-load and get the Dayan boats off-planet before the spy satellites came over.

Now we've got the town and no-body knows we've landed. If this goes right the first the Con-federates'll know about us is when their spy snooper stops working."

"We had some luck," Bannister said. "Boat in harbor, communica-tions out to the mainland—"

"Don't confuse luck with deci-sion factors," Falkenberg answered. "Why would I take an isolated hole full of Loyalists if there weren't some advantages?" Privately he knew better. The telephone ex-change taken by infiltrating scouts, the power plant almost unguarded and falling to three minutes' brief combat—it was all luck you could count on with good men, but it was luck. "Excuse me." He touched a stud in response to a low humming note. "Yes?"

"Train coming in from the mines, John Christian," Major Sav-age reported. "We have the station secured, shall we let it go past the block outside town?"

"Sure, stick with the plan, Jerry. Thanks." The miners coming home after a week's work on the sides of Ranier Crater were due for a sur-prise.

They waited until all the lights changed to green. Every objective was taken. Power plants, communi-cations, homes of leading citizens, public buildings, railway station and airport, police station . . . Al-lansport and its eleven thousand citizens, were under control. A timer display ticked off the minutes until the spy satellite would be overhead.

Falkenberg spoke to the inter-com. "Sergeant Major, we've twenty-nine minutes to get this place looking normal for this time of night. See to it."

"Sir!" Calvin's unemotional voice was reassuring.

"I can't think the Confederates spend much time examining pictures of the boondocks anyway," Falken-berg told Bannister. "Best to take no chances, though." Motors roared as ground cars and choppers were put under cover. Another helicopter flew overhead looking for telltales.

"As soon as that thing's past get the troops on the packet ship," Fal-kenberg ordered. "And send in Captain Svoboda, Mayor Hastings, and the local militia colonel—Ardway wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Calvin answered. "Colonel Martine Ardway. I'll see if he's up to it, Colonel."

"Up to it, Sergeant Major? Was he hurt?"

"He had a pistol, Colonel. Twelve-millimeter thing, big slug, slow bullet, couldn't penetrate ar-mor but he bruised hell out of two troopers. Monitor Badnikov laid him out with a rifle butt. Surgeon says he'll be all right."

"Good enough. If he's able I want him here."

"Sir."

Falkenberg turned back to the desk and used the computer to pro-duce a planetary map. "Where would the supply ship go from here, Mr. Bannister?"

The Secretary traced a course. "It would—and will—stay inside this is-land chain. Nobody but a suicide takes ships into open water on this planet. With no land to interrupt them the seas go sixty meters in storms." He indicated a route from Allansport to Cape Titan, then through an island chain in the Sea of Mariners. "Most ships stop at Preston Bay to deliver metalshop goods for the ranches up on Ford Heights Plateau. The whole area's Patriot territory and you could lib-erate it with one stroke."

Falkenberg studied the map, then said, "No. So most ships stop there . . . Do some go directly to Astoria?" He pointed to a city eigh-teen hundred kilometers east of Preston Bay.

"Yes, sometimes. But the Con-federates keep a big garrison in As-toria, Colonel. Much larger than the one in Preston Bay. Why go twenty-five hundred kilometers to fight a larger enemy force when there's good Patriot country at half the distance?"

"For the same reason the Con-federates don't put much strength at Preston Bay. It's isolated. The Ford Heights ranches are scattered . . . Look, Mr. Secretary, if we take Astoria we have the key to the whole Columbia River Valley. The Confederates won't know if we're going north to Doak's Ferry, east to Grand Forks and on into the capital plains, or west to Ford Heivlits. If I take Preston Bay first they'll know what I intend because there's only one thing a sane man could do from there."

"But the Columbia Valley people aren't reliable! You won't get good recruits—"

They were interrupted by a knock. Sergeant Major Calvin ushered in Roger Hastings and Mar-tine

Ardway. The militiaman had a lump over his left eye and his cheek was bandaged.

Falkenberg stood to be introduced and offered his hand, which Roger Hastings ignored. Ardway stood rigid for a second, then extended his own. "I won't say I'm pleased to meet you, Colonel Falkenberg, but my compliments on an operation well conducted."

"Thank you, Colonel. Gentlemen, please be seated. You have met Captain Svoboda, my pro-vost?" Falkenberg indicated a lanky officer in battle dress who'd come in with them. "Captain Svoboda will be in command of this town when the Forty-second moves out."

Ardway's eyes narrowed with interest.

Falkenberg smiled. "You will see it soon enough, Colonel. Now. The rules of occupation. As mercenaries we are subject to the CoDominium's Laws of War. Public property is seized in the name of the Free States. Private holdings are secure and any property requisitioned will be paid for. Any property used to aid resistance whether directly or as a place to make conspiracy will be instantly confiscated."

Ardway and Hastings shrugged. They'd heard this before. At one time the CD tried to suppress mercenaries. When that failed the Fleet rigidly enforced the Grand Senate's Laws of War, but now the Fleet was weakened by budget cuts and a new outbreak of U.S.-Soviet hatred. New Washington was isolated and it might be years before CD Marines appeared to enforce rules the Grand Senate no longer cared about.

"I have a problem, gentlemen," Falkenberg said. "This city is Loyalist and I must withdraw my regiment. There aren't any Patriot soldiers yet. I'm leaving enough force to complete the conquest of this peninsula, but Captain Svoboda will have few troops in Allansport itself. Since we cannot occupy the city it can legitimately be destroyed to prevent it from becoming a base against me."

"You can't—" Hastings protested, jumping to his feet. An upset ash-tray shattered. "I thought all that about preserving private property was a lot of crap!" He turned to Bannister. "Howard, I told you last time all you'd succeed in doing was burning down the whole goddam planet! Now you import soldiers to do it for you! What in God's name can you expect to gain from this war?"



"Freedom," Bannister said proudly. "Allansport is a nest of traitors anyway."

"Hold it," Falkenberg said gently.

"Traitors!" Bannister repeated. "You'll get what you deserve, you—"

"Ten-SHUT!" Sergeant Major Calvin's command startled them. "The colonel said you was to hold it."

"Thank you." The silence was louder than the shouts had been. "I said I could burn the city, not that I intend to. However, since I won't, I must have hostages." He handed Roger Hastings a computer type-script. "Troops are quartered in homes of these persons. You will note that you and Colonel Ardway are at the top of my list. All will be detained and anyone who escapes will be replaced by members of his family. Your property and ultimately your lives are dependent on your cooperation with Captain Svoboda until I send a regular garrison here. Is this understood?"

Colonel Ardway nodded grimly. "Yes, sir. I agree to it."

"Thank you," Falkenberg said. "And you, Mr. Mayor?"

"I understand."

"And?" Falkenberg prompted.

"And what? You want me to like it? What kind of sadist are you?"

"I don't care if you like it, Mr. Mayor. I am waiting for you to agree."

"He doesn't understand, Colonel," Martine Ardway said. "Roger, he's asking if you agree to serve as a hostage for the city. The others will be asked as well. If he doesn't get enough to agree he'll burn the city to the ground."

"Oh." Roger felt a cold knife of fear. What a hell of a choice.

"The question is," Falkenberg said, "will you accept the responsibilities of the office you hold and keep your damn people from making trouble?"

Roger swallowed hard. *I wanted to be mayor so I could erase the ha-treds of the rebellion.*

"Yes. I agree."

"Excellent. Captain Svoboda."

"Sir."

"Take Mayor Hastings and Colonel Ardway to your office and interview the others. Notify me when you have enough hostages to ensure security."

"Yes, sir. Gentlemen?" It was hard to read his expression as he showed them to the door. The visor of his helmet was up, but Svoboda's angular face remained in shadow. As he escorted them from the room the intercom buzzed.

"The satellite's overhead," Major Savage reported. "All correct, John Christian. And we've secured the passengers off that train."

The office door closed. Roger Hastings moved like a robot across the bustling city council chamber room, only dimly aware of the bustle of headquarters activities around him. The damn war, the fools, the bloody damned fools—couldn't they ever leave things alone?

IV

A dozen men in camouflage battle dress led a slim, pretty girl across hard-packed sands to the water's edge. They were glad to get away from the softer sands above the high-water mark nearly a kilometer from the pounding surf. Walking in that had been hell, with shifting powder sands infested with small burrowing carnivores too stupid not to attack a booted man.

The squad climbed wordlessly into the waiting boat while their leader tried to assist the girl. She needed no help. Glenda Ruth wore tan nylon coveralls and an equipment belt, and she knew this planet and its dangers better than the soldiers. Glenda Ruth Horton had been taking care of herself for twenty-four of her twenty-six years.

White sandy beaches dotted with marine life exposed by the low tide stretched in both directions as far as they could see. Only the boat and its crew showed that the planet had human life. When the coxswain started the boat's water jet the whirr sent clouds of tiny sea-birds into frantic activity.

The fast packet *Maribell* lay twelve kilometers offshore, well beyond the horizon. When the boat arrived deck cranes dipped to seize her and haul the flat-bottomed craft to her davits. Captain Ian Frazer escorted Glenda Ruth to the chart room.

Falkenberg's battle staff waited there impatiently, some sipping whiskey, others staring at charts whose information they had long since absorbed. Many showed signs of seasickness: the eighty-hour voyage from Allansport had been rough and it hadn't helped that the ship pushed along at thirty-three kilometers an hour, plowing into big swells among the islands.

Ian saluted, then took a glass from the steward and offered it to Glenda Ruth. "Colonel Falkenberg, Miss Horton. Glenda Ruth is the Patriot leader in the Columbia Valley. Glenda Ruth, you'll know Secretary Bannister."

She nodded coldly as if she did not care for the rebel minister, but she put out her hand to Falkenberg and shook his in a thoroughly masculine way. She had other masculine gestures, but even with her brown hair tucked neatly under a visored cap no one would mistake her for a man. She had a heart-shaped face and large green eyes, and her weathered tan might have been envied by the great ladies of the CoDominium.

"My pleasure, Miss Horton," Falkenberg said perfunctorily. "Were you seen?"

Ian Frazer looked pained. "No, sir. We met the rebel group and it seemed safe enough, so Centurion Michaels and I borrowed some clothing from the ranchers and let Glenda Ruth take us to town for our own look." Ian moved to the chart table.

"The fort's up here on the heights." Frazer pointed to the coastal chart. "Typical wall and trench system. Mostly they depend on the Friedlander artillery to control the city and the river mouth."

"What's in there, Ian?" Major Savage asked.

"Worst thing is artillery," the Scout Troop commander answered. "Two batteries of 105's and a

bat-tery of 155's, all self-propelled. As near as we can figure, it's a stan-dard Friedland detached battalion."

"About six hundred Friedlanders, then," Captain Rottermill said thoughtfully. "And we're told there's a regiment of Earth mercenaries. Anything else?"

Ian glanced at Glenda Ruth. "They moved in a squadron of Confederate Regular Cavalry last week," she said. "Light armored cars. We think they're due to move on, 'cause there's nothing for them to do here, but nobody knows where they're going."

"Odd," Rottermill said. "There's not a proper petrol supply for them here—where might they go?"

Glenda Ruth regarded him thoughtfully. She had little use for mercenaries. Freedom was something to be won, not bought and paid for. But they needed these men, and at least this one had done his homework. "Probably to the Snake Valley. They've got wells and refineries there." She indicated the flatlands where the Snake and Columbia merged at Doak's Ferry six hundred kilometers to the north. "That's Patriot country and cavalry could be useful to supplement the big fortress at the Ferry."



"Damn bad luck all the same, Colonel," Rottermill said. "Nearly three thousand men in that damned fortress and we've not a lot more. How's the security, Ian?"

Frazer shrugged. "Not tight. The Earth goons patrol the city some, doing MP duty, checking papers. No trouble avoiding them."

"The Earthies make up most of the guard details too," Glenda Ruth added. "They've got a whole rifle regiment of them."

"We'll not take that place by storm, John Christian," Major Savage said carefully. "Not without losing

half the Regiment."

"And just what are your soldiers for?" Glenda Ruth demanded. "Do they fight sometimes?"

"Sometimes." Falkenberg studied the sketch his scout commander was making. "Do they have sentries posted, Captain?"

"Yes, sir. Pairs in towers and walking guards. There are radar dishes every hundred meters and I expect there are body capacitance wires strung outside as well."

"I told you," Secretary Bannister said smugly. There was triumph in his voice, in contrast to the grim concern of Falkenberg and his officers. "You'll have to raise an army to take that place. Ford Heights is our only chance, Colonel. Astoria's too strong for you."

"No!" Glenda Ruth's strong low-pitched voice commanded attention. "We've risked everything to gather the Columbia Valley Patriots. If you don't take Astoria now, they'll go back to their ranches. I was opposed to starting a new revolution, Howard Bannister. I don't think we can stand another long war like the last one. But I've organized my father's friends, and in two days I'll command a fighting force—if we scatter now I'll never get them to fight again."

"Where is your army—and how large is it?" Falkenberg asked.

"The assembly area is two hundred kilometers north of here. I have six hundred riflemen now and another five thousand coming. A force that size can't hide!" She regarded Falkenberg without enthusiasm. They needed a strong organized nucleus to win, but she was trusting her friends' lives to a man she'd never met. "Colonel, my ranchers can't face Confederate Regulars or Friedland armor without support, but if you take Astoria we'll have a base we can hold."

"Yes." Falkenberg studied the maps as he thought about the girl. She had a more realistic appreciation of irregular forces than Bannister—but how reliable was she? "Mr. Bannister, we can't take Astoria without artillery even with your Ford Heights ranchers. I need Astoria's guns, and the city's the key to the whole campaign anyway. With it in hand there's a chance to win this war quickly."

"But it can't be done!" Bannister insisted.

"Yet it must be done," Falkenberg reminded him. "And we do have surprise. No Confederate knows we're on this planet, and won't for—" he glanced at his pocket computer—"twenty-seven hours, when Weapons Detachment knocks down the snooper. Miss Horton, have you made trouble for Astoria lately?"

"Not for months," she said. Was this mercenary different? "I only came this far south to meet you."

Captain Frazer's sketch of the fort lay on the table like a death warrant. Falkenberg watched in silence as the scout drew in machine-gun emplacements along the walls.

"I forbid you to risk the revolution on some mad scheme!" Bannister shouted. "Astoria's far too strong. You said so yourself."

Glenda Ruth's rising hopes died again. Bannister was giving the mercenaries a perfect out.

Falkenberg straightened and took a brimming glass from the steward. "Who's junior man here?" He looked around the steel-riveted chart room until he saw an officer near the bulkhead. "Excellent. Lieutenant Fuller was a prisoner on Tanith, Mr. Bannister. Until we caught him—Mark, give us a toast."

"A toast, Colonel?"

"Montrose's toast, Lieutenant. Montrose's toast."

Fear clutched Bannister's guts into a hard ball. Montrose! And Glenda Ruth stared uncomprehendingly, but there was reborn hope in her eyes ...

"Aye, aye, Colonel." Fuller raised his glass. "He either fears his fate too much, or his desserts are small, who dares not put it to the touch, to win or lose it all . . ."

Bannister's hands shook as the officers drank. Falkenberg's wry smile, Glenda Ruth's answering look of comprehension and admiration—they were insane! The lives of all the Patriots were at stake, and the man and the girl, both of them, they were insane!

Maribell swung to her anchors three kilometers offshore from Astoria. The fast-moving waters of the Columbia swept around her toward the ocean some nine kilometers downstream, where waves crashed in a line of breakers five meters high. Getting across the harbor bar was a tricky business, and

even in the harbor itself the tides were too fierce for the ship to dock.

Maribell's cranes hummed as they swung cargo lighters off her decks. The air-cushion vehicles moved gracelessly across the water and over the sandy beaches to the corrugated aluminum warehouses, where they left cargo containers and picked up empties.

In the fortress above Astoria the officer of the guard dutifully logged the ship's arrival into his journal. It was the most exciting event in two weeks. Since the rebellion had ended there was little for his men to do.

He turned from the tower to look around the encampment. *Blasted waste of good armor*, he thought. No point in having self-propelled guns as harbor guards. The armor wasn't used, since the guns were in concrete revetments. The lieutenant had been trained in mobile war, and though he could appreciate the need for control over the mouth of New Washing-ton's largest river, he didn't like this duty. There was no glory in manning an impregnable fortress.

Retreat sounded and all over the fort men stopped to face the flags. The Franklin Confederacy colors fluttered down the staff to the sa-lutes of the garrison. Although as guard officer he wasn't supposed to, the lieutenant saluted as the trum-pets sang.

Over by the guns men stood at attention but *they* didn't salute. Friedland mercenaries, they owed the Confederacy no loyalty that hadn't been bought and paid for. The lieutenant admired them as soldiers, but they were not likable.

It was worth knowing them, though, since nobody else could handle armor like they could. He had managed to make friends with a few. Some day, when the Con-federacy was stronger, they would dispense with mercenaries, and un-til then he wanted to learn all he could. There were rich planets in this sector of space, planets that Franklin could add to the Con-federacy now that the rebellion was over. With the CD Fleet weaker every year, opportunities at the edges of inhabited space grew, but only for those ready for them.

When retreat ended he turned back to the harbor. An ugly cargo lighter was coming up the broad roadway to the fort. He frowned, puzzled, and climbed down from the tower.

When he reached the gate the lighter had halted there. Its engine roared, and it was very difficult to understand the driver, a broad-shouldered seaman-stevedore who was insisting on something.

"I got no orders," the Earth mer-cenary guardsman was protesting. He turned to the lieutenant in re-lief. "Sir, they say they got a ship-ment for us on that thing."

"What is it?" the lieutenant shouted. He had to say it again to be heard over the roar of the mo-tors. "What is the cargo?"

"Damned if I know," the driver said cheerfully. "Says on the mani-fest 'Astoria Fortress, attention Supply Officer.' Look, Lieutenant, we got to be moving. If the captain don't catch the tide he can't cross the harbor bar tonight and he'll skin me for squawk bait! Where's the supply officer?"

The lieutenant looked at his watch. After retreat the men dispersed rapidly and supply officers kept short hours. "There's nobody to off-load," he shouted.

"Got a crane and crew here," the driver said. "Look, just show me where to put this stuff. We got to sail at slack water."

"Put it out here," the lieutenant said.

"Right. You'll have a hell of a job moving it though." He turned to his companion in the cab. "O.K., Charlie, dump it!"

The lieutenant thought of what the supply officer would say when he found he'd have to move the ten-meter-by-five containers. He climbed into the bed of the cargo lighter. In the manifest pocket of each container was a ticket reading `Commissary Supplies.'

"Wait," he ordered. "Private, open the gates. Driver, take this over there." He indicated a ware-house near the center of the camp. "Off-load at the big doors."

"Right. Hold it, Charlie," Ser-geant Major Calvin said cheerfully. "The lieutenant wants the stuff in-side." He gave his full attention to driving the ungainly cargo lighter.

The lighter crew worked the crane efficiently, stacking the cargo containers by the warehouse doors.

"Sign here," the driver said. "I—perhaps I better get someone to inventory the cargo."

"Aw, for Christ's sake," the driver protested. "Look, you can see the seals ain't broke—here, I'll write it in. 'Seals intact, but cargo not inspected by recip—' How you spell recipient, Lieutenant?"

"Here, I'll write it for you." He did, and signed with his name and rank. "Have a good voyage?"

"Naw. Rough out there, and get-ting worse. We got to scoot, more cargo to off-load."

"Not for us!"

"Naw, for the town. Thanks, Lieutenant." The cargo lighter pivoted and roared away as the guard lieutenant shook his head. *What a mess.* He climbed into the tower to write the incident up in the day book. As he wrote he sighed. One hour to dark, and three until he was off duty. It had been a long, dull day.

Three hours before dawn the cargo containers silently opened, and Captain Ian Frazer led his scouts onto the darkened parade ground. Wordlessly they moved toward the revetted guns. One squad formed ranks and marched toward the gates, rifles at slope arms.

The sentries turned. "What the hell?" one said. "It's not time for our relief, who's there?"

"Can it," the corporal of the squad said. "We got orders to go out on some goddam perimeter pa-trol. Didn't you get the word?"

"Nobody tells me anythin'—uh." The sentry grunted as the corporal struck him with a leather bag of shot. His companion turned quickly, but too late. The squad had already reached him.

Two men stood erect in the star-light at the posts abandoned by the sentries. Astoria was far over the horizon from Franklin, and only a faint red glow to the west indicated the companion planet.

The rest of the squad entered the guardhouse. They moved efficiently among the sleeping relief men, and when they finished the corporal took a communicator from his belt. "Laertes."

On the other side of the parade ground, Captain Frazer led a group of picked men to the radar control center. There was a silent flurry of bayonets and rifle butts. When the brief struggle ended Ian spoke into his communicator. "Hamlet."

There was no answer, but he hadn't expected one.

Down in the city other cargo containers opened in darkened warehouses. Armed men formed into platoons and marched through the dockside streets. The few civil-ians who saw them scurried for cover; no one had much use for the Earthling mercenaries the Con-federates employed.

A full company marched up the hill to the fort. On the other side, away from the city, the rest of the Regiment crawled across plowed fields, heedless of radar alarms but careful of the sentries on the walls above. They passed the first line of capacitance wires and Major Sav-age held his breath. Ten seconds, twenty. He sighed in relief and mo-tioned the troops to advance.

The marching company reached the gate. Sentries challenged them while others in guard towers watched in curiosity. When the gates swung open the tower guards relaxed. The officer of the watch must have had special orders ...

The company moved into the ar-mored car park. Across the parade ground a sentry peered into the night. Something out there? "Halt! Who's there?" There was only si-lence.

"See something, Jack?" his com-panion asked.

"Dunno—look out there. By the bushes—and—my God, Harry, the field's full of men! CORPORAL OF THE GUARD! Turn out the Guard!" He hesitated before taking the final step, but he was sure enough to risk his sergeant's scath-ing displeasure. A stabbing finger hit the red alarm button and lights blazed around the camp perimeter. The sirens hooted, and he had time to see a thousand men in the field near the camp; then a burst of fire caught him and he fell.

The camp erupted into con-fusion. The Friedland gunners woke first. They wasted less than a minute before their officers realized the alarm was real. Then the gun-ners boiled out of the barracks to save their precious armor, but from each revetment bursts of machine-gun fire cut into them. Gunners fell in heaps as the rest scurried for cover. Many had not brought per-sonal weapons in their haste to serve the guns, and they lost time going back for them.

Major Savage's men reached the walls and clambered over. Alter-nate sections kept the walls under a ripple of fire, and despite their heavy battle armor the men climbed easily in Washington's lower gravity. Officers sent them to the parade ground where they added their fire to that of the men in the revetments. Hastily-set machine guns isolated the artillery emplacements with a curtain of fire.

That artillery was the fort's main defense. Once he was certain it was secure, Major Savage sent his in-vaders by waves into the camp bar-racks. They burst in with grenades and rifles ready, taking whole com-panies before their officers could arrive with the keys to their weap-ons racks. Savage took the Con-federate Regulars that way, and only the Friedlanders had come out fighting; but their efforts were di-rected toward their guns, and there they had no chance.

Meanwhile the Earth merce-naries, never very steady troops at best, called for quarter; many had not fired a shot. The camp defend-ers fought as disorganized groups against a disciplined force whose communications worked perfectly.



At the fortress headquarters building the alarms woke Commandant Albert Morris. He listened in disbelief to the sounds of battle, and although he rushed out half dressed, he was too late. His com-mand was engulfed by nearly four thousand screaming men. Morris stood a moment in indecision, torn by the desire to run to the nearest barracks and rally what forces he could, but he decided his duty was in the communications room. The capital must be told. Desperately he ran there.

Everything seemed normal inside and he shouted orders to the duty sergeant before he realized he had never seen the man before. He turned to face a squad of leveled rifles. A bright light stabbed from a darker corner of the room, nearly blinding him.

"Good morning, sir," an even voice said.

Commandant Morris blinked, then carefully raised his hands in surrender. "I've no sidearms. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Colonel John Christian Falken-berg, at your service. Will you sur-render this base and save your men?"

Morris nodded grimly. He'd seen enough outside to know the battle was hopeless. His career was

fin-ished too, no matter what he did, and there was no point in letting the Friedlanders be slaughtered. "Surrender to whom?"

The light flicked off and Morris saw Falkenberg. There was a grim smile on the colonel's lips. "Why, to the Great Jehovah and the Free States of Washington, Comman-dant . . ."

Albert Morris, who was no histo-rian, did not understand the refer-ence. He took the public address mike the grim troopers handed him. Fortress Astoria had fallen.

Twenty-three hundred kilometers to the west at Allansport, Sergeant Sherman White slapped the keys to launch three small solid rockets. They weren't very powerful birds, but they could be set up quickly, and they had the ability to loft a hundred kilos of tiny steel cubes to a hundred and forty kilometers. White had very good information on the Confederate satellite's ephemeris; he'd observed it for its past twenty orbits.

The target was invisible over the horizon when Sergeant White launched his interceptors. As it came overhead the small rockets had climbed to meet it. Their radar fuses sought the precise moment, then they exploded in a cloud of shot that rose as it spread. It con-tinued to climb, halted, and began to fall back toward the ground. The satellite detected the attack and beeped alarms to its masters. Then it passed through the cloud at fourteen hundred meters per sec-ond relative to the shot.

Four of the steel cubes were in its path.

V

Falkenberg studied the manuals on the equipment in the Confederate command car as it ,raced northward along the Columbia Val-ley Road toward Doak's Ferry. Captain Frazer's scouts were some-where ahead with the captured cav-alry equipment, and behind Fal-kenberg the Regiment was strung out piecemeal. There were men on motorcycles, in private trucks, horse-drawn wagons, and on foot.

There'd be more walking soon. The captured cavalry gear was a lucky break, but the Columbia Val-ley wasn't technologically developed. Most local transport was by animal power, and the farmers re-lied on the river to ship produce to the deep-water port at Astoria. The riverboats and motor fuel were the key to the operation. There wasn't enough of either.

Glenda Ruth Horton had sur-prised Falkenberg by not arguing about the need for haste, and her ranchers were converging on all the river ports, taking heavy casualties in order to seize boats and fuel be-fore the scattered Confederate oc-cupation forces could destroy them. Meanwhile Falkenberg had reck-lessly flung the Forty-second north-ward.

"Fire fight ahead," his driver said. "Another of them one-battery posts."

"Right." Falkenberg fiddled with the unfamiliar controls until the map came into sharper focus, then activated the comm circuit.

"Sir," Captain Frazer answered. "They've got a battery of 105's and an MG company in there. More than I can handle."

"Right. Pass it by. Let Miss Hor-ton's ranchers keep it under siege. Found any more fuel?"

Frazer laughed unpleasantly. "Colonel, you can adjust the carburetors in these things to handle a lot, but Christ, they bloody well won't run on parafin. There's not even farm machinery out here! We're running on fumes now, and damned low-grade fumes at that."

"Yeah." The Confederates were getting smarter. For the first hun-dred kilometers they took fueling stations intact, but now unless the Patriots were already in control the fuel was torched before Frazer's fast-moving scouts arrived, "Keep going as best you can, Captain."

"Sir. Out."

"We got some reserve fuel with the guns," Sergeant Major Calvin reminded him. The big RSM sat in the turret of the command caravan, and at frequent intervals fondled the thirty-millimeter cannon there. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it had been a long time since the RSM was gunner in an armored vehicle. He was hoping to get in some fighting.

"No. Those guns have to move east to the passes. They're sure to send a reaction force from the capital, Top Soldier."



But would they? Falkenberg wondered. Instead of moving northwest from the capital to reinforce the fortress at Doak's Ferry, they might send troops by sea to retake Astoria. It would be a stupid move, and Falkenberg counted on the Confederates acting intelligently. As far as anyone knew, the Astoria Fortress guns dominated the river mouth.

A detachment of Weapons Battalion remained there with anti-aircraft rockets to keep reconnaissance at a distance, but otherwise Astoria was held only by a hastily-raised Patriot force stiffened with a handful of mercenaries. The Friedlander guns had been taken out at night.

If Falkenberg's plan worked, by the time the Confederates knew what they faced, Astoria would be strongly held by valley Patriot armies, and other Patriot forces would have crossed the water to hold Allansport. It was a risky battle plan, but it had one merit: it was the only one that could succeed.

Leading elements of the Regiment covered half the six hundred kilometers north to Doak's Ferry in ten hours. Behind Falkenberg's racing lead groups the main body of the Regiment moved more ponderously, pausing to blast out pockets of resistance where that could be quickly done, otherwise bypassing them for the Patriot irregulars to starve into submission. The whole valley was rising, and the further north Falkenberg went the greater the number of Patriots he encountered. When they reached the four-hundred-kilometer point, he sent Glenda Ruth Horton eastward toward the passes to join Major Savage and the Friedland artillery. Like the Regiment, the ranchers moved by a variety of means: helicopters, trucks, mules, and on foot.

"Real boot straps," Hiram Black said. Black was a short wind-browed rancher commissioned a colonel by the Free States Council and sent with Falkenberg to aid in controlling rebel forces. Falkenberg liked the man's dry humor and hard realism. "General Falkenberg, we got the damnedest collection in the history of warfare."

"Yes." There was nothing more to say. In addition to the confused transport situation, there was no standardization of weapons: they had hunting pieces, weapons taken from the enemy, the Regiment's own equipment, and stockpiles of arms smuggled in by the Free States before Falkenberg's arrival. "That's what computers are for," Falkenberg said.

"Crossroad coming up," the driver warned. "Hang on." The crossing was probably registered by the guns of an untaken post eight kilometers ahead. Frazer's cavalry had blinded its hilltop observation radars before passing it by, but the battery would have had brief sights of the command car.

The driver suddenly halted. There was a sharp whistle, and an explosion rocked the caravan. Shrapnel rattled off the armored sides. The car bounded into life and accelerated.

"Ten credits you owe me, Sergeant Major," the driver said. "Told you they'd expect me to speed up."

"Think I wanted to win the bet, Carpenter?" Calvin asked.

They drove through rolling hills covered with the golden tassels of corn-like plants. Genetic engineering had made New Washington's native grain one of the most valuable food crops in space.

Super-fically similar to Earth 'maize, the "corn" had a growing cycle of two local years. Toward the end of the cycle hydrostatic pressures built up until it exploded, but if harvested in the dry period it was high-protein dehydrated food energy, palatable when cooked in water, and good fodder for animals as well.

"Ought to be getting past the op-position now," Hiram Black said. "Expect the Feddies'll be pulling back to the fort at Doak's Ferry from here on."

His estimate was confirmed a half hour later when Falkenberg's comm set squawked into action. "We're in a little town called Madselin, Colonel," Frazer said. "Used to be a garrison here, but they're running up the road. There's a citi-zens' committee to welcome us."

"To hell with the citizens' com-mittee," Falkenberg snapped. "Pur-sue the enemy!"

"Colonel, I'd be very pleased to do so, but I've no petrol at all."

Falkenberg nodded grimly, "Captain Frazer, I want the scouts as far north as they can get. Isn't there *any* transport?"

There was a long silence. "Well, sir, there are bicycles . . ."

"Then use bicycles, by God! Use whatever you have to, Captain, but until you are stopped by the enemy you will continue the advance, by-passing concentrations. Snap at their heels— Ian, they're scared. They don't know what's chasing them and if you keep the pressure on they won't stop to find out. Keep going, laddie. I'll bail you out if you get in trouble."

"Aye, aye, Colonel. See you in Doak's Ferry."

"Correct. Out."

"Can you keep that promise, General?" Hiram Black asked.

Falkenberg's pale blue eyes stared through the rancher. "That depends on how reliable your Glenda Ruth Horton is, Colonel Black. Your ranchers are supposed to be gathering along the valley. With that threat to their flanks the Confederates will not dare form a defense line south of Doak's Ferry. If your Patriots don't show up—" He shrugged. Behind him the Regi-ment was strung out along three hundred kilometers of roads, its only flank protection its speed and the enemy's uncertainties. "It's up to her in more ways than one," Falkenberg continued. "She said the main body of Friedland armor was in the capital area."

Hiram Black sucked his teeth in a very unmilitary manner. "Gen-eral, if Glenda Ruth's sure of something, you can damn well count on it."

Sergeant Major Calvin grunted. The noise spoke his thoughts better than words: it was a hell of a thing when the Forty-second had to de-pend for its life on a young colo-nial girl.

"How did she come to command the valley ranchers anyway?" Fal-kenberg asked.

"Inherited it," Black answered. "Her father was one hell of a man, General. Got himself killed in the last battle of the first revolution. She'd been his chief of staff, and old Josh trusted her more than he did most of his officers. So would I, was I you, General."

"I already have." To Falkenberg the Regiment—his Regiment, formed from the Forty-second Co-Dominium Marines he'd commanded before his court martial—was more than a mercenary force. It was an instrument perfectly forged, its existence and perfection its own reason for existence like any work of art. Because it was a military force it had to fight battles and take casualties, and the men who died in battle were mourned—but they weren't the Regiment, which could exist when every man now in it was dead.

The Forty-second had faced de-feat before and might find it again—but this time the Regiment itself was at hazard. Falkenberg was gambling not mere lives, but the Forty-second.

He studied the battle maps as they raced northward. By keeping the enemy off balance, one regi-ment could do the work of five. Eventually, though, the Con-federates would no longer retreat. They were falling back on their fortress at Doak's Ferry, gathering strength and concentrating for a battle that Falkenberg could never win. Therefore that battle must not be fought until the ranchers had concentrated. Meanwhile, the Regi-ment must bypass Doak's Ferry and turn east to the mountain passes, closing them before the Friedland armor and Covenant Highlanders could debouch onto the western plains.

"Think you'll make it?" Hiram Black asked. He watched as Falkenberg manipulated controls to move

symbols across the map tank in the command car. "Seems to me the Friedlanders reach the pass before you can."

"They will," Falkenberg said. "And if they get through, we're lost." He twirled a knob, sending a bright blip representing Major Savage with the artillery racing diagonally from Astoria to Hillyer Gap while the main force of the Regiment continued up the Columbia, then turned east to the mountains, covering two legs of a triangle. "Jerry Savage could be there first, but he won't have enough force to stop them." Another set of symbols crawled across the map. Instead of a distinctly formed body, this was a series of rivulets coming together at the pass. "Miss Horton has also promised to be there with reinforcements and supplies—enough to hold in the first battle, anyway. If they delay the Friedlanders long enough for the rest of us to get there, we'll own the entire agricultural area of New Washington. The revolution will be better than half over."

"And if she can't get there—or they can't hold the Friedlanders and Covenanters?" Hiram Black asked.

Sergeant Major Calvin grunted again.

TO BE CONCLUDED