

For Texas and Zed by Zach Hughes

Chapter One

"Well, sirs, you swing down the Orion Arm with the fires of a sun in your belly, point out in the plane of the disc toward Carina and turn right to Puppis. Beacon blink on the RR Lyrae stars near Orion past the black hole in Taurus. When you see the Beta Canis Majoris on the left you blink on the giant Cepheid on an angle of thirty-five to the galactic ecliptic to Auriga and after that it's a matter of blinking by the seat of your pants."

"And, as I follow your rather poetic instructions," said Jum Anguls, First Leader, Ursa Major Sector, "you end up in nowhere."

"In the big lonesome," Murichon Burns said. "The boonies. The outback."

"Are we wasting the gentleman's time?" asked the lady, with an imperious stare aimed in Murichon's direction. She wore stylish starcloth, spangled, transparent, her tipped mammaries soft peaks pushing against the frail material.

Anguls chuckled, crossing his tightly clad, fleshy thighs. "When dealing with provincials—" He winked at Murichon. "Gwyn has so little patience, you see. They move swiftly on the old Earth."

"To talk in specifics when dealing with honest traders is expected," Gwyn said, forcing her full lips into a semblance of a smile. Her eyes, in her dark face, were glowing jewels, slanted upward. Her skin had the richness of satin-deep space, but lighter, tending to creamy brown, the complexion of the mother planet. In contrast to her, to the white softness of the skin of Jum Anguls, Murichon was reddened, roughed, weathered. His rough spacecloth, dull blue, against the richness of the others' clothing, seemed rude. Yet he was at ease while Anguls chewed a fingernail and looked at him askance and the female blinked at him through force-grown lashes of half an inch length.

"The Republic is not asking for inclusion on the Empire's star maps," Murichon said. "I am here to sell meat. If you're buying, fine. If not—"

Murichon looked out the huge expanse of window and saw the city below, alive, blinking, moving. Trails of fire where arcs lit the lanes, flashes of color as ad-signs lured and promised, the movement of traffic at ten levels, all below, crawling up in whites and reds in the foothills and then abating in density as the galaxy itself thinned toward home. And as he looked he could imagine, hear in his mind, the din, the roar, the sigh and moan of millions crowded into small spaces and his heart flew the countless parsecs and yearned for the Bojacks of Texas, the trackless plains with the grazing herds, the wide sky, the soft caress of the winds of home.

"We are, of course, buying," Anguls said, "but I think the Lady Gwyn has a point. We do not intend to take delivery on meacr steaks dehydrated to the point of cured leather or softened to carrion."

"You ate," Murichon said. The table testified to that. He'd grilled the steaks himself, after picking them at random from the selection he'd brought in on the *Texas Queen*. "Quick-frozen. In transport for thirty-two standard days—"

"Via Orion and Taurus and the third Cepheid on the left," Lady Gwyn said.

"I know a shortcut," Murichon grinned. He turned, bellowed. The loud call startled the Lady Gwyn, causing her to spill a drop of goodRio Grandewine on the tiny skirt of her costume. She frowned, reached for a napkin. She paused in mid-motion, the spilled wine forgotten, as a tall, young man appeared in the doorway, tray in hand. He, too, was dressed in space blue. However, it was not his attire which froze the Lady Gwyn into admiring immobility for a second, and then sent her long lashes fluttering.

"My son," Murichon said. "He's called Lex."

"Lex," the Lady Gwyn breathed.

Lex himself had not recovered as quickly as Gwyn. His face, already showing the character lines, the weathering, was flushed, his eyes locked on the area of brown skin showing above the low neckline of Gwyn's costume.

"Won't you join us?" Jum Anguls said.

Lex looked down from his six foot seven inch height and raised his eyebrows in question toward Murichon, waiting. When Murichon nodded he moved, saying, "Sure," to place the tray and its steaming contents at table center and then to swing one long blue-clad leg over a chair and ease his weight down with a soft thump.

"Your manners, boy," Murichon said.

" 'Scuse me, ma'am," Lex said, not sure what he'd done wrong.

"Now this," Murichon said, "is meacr steak which was frozen sixty days before lift-off. That ages it to over ninety days."

"My dear fellow," Anguls said, rubbing his distended belly, "I don't know about the appetite of you, what do you call yourselves?Texasmen?"

"Texicans," Lex said, speaking as he speared a steak on a fork and flopped it onto his plate.

"But the ample size of our previous repast," Anguls said.

"Just a taste," Murichon said.

"Ah, well." Anguls sighed, cut a dainty portion with delicate, long-nailed hands. He lifted the bite to his lips, after sniffing it, chewed thoughtfully. "The preservation process seems to be quite effective."

Allowing for transshipment to other systems, using your warehouses as a distribution point, you'd have six months to receive, sell and distribute before there would be any noticeable deterioration in quality," Murichon said.

"Sometimes out on the plains we keep it without cooling for a month," Lex said, talking around a cheekful of meat. "Gets a little ripe—"

"Please," Gwyn said, frowning.

"Course, you can dry it in the sun," Lex said. "Makes it chewy. Keep it all winter that way."

"As to terms," Anguls said. "As you may or may not know, a minimum of sixty percent of total shipments would have to be carried in Empire hulls. This is a basic requirement, you know, over which I have no control. Price? On that I am more flexible."

"Negative," Lex said, putting his fork down with a clatter.

"I'll handle this, boy," Murichon said.

"No Empire ships on Texas," Lex said, his voice cold.

"Will you shut up?" Murichon roared.

"Sorry, Dad, but—"

"But me no buts, just shut up, enjoy the view and eat." He had not missed the fact that his son's eyes seemed glued to the red-painted nipples of the Lady Gwyn's mammaries. "No Empire hulls," he said, looking deep into Jum Anguls' watery eyes.

"That's what I just said, Dad," Lex said.

"Impossible," Gwyn said, letting her eyes leave Lex's bulging arm biceps for a moment. "Our Space Guilds would not hear of it."

"Way I hear it," Murichon said, "your Space Guilds are hungry, too. But that's it. You've got the price. You've got the terms. Delivery on Leader Anguls' site in Texas hulls. Payment in acceptable metals. No paper. No credits."

"Mr. Burns, what you propose is not only impossible, it's absolutely inane," Anguls said, his face serious. "Are you implying that the coinage of the Empire is not stable?"

"I ain't implying anything," Murichon said. "But we damned sure can't spend Empire paper on Texas." He rose. "Well, it's been a long day."

The two Empire people, accustomed to long, leisurely meals followed by stimulants, looked up, shocked by such discourtesy. Gwyn, glancing at the First Leader, saw danger in his face. Quickly she put her hand on his arm. "We are not dealing with civilized men," she whispered, as they rose together. Anguls coughed back his anger and nodded.

"I will deliver your terms to our Economic Board," Anguls said. "I do not offer, however, any hope of their being accepted."

Murichon shrugged. "Cassiopeian metals aren't as good as yours, to be frank, but they aren't slaves to their Guilds." He yawned massively, not bothering to cover it. "Lex, you wanta show the good folks out?"

"Yeah, in a minute," Lex said, stuffing his mouth, wiping it on the back of his hand, rising while chewing and swallowing. "You turning in, Dad?"

"It's been a long day, as I said."

"Mind if I go down the hill?" Lex asked, hitching at his low-hanging jeans.

"Don't want you out raising hell among the civilized folks," Murichon growled. "Like turning a Bojack farl loose in a flock of meacrs."

Anguls bristled anew. "He'd be quite safe in our city, sir."

"Ain't him I'm worried about," Murichon said.

"Perhaps," the Lady Gwyn said, "your father would feel more at ease if you had a qualified guide."

"You offering?" Murichon asked, his brows lifting to show his steel-blue eyes.

"I'm, uh, offering," she said, smiling toward Lex, who was standing with his hands thrust into his back pockets.

Murichon roared. "Well!" Anguls sputtered.

"Hell, you got diplomatic immunity, I guess," Murichon said. "Just don't drink anything you wouldn't feed to a beagle and remember that civilized folks can be breakable." He turned, walked three paces, paused. "And put on some decent clothes. You want civilized folks to think you're working a meacr dip?"

Left alone, the two Empire citizens felt awkward. They were unaccustomed to being kept waiting. "Arrogant barbarians," Jum Anguls growled.

"I find them charming," Gwyn said.

"You'd find anything over two inches charming," Anguls said.

"Quality, darling," she said, blinking her long lashes. "Not quantity."

"At least you're thinking," Anguls said. "If anyone can get information out of that big oaf you can."

"Thank you."

"I want the coordinates," Anguls said. "Exact and complete. If they have as many of those animals as they say—"

"Remember our research team's report, my dear First Leader. By historical fact, all Texicans are pathological liars when it comes to facts about their country, their possessions, their natural resources."

"Divide it by half and it's worth sending a fleet," Anguls said.

Lex came out buttoning multiple pearl-like studs on a dark wine jacket-shirt which hung past his waist, loose. His jeans were of shiny silken material, tight at the thighs, flared at the ankles. The Lady Gwyn, measuring the heroic scale of his body, put her soft hand on his arm, guided him out the doorway onto a marble balcony with a magnificent overlook. Lex wasn't interested in scenery. His eyes were traveling the graceful curve of her neck, down to the soft, dark valley between two red-tipped peaks.

Guards sprang to stiff attention, presented arms. An atmosphere convertible clanged entry ramp down, lights glowed from within. Anguls, with a look at the Lady Gwyn, trod regally upward the slight slope and disappeared within. Guards followed. Escort fighters orbited the larger vessel as it lifted.

"First," Gwyn said, still hanging onto Lex's arm, "I must go to my villa."

"We gonna do the town, we oughta get started," Lex said.

"Dressed like this?"

"I like it."

"That's sweet." She stood on tiptoe and planted a warm kiss on his cheek. "But you'll like my town costume, too."

"You don't mind driving, I hope," Lex said as they entered the vehicle provided by the Empire for VIP guests of the diplomatic villa atop the mountain. "I'm not used to so many people."

Lady Gwyn's villa was also in diplomatic country, a five-minute flight from the guesthouse which housed the Texas delegation headed by Murichon Burns. Once there, she surreptitiously punched a signal button which warned her domestics to stay in their quarters until further notice, escorted Lex into a luxurious room overlooking the city, filled his big hand with a deceptively mild-tasting concoction.

"Do you really like my costume?" she asked, posing before him, much of Lady Gwyn on display.

"I love it," he said. "Wish I could get one to take home to my girl."

"Is she as heroically formed as you?" Gwyn said.

"If you mean is she bigger than you she is." Hell, all Texas women were bigger. That was a part of her fascination. She stood no taller, he estimated, than five and a half feet. Her waist was startlingly small.

"If she isn't much larger she could wear this," Gwyn said, pushing the costume down off her shoulders, doing it slowly, tantalizingly. Lex's eyes got larger as the red-tipped mounds were revealed; then ever larger as she let the filmy garment drift downward, freeing it from her flaring hips with a seductive wiggle. She was clean-shaven. From hairline to toe she was of a uniform creamy brown.

She bent her knees, retrieved the garment, put it into his hand. It held her warmth. "Would you give her this as a gift from me?"

"Sure," Lex said, swallowing. Actually he didn't have a girl, wasn't old enough to claim one of the cozen or so nubile women in his county. He'd been thinking of buying one of the revealing garments just to prove to the boys that Empire women wore such things.

The costume had the light, fragile feel of a Texas girl's undergarment. Once, in Dallas City, he'd held such a garment in his hands with great and breathless anticipation. Once and only once he'd seen a woman in the gloriously nude state in which the Lady Gwyn stood so casually before him. He felt his chest constricting. All of the mucous membranes of his body were constricting, all erectile tissue engorging itself with his hot blood.

The Lady was not oblivious to his interest. With a pulse-pounding grace she moved toward him. "Darling, do you really want to go into the city?"

Lex swallowed.

"It's just a city, you know."

He tried to give orders to his hands. *Be Still. Down*. His hands had minds of their own and then were full of softness, heat, smoothness.

"Ah," she said, "you don't want to leave our nice villa, do you?"

"Nope," Lex said.

And that was the last of conversation.

Even when, in a twisting, relaxing heap of moist limbs and sweetness she breathed into his ear and asked him about his home. Even when, after a few more of those fine-tasting but deceptive drinks, he felt the world tilt and knew great and revived strength and she played coy. Even when his superior strength forced her and brought a sigh of inevitable resignation to her soft lips.

"It must be a wonderful place, your planet," she said, as dawn came through the open windows and showed the dark circles of lovely dissipation under her eyes.

"Yeah," he said, just before he put pressure on her carotid arteries. She struggled, fear in her eyes, and then went quietly to sleep as her brain was deprived of oxygen.

When he carried the large, limp bundle past the guards at the spaceport he could feel her breathing as she lay inertly across his shoulder. The crudeness of his first method of immobilization had been followed by the administration of a harmless tablet used by spacemen to enforce sleep quickly during the endless shifts of blink travel. The diplomatic badge he wore warded off any search, even in such a sensitive area as a deep spaceport. At the ship, his fellow Texicans, if they had curiosity, showed none. As acting First Officer, he enjoyed the relative luxury of a six-by-eight private cabin. There, he looked at his prize, nude, lithe, breathing deeply and evenly. He smoothed her jet-black hair on the polydown pillow. It would be close quarters on the trip home, but it would be worth it. His supply of dozers would hold out until the *Queen* was well past the Cassiopeian lines, and then it would be too late to turn back to the Empire. He would present his father with an accomplished deed.

He felt the efforts of the night all at once, and he yawned mightily. Locking the cabin door behind him, he went to crew's quarters and showered, heedless of the waste of water since the ship was in port. Then, with a glad feeling for his companion, he bent his body around the frailness, the creamy brown richness, the heat, the softness and slept the sleep of the tired conqueror.

He woke to the sound of the ship's power, an all-pervading hum, an awareness, a prickling of the skin. Next to him, the Lady Gwyn slept peacefully, her lips parted sweetly. He kissed them, then held her in his arms as he gave her water and a dozer. Dressed in ship's wear, he went to the bridge.

"Big night?" Murichon Burns asked absently, as his eyes followed an intricate pattern of meters and instruments. The ship was almost to lift power.

"Big enough," Lex said. "We leaving?"

"How did you ever figure that out?"

"You heard from the great leader, then?"

"We'll hear from him via blinkstat from a few parsecs out," Murichon said. "I'll feel better about it that way."

A soft bell sounded the readiness of the ship's power. As Murichon's hands played over the console the hum of the plant changed, became a bee's song.

"*Texas Queen*," a voice said on the sound system, "you do not have clearance to charge."

"I'm taking clearance," Murichon said, without activating the broadcast unit. "Read me clearance one-one-hundredth unit vertical vector," he told Lex.

"Traffic as thick as parasites on a molting meacr," Lex said. "Depth and layers."

"Find me a hole, boy. We're going into it."

It was risky business. It was a busy planet and an active spaceport. Inbound and outbound, the starships, the interplanetary craft, the privates and atmoflyers cluttered the screens.

"The button's yours," Murichon said, giving way to the superior reflexes of the young. "When you find a hole, hit it."

"*Texas Queen, Texas Queen*," the control voice said, "you will decharge immediately."

"Now," Lex said, the screen giving him a small vertical hole which, the computers estimated, would be open for a millisecond, and the button was punched as he spoke and there was a feel of intimate and disturbing events in his gut as he looked out on the blackness of space with Polaris off the starboard quarter and depressed at an angle of seventy.

"I'll take her, boy," Murichon said. "We'll likely have company for a while."

Company they had. She signaled her blinking from outside the planet's atmosphere and emerged into space a telescope's shot away, a sleek and deadly Empire Vandy, painted the black of space but visible as the *Queen's* autos homed in on her. Aboard was Fleet Captain Arden Wal, veteran of the Battle of Wolfs Star, graying, slim, impeccable in his gold and black. As the *Texas Queen* moved at sub-light speed, charging for a big blink, Wal had time to report. He was near enough to use voice transmission, scrambled, of course. "As you suspected, sir, the bird flew prematurely."

"You're with her?" The voice was the smooth, cultured one of First Leader Jum Anguls.

"We have her, sir. We'll stay with her."

"Not too close."

"Of course, sir."

Wal relaxed. His superior power was ready, capable of outleaping that rusting antique by a hundredfold, equipped with instruments which could, in that micro-microinstant of blinking, measure and follow and emerge within a few thousand miles of any blinking ship. His Vandy had just been reconditioned at the Empire yards on Polaris Two. She was a smoothly functioning unit with a crew seasoned by two tours along the Cassiopeian frontier. To think for one moment that she was incapable of following the primitive

Texas vehicle through space was to approach heresy.

Ahead, the *Texas Queen* blinked along a line down the Orion Arm and she was there, recharging, when Captain Arden Wal's *Wolf* emerged. The mission, Wal was thinking, was duck soup, a welcome rest for a crew which had earned a rest. He began to have his first doubts when a series of straight vector blinks showed the line of travel to be directly toward the Cassiopeian defense lines beyond Antares. If the Texicans continued in that direction, it would prove one thing, or one of two things. Either Jum Anguls was right in suspecting that the Texicans were Cassiopeian spies or the outworlders were just plain crazy, flying into the teeth of five full Line Fleets, each ship of which was more than capable of making scattered atoms out of the *Texas Queen*. Already the Cassiopeians would be alerted by the signals which a bunking ship sends ahead of itself through the continuum. Already a thousand weapons would be moving ponderously toward a possible emergence point.

The *Texas Queen* leaped parsecs through the emptiness, not deviating from the line of travel. Zigzagging to avoid large stars which could disrupt a blink generator and send a ship and its contents into limbo for eternity, the ship blinked and rested, bunked and rested, traveling the Orion Arm in seven-league boots, covering distances which strained the imagination in an instant, held back only by the need to rest, to recharge, to build for the next jump. And always behind her the sleek, dark form of the Empire Vandy.

Wal rang battle stations when, with gentlemanly courtesy, the warning came. "You are nearing Cassiopeian space, guard yourself and identify."

Wal listened for the telltale identification from the vessel ahead of him. None came. Instead, as instruments whined to measure, she blinked and the *Wolf* followed on automatic with the crew tense and all weapons ready and hell broke loose as the *Wolf* emerged into space dead center of a whole Cassiopeian Line Fleet and screens sizzled as an incredible assault was made by a thousand weapons centered.

"The Texan, the Texan," Wal said, his voice calm.

"Gone, sir." The tech was not so calm. Bedlam was breaking loose as the ship's screen began to fail and force hammered the hull.

It was true. The tuned screens which had been following the Texas ship were blank. She'd blinked into the middle of a fleet and disappeared and now that fleet was pounding the Empire Vandy and gunners were opening up and, as he gave the emergency one order which gutted his power and left him a derelict in dead space—but out of Cassiopeian range—he saw first one and then another Cassiopeian cruiser puff as screens went under the concentrated fire of the *Wolf*. At least, he thought, in the silence of a dead ship, we took two of the bastards with us.

It is not a pleasant feeling to kill a fine ship. One instant with smooth sounds she's alive around you and the next she's silent as a tomb and floating free in uncharted space and you know that the power is melted into a useless blob of metals and all that's left is life support emergency to hold you, maybe, until you can find out where the hell the undirected emergency blink sent you and call in a wrecker. The hull can be salvaged, if it isn't too long a tow back to an Empire base, but she's no longer the same ship. Once before he'd been forced to do it, in the last stages of the Battle of Wolfs Star when he'd been Captain of an old Middle-guard cruiser. Now he'd been forced, to save his crew, to save himself, to kill one of the newest, finest ships of the Empire fleet and it caused him indigestion as his navigators searched unfamiliar stars for a clue to their location and the signalman sat patiently waiting to send out a tow request. And as he felt his stomach growl in protest he knew a mixture of hate and puzzlement. It was a strange feeling. He had little experience with hate. He didn't like the Cassiopeians, of course, but they were gentlemen.

They knew the rules of warfare and followed them. Their warning had been in the finest traditions of the hundred years' war. It was the Texicans who were barbarians, leading the *Wolf* into a trap, without a doubt by some prearranged plan wherein the *Texas Queen* went unharmed while the Empire ship came under the concentrated fire of a fleet. Only the superiority of the Empire screens had saved her. Yes, it was clearly the men from Texas, wherever the hell it was, who were responsible for his being, for the second time in his career, aboard a killed ship, a ship gutted by his own orders. They would pay.

It took eighteen hours to locate the *Wolf* in the sea of uncharted stars. The distress signal going into the nearest blinkstat relay point was weak, incomplete. The *Wolf* wallowed in her own misery for two long, sweating, stale-aired weeks before a rescue tug blinked alongside to begin the tedious journey to the Empire.

"They will pay," Captain Arden Wal promised the universe as he felt the grapples join his disabled ship to the tug, knew the first discomfort of overstressed blinking.

He did not know that one of the Texicans had already begun to pay for his sins, although leading the Empire Vandy into a Cassiopeian fleet was not, in his mind, one of them. Going into the Cassiopeian line, Lex's presence was required in the bridge. While there, his youthful reflexes in command of the intricate controls of the double-blink system installed shortly before leaving the home planet, he was unable to guard and tend his unconscious guest in the First Officer's stateroom. He had discovered that the Lady Gwyn's system was unusually resistant to drugs and his supply of dozers was low even before reaching the Cassiopeian sector. While he was on duty, at a rather touchy time, the Lady from old Earth awoke, made the classic quote,

"Where the hell am I?" and immediately put two and two together.

Seeing her storm out of the stateroom into the crowded bridge was an experience which the crewmen of the *Queen* would long remember. The only garment Lex had brought aboard when he kidnapped his newfound love was the scanty, revealing thing of transparent mist and the Lady's mammary points were not painted, but tattooed a permanent red and although her hair was a bit worse for having lacked attention through her long sleep, she was a spectacular sight as she raged into the bridge, lips forming words which most Texicans would have used only in dire pain or anger and then not in the presence of a lady.

Lex heard, but there was no time to turn. The ship was building for the blink and as he heard her apply some rather harsh epithets against his manhood and general character the ship was blinking and as he started his finger toward the button which activated the immediate double-blink, sending the *Queen* at right angles out of the midst of the waiting fleet, he felt her fists pounding on his back and then, the *Queen* resting safely at a known point in space awaiting the charge to send her peacefully homeward, minus an escort, having performed a feat which was unknown to that date in space technology, he turned, a smile forming, and the Lady Gwyn's fist took him directly on the nose. He bled.

"What the holy hell?" Murichon Burns exploded.

"Ole Lex brung him a souvenir," said a crewman, to the delight of his mates, who laughed as Lex feebly tried to wipe blood from his upper lip while defending himself against the surprisingly strong onslaught of the scantily clad Lady from Earth. "A chocolate all-day sucker," the same wag said, to applause in the form of chuckles.

"Now you stop it, Gwyn," Lex said, his voice shaking as she tried to scratch his eyeballs from their sockets. "After all, I'm going to marry you."

That stopped her. Her talons were stilled in midair, her shrill verbal assault silenced. "Marry me?" she asked in amazement, her voice going deep contralto. "Marry me?"

"Sure," Lex said, blushing as the men looked on. "You don't think I'm the kind of man who'd steal a woman away from her folks without doing the right thing by her?"

"Marry me?" She asked it quietly, her face blank with shock, her mouth hanging open. Then the storm grew again and her eyes blazed. "You hopeless moron. You brainless—"

"Shouldn't talk like that," Lex said, having had time to think it over. He wasn't used to being shamed, by a woman of all people, in front of his mates. He picked her up under one strong arm and suffered her scratching as he carried her from the bridge to a chorus of hoots and chuckles.

"I'll be the son of an albino ground dog," Murichon Burns said. "He's stolen a representative of old mother Earth herself."

But there was work to be done. Contact, via blink-stat, to be made with His Honor, the First Leader of Ursa Major Sector. Texas had meat to sell.

"Your Honor," he dictated to the signalman, "this is Murichon Burns sending. If it ain't too much trouble I'd like to know, by return blinkstat beamed—" He let the signalman fill in the coordinates. "—if you've decided to swap a little metal for good Texas, meacr."

Chapter Two

There's nothing like spirited competition to make a fool forget his humiliation. And an airors is probably the most gloriously overpowered vehicle in creation, a thing made for a man who has just been spat upon, kicked, scratched, cursed at and threatened with burial in a teacup after being administered a thorough enema. Windscreen up, Lex powered the gleaming red airors straight up to ten thousand feet, leveled her, gave her a kick in the side to send her hurtling west at a speed which narrowly allowed retention of his hair, streaming in the blast.

Below him, Texas sunned itself in the beaming rays of good old Zed, the Lone Star. Up there at ten thousand the wooded, rolling hills around Dallas City were leveled to a mat of green and as his airors, *Zelda*, streaked silently away from the sun the big emptiness of the plains came rushing toward him until all below there was a sea of brownish green with the grazing meacr visible only when they flocked together.

He spotted, far below, the dot of a herding airors and beeped a greeting on the air-to-air and got a beep in return and then the herder was far behind and the Pecos was a thin line of green through the brownish grass and then gone and over New Paris, one hour and five hundred miles out of Dallas City, he slowed to go on voice to tell his aunt Mary that he and his dad were back from the Empire and that they were feeling fine, and, yes, they had watched their diet and hadn't drunk Empire water.

He began to feel a little better when he saw the white glitter of the big sands up ahead and he dove, screaming with the rushing wind, to make dust trails, and the airors skimmed the dunes at a flat-out sub-sonic max, leaving swirls of sand and terrified sanrabs in his wake. Feeling his oats, forgetting Empire and a girl with red-tattooed nipples, he nipped *Zelda* upside down and slowed to a mere three and hung his head down toward the sand to watch its ripples flow by underneath, yelling and feeling the wind fill his mouth and ripple the flesh of his cheeks. He flipped upright and took his legs off the rests to stretch them

short of the rise of the far-side foothills and then rose in a swoop to cross the low mountains into moist, warm air of the savannah. There was the sea. It was big, just as everything on Texas was big. Behind him stretched seven thousand miles of plains, desert and mountains. Ahead of him, gleaming and sparkling in the sun, ten thousand miles of open ocean with not enough islands to give resting places to the seabirds.

He went up until he felt the air get thin and looked at it as he closed on New Galveston-by-the-Sea. It was a sight which never failed to thrill him, the blue of the sea, the clean, white buildings of the town, the mountains behind him. His mother had been born in New Galveston and he'd attended secondary school there to learn his reading and writing. He'd been given his first airors upon graduation and his first solo flight had been just like this, high, fast, the view magnificent, the air warm but cooling at altitude, the sun bright, the ocean stretching endlessly outward unmarred by floating things save a few pleasure sailers near shore and the surfers on the very fringe next to the white, bright strand.

When he spotted the brightly colored umbrellas on the strand he dug his heels in, dropped power and fell like a space-fresh meteorite aimed at the parking area near the refreshment tent. He thought negative power at the last possible instant and crushed to a stop with the skids of the airors contacting the sand without stirring a particle and was greeted with whoops and a can of icy brew.

In that crowd he was not a giant, as he'd been back in the Empire. Some of them went well over seven feet, but he knew from past trials that he could hold his own with them at any of the manly arts from leg wrestling to hand fighting because he kept in shape and went light on the brew and didn't touch the hard stuff except for a glass of Rio now and then at dinner.

Class of '72 reunited. Twenty high-spirited young Texicans in tight-fitting jeans and some swimsuits and brown shoulders and big arms and whoops of greeting and backslapping and more brew until Lex finally got loose from the mob and singled out old Billy Bob Blink and said, "Got something to show you."

They walked behind a dune and Lex showed him Gwyn's little costume. He held up the misty thing in front of him and said, "How about that?" Billy Bob's eyes went wide and he tried to touch it but Lex pulled it away.

"You're kidding," Billy Bob said.

"Right on the streets they wear 'em," Lex lied. "All of 'em sticking out all over the place."

"You're kidding," Billy Bob said.

"She gave this to me," Lex said.

"The one you brought back?"

"Her."

"Holy Hopping Hornies." Billy Bob was openly impressed. "When you gonna marry her?"

"Well," Lex said, looking up to see a lone beagle soaring up there looking for dinner. "I guess I'll have to think it over a little."

"They say she's pretty."

"She's all right," Lex admitted, wondering how the hell the word had spread all the way to New

Galveston in just a day and a night, but knowing how, because big as it was Texas was a close-knit community and if you put the hood and the air on an airors you could make it from Dallas City to New Galveston in ten minutes with one blink up and one blink down and the communicators were free to all and everyone was everyone else's cousin, so when you stopped to think it wasn't strange at all to know that New Galveston knew that Lex Burns had brought home an Empire gal.

"What are you gonna do today?" Billy Bob asked, after he'd watched Lex put the little misty thing away in his pocket.

"Oh, racing and herding, I guess," Lex said.

"Try to get into different heats at first so we won't knock one another out early," Billy Bob said. "That way you'll at least make the finals."

"You mean that way you'll make the finals," Lex said, grinning.

They walked back and joined the group and they were drawing lots for the first racing heats. Lex held back and Billy Bob went first and then when the heat which Billy Bob had drawn was full, Lex took his number. He was up against some good boys, but he'd seen Billy Bob Blink in action before and he knew that when it came down to the final run it'd be his *Zelda* against Billy Bob's *Clean Machine* and then there'd be hell to pay, because Billy Bob, taking after his distant grandfather a few times removed, was always coming up with something new. Billy Bob thought he owned all airorses because his distant forebear had developed the blink drive back on the old Earth when they said that all inventions were possible only through the work of a well-financed research team. Old man Blink had built the first blink drive in his garage workshop on the out-skirts of Houston in a prime example of individual initiative which was still being taught to Texas schoolchildren six hundred years later. Lex knew the story well. Having built a machine which could reduce space, any known length of it, to nothing, he offered it to the government, but all of the Congress and everyone else was too interested in trying to impeach a President named Wixon or something; no one would listen to a gray-haired thirty-year-old TV repairman from Texas. So old Zed Blink installed his drive in a 1954 Lincoln Continental and emerged it into the restricted air space over the White House, which was the place of the President of the United States then, and *that* got some attention. Then the armed forces wanted an exclusive on the drive and there was one hell of a hassle about it until Blink gave the drive, outright gave it, to six domestic airlines and in doing so gave up a sure fortune. Well, it was an old story and Lex just happened to think about it while he was watching Billy Bob win his heat and while he was tinkering with *Zelda* getting her ready. Because Billy Bob had seemed to inherit the scientific abilities of the Blink boys and was always coming up with something new for his airors. All Lex had going for him was his natural skill and a nerve which allowed him to hug the pylons closer and fly faster and withstand the g forces of the right-angle turns better than most. After all, the rules made it so that the final limiting factor was physical ability, not tinkering knowledge to soup up an airors.

Billy Bob won his heat handily. He didn't use anything new and startling, just solid racing ability and the finely tuned *Clean Machine's* basic functions. There was only one accident. The racecourse was two parallel rows of pylons set a hundred feet apart stretching down the strand, and one boy from up in the Bojacks lost his airors and put her nose into the surf and tumbled six times before sinking slowly into the shallow water. He came up spitting salt and waving a hand to show that he was OK.

Speed wasn't everything. Some of the old-timers said that the race was patterned after an event back on the old Earth which had riders on animals guiding them around barrels and it was turning ability as much as anything which made the race, for the pylons were close together and you had to cut each one of them. Miss one and you got a penalty.

It was a fine Texas day with Old Zed—the star named after Zed Blink, who led the people out of red-tape democracy to find a solitary star way out in the big lonesome—hot and fierce and the sweat felt good as it cooled not too rapidly on the forehead and then Lex was getting ready and the first two boys to make the run both missed a pylon and then he took the course going slow and sure, because his competition wasn't too keen, and he won it by a few seconds.

Billy Bob won his second heat as if he'd been *the* Blink. Actually, it was his great-great-grandfather who had developed the mnemonic brains of an airors. Billy Bob was good. He rode in the prescribed style, hands free, giving orders to his airors with knees and body movements and the almost uncanny empathy which can develop between a good airors and a good rider. It was almost as if the *Clean Machine* were a living thing reading Billy Bob's mind. Well, sometimes you felt almost as if an airors were a living thing. Out on the boonies, the Bojacks, you spent a lot of time with it, and you got to the point of talking to it and it responded, that funny, complicated brain learning new things; and while herding a wingling meacr you sometimes wondered if that damned machine didn't know more about it than you did. A wingling is swift and shifty and sometimes the airors seemed to anticipate a darting turn before you did and that was the kind of thing you had to have to be able to do the job and to be able to win a race and Billy Bob had it. He'd won more races than any other young stud on Texas and the next one to him was one Lex Burns, who won his prelim heats and then, sweating, drinking a cool brew, eager, a little nervous, watched Billy Bob really turn it on to best the best time of the day by a full five seconds, eliminating everyone but Lex from the finals.

Lex took his run, his first, all out, leaning, twisting, feeling the hard pull of the g's as he cut a pylon, a force which, had he not been strapped in, would have thrown him ass over teakettle into the sand or the surf. He was counting off the ticks of the clock as he went down course and he knew he was behind Billy Bob's time by at least half a second and one odd run back up the course to make it up. He powered the *Zelda* beyond human ability to ride her and leaned horizontal on the turns and stirred up sand as his boot tip dragged he was flying so low. He could hear the rush of the wind and his own grunts of effort as he fought the g's, sometimes feeling the blood pushed out of his brain and going a little soft in the head but recovering in time to push the *Zelda* hard down the last straightaway to tie Billy Bob's time to the tenth of a second.

That called for a runoff and the crowd had grown and it seemed that all of New Galveston was out to see them break the tie. Lex had to go first and he went down all out and blacked out for what seemed to be an eternity as he rounded the last pylon, losing a precious tick as he went wide and then recovering to burn up the course, blowing sand silently in the wake of the flashing *Zelda*, but he knew he'd blown it down there on the far turn, and sure enough, when Billy Bob came in he was a tenth of a second faster and, once again, Lex had to settle for a second.

"I been running hind tit to you all my life," he told Billy Bob. "One of these days I'm gonna get tired of it and beat on you a little."

"Bring your lunch," Billy Bob said. "It'll be a long day's work."

Herding, now, was a separate breed of cat. In herding, it usually went the other way, with Lex's slightly lighter weight adding to his maneuverability and his rapport with his machine giving him another slight edge. The contest was a simple one drawn directly from the work life of a male Texican. It all started way back when the settlers found out that the meacr made better, juicier, more tender steaks than the various breeds of Earth cattle which had been brought out in the original settlement fleet. The meacr was smaller than, say, a whiteface or a Charolais, and he bred like an old Earth rabbit, having twins twice a year, cute little critters with wings which, after a few days, hardened up like a bat's wing and grew to

massive length to carry the chunky little body of the wingling up into the auto sport and play and look for insects and small rodents, things which made up his diet until the change, when the wings shrank into two swollen appendages used for flicking bisects and which made the finest, tastiest soup this side of galactic core. In his flying form the meacr was unpredictable. He was as likely to soar a thousand miles as he was to stay put on the range where he belonged, with an owner's brand on his hide, until his wings set and he started to grow and eat a few tons of grass to make him fat, placid and highly edible. While he was in flying form, the meacr needed herding to keep him on his proper range and that was where the airors came into its own. The meacr wingling wasn't fast, but he was tricky. It took some dude to stay with him, herd him back where he belonged. Fortunately, the wingling was gregarious, soaring in groups of six to twenty, and he played follow the leader. Herd the leader and the rest followed.

There weren't that many Texicans that a man could go through life without doing a hitch on the Bojacks and both Billy Bob and Lex had done their year. There were, of course, professional herdsmen who made a lifetimes work of it, but they were, for the most part, loners who loved the big, empty nighttime skies of Texas, lit only by the two small moons, the galaxy itself mist in the southern sky on summer evenings. Some of them were men who had lost out in the competition for the scarce women of Texas. Some of them were just ne'er-do-wells who couldn't hack it in the towns and some just liked it.

Lex had liked it well enough. It was a pleasure to have it all to yourself, all the Bojack country stretching away flat and green to make an inverted bowl of horizon all around you, the meacrs gentle and quiet, making only those soft, sweet humming sounds after they fed enough for the day, the winglings being restless and pesky, the occasional old, grizzled farl sneaking up to cut down a stray for his dinner. But Lex, being the son of Murichon Burns, had been off planet twice, once when he was just thirteen, on a scouting trip into Cassiopeian territory to determine the feasibility of trade routes into the galaxy. And once you've seen space, well, herding winglings becomes just a sport for a Sunday afternoon and the year of enforced service drags and then you begin to know what girls represent and you're given the loot and a new suit and sent into Miss Toni's in Dallas City and after that the Bojacks have lost their charms.

But doing it for sport, herding, is fine; and Lex was ready and eager as he took his turn in the chute and a wingling with a ring on its tail to put life into it was released a few yards in front of him to take to the air like a salt-shot beagle. He was off with a whoop and had *Zelda* on the wingling's nose in a wink and had the critter going the right way when he made a slip and the wingling zapped a left and then it was full g's getting him again and not much time lost and the circle down there coming up. He forced the frustrated wingling to land and the time was good enough to win his heat.

He leaned on the fence next to Billy Bob. "You, an, been to bed with her?"

"A gentleman don't answer questions like that," Lex said, looking skyward.

"I been into Miss Toni's," Billy Bob said.

"You ain't a man until you have," Lex said.

"Who'd you get when you went?"

"Girl named Pitty."

"Tall, blond?"

"The same."

"Hot damn. I got her, too."

"They say she specializes in first-timers," Lex said.

"God, what a set," Billy Bob breathed, the memory making him squirm.

"Billy Bob Blink next in the chute," the announcer said. Billy Bob was so shook thinking of Miss Pitty and her set that he let his wangling take a lead and lost three full seconds and then it was over and Lex had his ribbon and a few brews and then he buttoned up the hood and blinked home and in the gathering darkness the skies began to take on their blackness and the lone star of the globular cluster out there in the big lonesome was low and the galaxy hadn't risen yet. Then he began to think and what he thought he didn't like. He thought about the scene at the spaceport when the *Texas Queen* came down, all the big wigs there to meet her, although the news of the successful trip had been blinkstated ahead of them. They weren't there to greet the heroes returned from the Empire, but to see the girl Murichon Burns's boy had stolen, right under the noses of the Empire on Polaris Two.

He remembered how she looked, dressed like a decent Texas woman in real cloth, her legs extending out from the short skirt, her hair flowing down over her shoulders, her head held high. And he remembered what she'd said.

"I demand," she said imperiously, "that these ruffians be arrested at once."

"Well," said President Andy Gar, "we'll talk about that."

"Under the laws of the Empire," she said.

"This ain't Empire," the President had said, quickly.

"But there must be civilized men here."

"Well," said Murichon Burns, "I reckon we're civilized enough to suit us. Civilized enough, at any rate, to send you back on the meat fleet, but that'll be a wait, ma'am, since it takes time to slaughter and freeze."

"Meanwhile, ma'am," Lex said, "why don't you stay at our town house? We got plenty of room."

"I would not be caught dead under the same roof with you," she said.

"We're sorta short on guest facilities," President Gar said. "And Murichon's house is comfortable. But if you don't want to be around the boy I reckon we can find something. Might put you up at Miss Toni's place." This brought a general chuckle and roused Gwyn's suspicions.

"And who is Miss Toni?"

"Well, it's sorta hard to explain," Lex said. "But it's where we, I mean we young ones, go—"

"A whorehouse," Gwyn said.

"Not exactly," President Gar said. "We prefer to call it a place of professional entertainment." Miss Toni, who was over sixty, was Gar's cousin.

"We'll put the boy out in the garage," Murichon said.

And that's the way it had been. He saw her, that night, at table. She was displaying some curiosity about the planet and Murichon was answering questions carefully. He'd had her in isolation during the last part of the trip and what she could see in the skies wouldn't tell her much. It would tell her more than he wanted her to know, that Texas was an outplanet, distant from the disc of the galaxy, and relatively near a globular cluster, near enough for the cluster to make one huge star in the nighttime skies. However, after discussing it with the others, they'd decided that those were not enough clues to give away the exact location of the planet. At any rate, the only alternative to risking giving a clue was to keep the Lady on Texas and Murichon wasn't sure the planet could stand such a test. He'd seen her in action against his son. She was, he thought admiringly, quite a woman.

Lex tried to get into the conversation at table but every time he spoke she cut him dead and ignored his comments. She even turned down an offer to be taught airors riding and that was his hole card.

While he sat outside atmosphere, buttoned up in the hood of the *Zelda*, cold space empty around him, he called and used voice to say, "I'm home, Dad," hit the button and blinked into the garage. There was warmed-over soup and wingling stew and he ate alone, in the kitchen. He was feeling so lonely he had the cook robot go over menus just to hear a voice. Then he went to his room over the garage and turned on the circular music station from Dallas central and let the twangy sound of strings soak into his hide, killing a brew before going in for a shower.

Hell, he was going to marry the girl. What more did she expect?

"I am an appointed representative of the Emperor himself," she'd told President Gar. "I shall report my ill treatment to the Emperor personally."

"Well," President Gar said, "give the old boy my regards."

He was dressed and ready for—what? Dressed up and no place to go. Early evening. Just across the courtyard was—heaven in scents and feels and softness and long hair and supple legs and clinging arms. How could she change so quickly? She'd loved him there on Polaris Two. How could she have done the things she did with him without love? She wasn't like Miss Toni's girls, who had chosen to even the imbalance of the sexes on Texas by being all things to all men. Hell, she wasn't like that. So she had to have loved him and then, when he did what any man would do, steal away the girl he loved, she'd turned into a spitting, scratching female farl, half-tiger and half-shrew.

He was feeling quite sorry for himself when the communicator came to life and his father's voice requested his body in the house. A request from Murichon was not merely an order, it was the law, and, besides, it was something to do. He walked across and noted that there were a couple of strange airorses outside and an official arc with the great seal on the side. He went into the living room looking around for *her*. She wasn't there, but old Andy Gar was, along with the head man of the Meat Growers Association, a couple of Ranger officers of high rank and his father.

"Sit down, boy," Murichon said. He was dead serious, grim as being stranded in the middle of the great desert without water. Lex sat. He glanced out of the corner of his eye toward the Ranger General with his tan and gold braid and wondered how he'd look in uniform.

"I'm gonna give it to you straight and slow, son," Murichon said. "First off, it appears that you've snatched a red-hot coal right out of the Emperor's own fire and it might burn your fingers. Your little gal with the spitfire temper is the Emperor's own cousin, and, in all probability, one of his favorite bedmates, judging from the fuss they're making about the Lady Gwyn."

"The Empire demands," began the Ranger General, but Murichon held up his hand and the General lapsed into silence.

"He's just a boy and he's got a decision to make," Andy Gar said. "Let's make sure he understands the situation."

"You know we've been in blinkstat communication with the First Leader on Polaris," Murichon said. Lex nodded. He knew the setup. At random times a Texican ship, blinking random patterns within range of an Empire blink relay, would contact and wait just long enough to receive a message in return. The details of the meat shipment were being worked out that way, after the Empire had swallowed its pride in order to be able to swallow good, juicy Texas steak. "Well, the first message about your gal was just a polite inquiry about her, wondering if we had any idea where she was. That was a couple of days ago. The next one wasn't so polite. They told us flatly that you'd been seen carrying a suspicious-looking sack onto the *Texas Queen*. Now I suppose we should have just flat out lied about it at that point, but you know I don't cotton to lying without reason, and I was looking on this Lady Gwyn as just another Empire gal, a little more advanced in position than most, but just another gal in a system which has billions of girls. I was wrong. I admitted that one of the crewmen had taken a fancy to her and had lifted her to be his wife. I was lying just a little, because I guess that was your intention."

"It was," Lex said.

"Well," Murichon said, "I should have lied more." He tilted his glass and drained it. He looked at his son and there was a deep wrinkle between his eyes he was looking so hard. "Son, they say either we turn over the kidnapper and the Lady in good condition or the meat deal is off."

Lex's face did not change, but he felt cold winds blow inside. He had an instant flashback to the day, the wild ride over the desert, the wide plains, the sun over Texas. "Well then, I reckon I'll have to go," he said.

Andy Gar cleared his throat. "Son, do you remember when that prospector, got picked up in Cassiopeian space back in '65?" Lex nodded. He remembered it well from hearing the stories, but he'd been born too late to volunteer for the rescue force. "And how the whole nation turns out when a man is missing in the desert or somewhere?"

"Yes, but this is different," Lex said.

"Only in degree," Andy Gar said, while the Ranger General fidgeted. "You're still a Texican and we Texicans stick together. There ain't no one here gonna try to force you to go into the Empire and turn yourself in to a pack of faggots. Under ordinary circumstances, our answer to the Empire ultimatum would have been something like what old Jack Bridges told his wife when he was determined on going out into the outback prospecting for iron." Lex chuckled. Jack Bridges, an almost legendary figure, had reputedly told his wife, who protested his leaving her and her two children, to perform an anatomical impossibility involving basic breeding functions. "But," Gar went on, "we got us a problem, son. We're all alone out here and there ain't too many of us and we'd like to have enough people on this world to fix it up right, not too many, but just enough. Because we're short on a lot of things we have to limit the population so that there's just about one Texican for every thousand square miles of land. We need metals. You know from your schooling that Texas is a light planet. That's good in a way, because if she had a metal core like some she'd have a gravity which would be so strong it would be all we could do to crawl. Now we've got a couple of ways to get metals. We can sneak into the worlds on the periphery and poach them from Empire or Cassiopeian territory. We've done it in the past and so far we've not lost

a man. But sooner or later we're going to get caught. Some prospector is going to be careless and he'll come home with an Empire or a Cassiopeian Vandy on his tail and then we'll be in it when we don't want to be. All the Republic of Texas wants is to be left alone to do things the way our fathers did them, maybe just a bit better. We want no part of the war inside the galaxy. But we've got some things that each of the warring sides would risk ten battle fleets for. Meat, for example. They're eating manufactured protein on the ships of the line and the home front doesn't even get that most of the time. Let an Empireite or a Cassiopeian see Texas and we'll be calling out the Guard and I don't have to tell you that even a Texican can be outgunned and outmanned when the odds are a million to one and the other side has unlimited metals and arms. The other way we can get metals is to trade, and we're right on the verge of making a successful deal for enough metals to keep Texas going for fifty years. We've spent ten years working out the details, breeding a surplus of meacrs, so you can see why some folks are a little upset about the turn of events."

"I'll go," Lex said.

"Hold your horses," Murichon said. "Hear it all."

"We've had our lawyers working over Empire law-books," the President said. "It seems that they've got more laws than they know what to do with. The penalty for kidnapping is a severe one, but it hasn't been enforced for a hundred or so years, because in spite of the war they've got so many people that when they lose one or two they don't even notice, unless the victim is someone of importance. There's not been a kidnapping prosecution on Earth for 2 hundred years and there are no penalties for rape—at least they're not enforced. So we're not sure just what they'd do to you. There's an old law on the books calling for life under supervision, working the mining planets, for kidnapping, so that seems to be the worst that could happen. On the other hand, we've told them and we're waiting for an answer, that you're the son of a rather important man who'd take a dim view of his son being sentenced to labor for life. We told them flat out that one Texican is worth all the metals they could dig in a thousand years, and we're hoping that they'll make an offer. Here's what we're thinking. If they'll offer a light punishment, and if you're willing to go out there for Texas, then we'll think it over. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Lex said. "I was the one done it. I ought to pay for it. Texas is more important than one man."

"Texas is one man," Andy Gar said. "One man repeated. Each individual as important as the whole." He drank. "So we're not going to pressure you, boy. The choice is yours."

Chapter Three

When Billy Bob heard about it, he came over from New Galveston on the *Clean Machine*, suspended her on nul-grav just over where Lex was lying on the sun deck in his skivvies, and poured a cold brew down Lex's bare chest, causing him to leap almost as high as the *Machine* and come down, waked from a nightmare about being holed up in a mining shaft for eternity, with his hand chopping the air with a force which would have decapitated a man had it struck home. Billy Bob almost fell off his airors laughing and Lex had to chuckle along, after the anger faded.

They were waiting for the word from the communications ship out in the galaxy. It was taking a helluva long time and the wait was getting on Lex's nerves. It was a nice day, just before a rain with the coolness moving in from the big weathermaking ice country to the north. Lex flew *Zelda* out of the garage, after making feeble excuses against showing the Lady Gwyn to Billy Bob. Actually, the Lady stayed close to her room and Lex wasn't about to disturb that sleeping farl. He told Billy Bob that Gwyn was so shook about being shipped back to the Empire, losing the chance to be the wife of Lex Burns, that she was

moody and her eyes were red from crying. So they went out into the desert and shot sonic booms at mountainsides and then went sanrab hunting.

Sanrab hunting was trickier than herding winglings, for the little rodent-like things were capable of turning three-sixty on a dime and it was hot, sweaty and not undangerous work to zoom low enough to lean down and make a grab with the bare hand for a sanrab's long tail while guiding the airors inches off the uneven surface with thought and knees and intuition. They caught two each and released the females and took the bucks home to the cook robot and then ate one each while in the front of the Burns house the official vehicles came and went and the air of something imminent, something bad, got thicker and thicker.

When Lex was called to the conference room he left Billy Bob behind and joined his father, the President and the same Ranger General, plus a few odd and assorted government officials and the Admiral of Texas' fleet. As a past President, it was not unusual for Murichon to have such notables in his house, and Andy Gar was a frequent caller, not only for business. Old Andy drove his own arc, saying that the Republic needed all able-bodied men in good jobs, not driving a President's car. He sat there among the others, a little older, a bit more weathered, dressed as they were dressed, in range clothes, and chewed some good Bojack tobacco,

"I reckon it's time, huh?" Lex asked, when he saw his father's grim face.

"We heard from His Majesty, or whatever he calls himself," Murichon said. He looked helplessly toward Andy Gar.

"Son," Gar said, "that gal must be something in bed."

Lex flushed and shifted his feet.

"His Bigness sets great store in her. He's rejected the deal we made with the First Leader on Polaris."

"Damn," Lex said, feeling lower than a belly-crawling reptile.

"He's put up some new terms," Gar said. "He said that we were unreasonable to refuse to agree to the Empire law which says Empire hulls have to be used in interplanetary trade with any outsiders."

"You're not going to let them come to Texas," Lex said. It wasn't a question.

"No, he suggested a compromise. Meet us halfway, he said. Out in the rim somewhere the cargoes would be lifted from Texas hulls to Empire hulls. We pick the place. We told him we didn't trust the Empire as far as we could sling a farl by the tail and the transfer would be on our terms and he said he'd agree to all that as long as we let Empire hulls carry the meat into Empire center to save him from the displeasure of the Guilds. We said, OK, fine. We'll do it, but we don't turn over the man you want under those conditions. He said, well, the deal is off."

The Ranger General cleared his throat and started to speak. Gar motioned him into silence. "Then we talked about your potential punishment and the best we could do is this. They'll try you in a regular court, but instead of going to the work planets, you'll serve a hitch, whatever the sentence is, in the Empire battle fleet. That's the best we could do."

"I guess it'll have to do," Lex said. "When do I leave?"

"The meat fleet won't be ready for a couple of weeks," Murichon said. "But the choice is still yours."

Make up your mind and keep it solid, because once we start slaughtering and freezing meacrs it'll be too late to change your mind."

"I won't change it," Lex said.

"Boy," Andy Gar said, "we don't know all about it, because we've discouraged any contact with the Empire, but what we know isn't good. The Empire's fighting fleets impress their men and since no one really wants to fight, except the leaders, maybe, the discipline is rough. There's not much real danger, apparently, because this war between the Empire and the Cassiopeians has been going on so long that it's become a sort of ritual. The last time a real clash came was about twenty years ago, at a place called Wolfs Star. That's good and it's bad. That means that service is mainly patrol along the frontiers, day after day, week after week, making little bows now and then in the direction of the enemy just to remind him that you're there. You might wish, before it's over, that they'd put you on a work planet."

"There's just one thing," Lex said, standing tall, his face set grimly. "On the way out I wanta be on the ship with *her* ."

"I reckon we can arrange that," Gar said, grinning broadly.

So there were two weeks left. He spent the first night in Dallas City with Billy Bob doing something he rarely did, drinking the hard stuff, the straight cactus juice which had the kick of a Darlene space rifle. He started hard and continued hard and then he and Billy Bob woke up, with two Rangers looking at them through the bars, after wrecking a joint and wasting a few out-of-town herders who had made some remark about kids being up too late. Murichon bailed them out and shook his head, but he didn't bad-mouth them, just told them to take it easy, that he wanted part of Texas left whole when Lex went off into the Empire, so the second time out they used Lex's savings, money he'd been putting aside for when he went courting in future years, and bought reservations at Miss Toni's from a couple of drunk herders and discovered that Miss Pitty, who had looked so good to them a couple of years before, had aged somewhat and now was a plush, over-fifty woman with big, sympathetic eyes and a voice which sounded sorta tired. But she'd heard. Everyone on Texas had heard, and she said she thought Lex was a very brave boy for doing what he was doing and that a brave boy deserved a good send-off.

"Honey," Miss Pitty said, "I've devoted my life to serving the needs of lonely Texicans, and only a few times have I really turned myself loose, you know what I mean? I mean, well, you have to conserve yourself, like, in this work, and if I let myself go all the time I'd burn myself out in a year, you know what I mean?"

"No ma'am," Lex said.

But in the dawn's early light he knew as he staggered weakly out of Miss Toni's and supported Billy Bob on his arm and went down the cool, crisp, early-fall-aired street humming to himself and wondering if it would be too rotten to have a snort before breakfast.

It wasn't too rotten, but breakfast sort of cleared his head and then they went and got *Zelda* and the *Clean Machine* and blinked up and down to land on a deserted strand way down south where the desert came up to the sea and there was no one within five hundred miles, save maybe a prospector out in the big lonesome. They ate sandwiches and swam and washed away the liquor of the night and then lay in the blazing sun, brown, tall, young.

"I'm going with you," Billy Bob said, after a light nap.

"Wish you could, boy."

"I can."

"Not a chance." Lex turned and squinted out over the light-dancing waters. "First time some Empire non-com told you to wash out the John you'd lay one on him."

"I can do anything you can," Billy Bob said. "You can take it I can. Hell, a man—" He paused, swallowed, on the brink of saying something sentimental. "Well, you're ugly and you ain't much, but we been friends, I mean—"

"I know what you mean," Lex said, "and I appreciate it. I really do."

"We could, like, maybe take over a ship once we were on the line. Then we could fly her home."

"No," Lex said. "Look, you're all set up to go into the business after you finish tech school, right? Hell, Texas needs you here more than it needs you out there keeping me company. You got a knack for things, mechanical things. You might come up with something important, something—" He paused.

A batgull flew low, eyeing them. Seeing that they were too big to eat, he went off on a wing toward the water.

"In a few years, when you're of age, you'll go out and court that little blond up north of New Galveston—"

"Won't be fun without you for competition," Billy Bob said.

"Least, this way, you'll have a chance," Lex said.

"Ho, ho."

Billy Bob threw a handful of hot, dry sand stingingly against Lex's bare lower parts and then there was a tumble of bodies, straining, matched well, neither able to get the advantage. They struggled to their feet, arms locked, fell heavily with mighty grunts, rolled in the sand. Lex got Billy Bob by the short hair, yanked and produced a roar of pain and then he broke away and ran, laughing, with Billy Bob after him, into the surf, rolling and slipping now as they wrestled, wet, naked.

A big comber with a reach of thousands of miles came in from nowhere and they tumbled, came up caught in the suds, coughing, laughing, to crawl to the sand and lie panting with the sun hot on their wet backs. They raced home at ground speeds, just off the deck, daring each other to swoop the hills closer, closer.

Then it was over and he was off to San Ann. There, in a dinky white hospital gown, he suffered the indignities of complete physical tests which proved him to be in the pink and then into the psych section with a bearded head man and his fat, female cohort and they mucked around in his brain and then he was in isolation, a part of his memory altered. Going home, he felt as if a part of him were missing, because, although he could remember everything about his growing up, his childhood, his dead mother, his dad, all the fellows, try as he might he couldn't think where he was from. Oh, he knew he was a Texican, but he had this lost feeling, even then, still on the planet, because where Texas once was, fixed on the mental map of the galaxy in his brain, was one great, deep mystery. They said it had to be that way. There were these two great powers out there gobbling up the galaxy world by world, fighting over each life-zone

planet, letting everything go to hell while they spent all their energy on breeding and building new fleets and new weapons and intellectualizing mightily over which system was best, the tight, central control of the Empire or the allied dictatorships of the Cassiopeian sectors. Either one of them would love to get claws into Texas, because it takes manpower and dirt to grow food with a good, natural taste, and not all planets are suited. You can take a rock and make it livable by making an atmosphere, but you can't create good dirt, and aside from Texas' good dirt, her billions of meacrs, her bountiful harvest of grains and other foodstuffs, just the fact that she existed, independent of either of the great systems, would be justification enough for either to send a space fleet to "liberate" the planet into themselves.

It was just the kind of thing that had been going on when man first began to expand out from Earth. Organization. Red tape. The individual pushed down into the masses. From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. That wasn't the Texas way. Texicans thought a man found his own niche in the scheme of things and hung onto it with tooth and claw and gave a friendly hand to a less able fellow, but not to the point of being ridiculous about it, not to the point of killing Mother Nature's way of making man better and better.

He had a smattering of all that from his schooling, and in the last week, he was force-fed more of it as people came to the ranch and gave him the benefit of all the knowledge available about the Empire and its ways.

History: In the old days, back on Earth, men built fabulous machines and atom bombs and began to find out what made the universe tick, but were, seemingly, unable to develop a pleasant, easy, sure method of birth control. Overpopulation bred poverty, starvation, wars, the rape of a planet. And most of them didn't learn, but went out into space and began all over again, the "East" and the "West" fighting it out there in the near stars, vying for the most fertile planets, breeding like sand flies to provide more settlers and more fighters. And, meantime, with misguided kindness, they tried to make all men equal in fact, when, in fact, man is born equal not at all, not in ability, not in physique, not in mind. Somewhere back there they lost sight of the fact that nature operates with a sort of natural artfulness to make life in the first place—intelligent, humanoid life had existed only on the old Earth—lifting some chemical compound to a state of near life and then working it, kneading it, torturing it with all manner of hardships and tests to make it develop into a form which can fight the inhospitable conditions of an unfeeling universe.

It wasn't that Texicans believed strictly in the survival of the fittest. Life was, perhaps, more sacred to Texicans than to any bleeding heart who moaned, back in the distant past, about the sanctity of the life of an unborn fetus. In all of Texas history there had never been an execution. But each Texican, while he was just a mixture of chemicals and a few cells in his mother's womb, was scanned and probed and if he didn't measure up, he didn't exist, for all you had to do was look at the pictures the spy ships brought back from the galaxy to see the sorry state of the race when breeding was indiscriminate and uncontrolled and people were allowed to be born with twisted limbs and damaged minds to be loved and pampered and revered as sacred life.

"They'll call you a fascist," said Professor Emily Lancing, a specialist in galactic civilization. "That is an antique name going back about six hundred plus years. They might even compare you to a man called Hitler, who believed that his nation was peopled by a super-race, that they were superior to all other peoples of Earth. This Hitler, among other things, tried to exterminate an entire religious sect by starvation and murder. Your answer to this, should you care to make an answer, is that you have not, nor has any Texican or group of Texicans, tried to exterminate anyone. But you don't want to appear too peaceful. We've deliberately left in your mind the facts concerning a certain incident in Cassiopeian space when we sent in a small fleet to pull out that prospector who was taken by the Cassiopeians. We want them to know that only a dozen Texican ships were involved, that the ships of the Cassiopeians were wasted not by the Empire but by Texas and that the incident precipitated the battle of Wolfs Star. How much do you

know about the Darlene space rifle?"

"Not much," Lex admitted, having a hard time concentrating on what she was saying because she was just in her late thirties, had glorious black hair and a Texas girl's body which seemed intent on bursting the seams of her costume. "I know that once it's trained on something there's no doubt about the outcome. Are you saying that we used the Darlene against the Cassiopeians twenty years ago?"

"We had to knock out five Cassiopeians swiftly to rescue the prospector. Five rounds from a Darlene. They thought it was an entire Empire battle fleet. Briefly, the Darlene sounds somewhat like an anachronism, because it fires a projectile. Empire and Cassiopeian weapons are based on rays or beams, but the projectile fired by the Darlene space rifle is something more than just a bullet. It's about a yard long and a third as thick and it contains not only a blink generator but other goodies which, once it's locked onto the target, guide it through any maneuvers the target can make, including blinking. There's no defense against it. Our people have worked on a defense, just so we'd have it, but the mechanics are just too much for us. We want them to know about it, so if they question you, you can tell what I've told you."

"If we've got something like that why do we take any guff off them?"

She smiled and crossed a shapely leg. Lex felt his mouth go dry. "Because it takes metals and it takes a long time and a lot of expensive hardware to fit a ship with a Darlene. We couldn't take on the whole Empire fleet, for example." As if she knew he was enjoying the view, she let her skirt slip upward to reveal a length of beautifully suntanned thigh. "But let's get back to philosophy. They'll question you, that's for sure. And I'd like—that is, we'd like, for you to admit that you're not unusual among Texicans. Oh, I know you can out-wrestle most, probably, but let modesty guide you. You tell them you're just a little below average in height and size—"

"I'm tall enough."

"Sure, honey," she said, smiling, "I know that. But they don't. Look, it all goes back to Darwinism. You know Darwin?"

"Evolution and all that?"

"That's right. Survival of the fittest, to put it simply. In its raw form, in nature, that meant eat or be eaten. The strongest, the smartest survived. The weak ones were selected out. Whole species of life on the old Earth were wiped out because they couldn't adapt to new conditions. Now our theory is, from our limited knowledge of the Empire, that they've very well eliminated natural selection from the human race. You saw them. What was your impression?"

"Well, they were sort of scrungy," he said. He wrinkled his brow, thinking. "I mean, they were sorta runty—"

"The natural trend of the race is toward greater height," she said. "It began centuries ago on Earth. Better foods, better health care, all contributed to making the race larger. If you've seen pictures of the armor worn back in the middle ages of the Christian Era on Earth you've noticed, I imagine, that the armor would be too small for a Texican twelve-year-old."

"Yeah."

"The closely packed civilizations of the galaxy have reversed that trend in recent centuries. Studies seem

to prove that the race there is shrinking, while here on Texas, people get taller and taller and healthier and healthier. Back on Earth, before the blink drive, there was a halfhearted effort to limit breeding, but that effort ended when an endless supply of worlds was opened up by the drive. Settlement was rapid and indiscriminate. Planetary conditions were sometimes unfavorable. Microorganisms on the new worlds opened up a whole new pack of ills in the form of disease and parasitic debilities. Food was sometimes inadequate. Although Empire medical science is probably more developed than ours, they waste a lot of time and materials treating people who were born defective. Indiscriminate breeding, unlimited, fills worlds with people who were slightly disadvantaged at birth. You're going to find that you're a man among children as far as physical strength is concerned. Oh, they're not all midgets, but you'll stand out in a crowd. They'll notice you and they'll ask questions. When you say you're the result of selective breeding, they'll call you a murderer and other things, but you can say that no living thing was killed because of you, that you were scanned when you were a mere union of egg and sperm and found to be normal, that's all. You can say that there's no abortion, except therapeutic, lifesaving emergency abortion, on this planet, and you'll be telling the truth. Defective cell-sperm unions simply are not allowed to become attached to the wall of the uterus."

"They mess with me," Lex said, "I'll tell them where they can go."

"Don't go in with that attitude, boy," she said. Lex bristled at being called boy with half of her thigh staring at him. "You don't have to take any shit off them, but don't look for trouble. We're doing our best to prepare you to answer their questions in a way which won't unduly antagonize them, which will make things easier for you. You try to fight all of them and you'll never come back."

"Well," Lex said, cooling off. He thought about it. It made sense. Not even a Texican could take on the whole Empire single-handed. He listened with respect as she continued to talk about a number of things. He tried to remember all of it, but his mind was elsewhere. They were alone in the house. She was a beautiful woman.

At midday they ordered from the cook robot and ate, still talking, on the balcony overlooking the wide expanse of the ranch. The conversation was informal, in a light vein. He was telling her about his impressions of the Empire, as he'd seen it on Polaris Two. When she began to ask questions about Empire women, he blushed and became tongue-tied. But he got out a little bit about their manner of dressing and, surprisingly, about how they seemed to think and feel that sex was just a plaything. Talking about sex with a pretty girl did things to him and he fell silent.

"You've had no opportunity to go courting, have you?" she asked, looking at him with dark brown eyes full of sympathy.

"Too young," Lex said.

"I'm so sorry you'll miss that. It's one of the most exciting times in life."

"Yeah," he said. "I guess you're married, huh?"

"Yes." She looked off into the distance. The sky was full of white clouds with thunderheads forming to the north. It would rain. "At least I was."

He waited, quiet, not even chewing the bite he had in his mouth. After a long time she said, "He was killed, you know."

"No, I didn't know," Lex said. "Gee, I'm sorry."

"They were looking for metallic deposits in the shallows off the east coast. He was in a diver at three thousand feet when the undersea quake came. They say he probably lived for hours there under the tons of mud and rock which fell on the machine."

Lex couldn't swallow. His throat was dry. He coughed and tried to think of words. She tossed her hair and smiled. "Well, let's not talk about that. I imagine you'll find a girl, out there in the Empire."

Lex thought of Gwyn and felt visceral twinges.

"And she'll make you forget all about Texas girls."

He shook his head. "I'll remember you," he said, surprised at his boldness. "I'll think of you and remember how Texas girls are big enough to be an armful, how they laugh, how they have that twinkle—' felt a huge lividness of face, a lump closed his throat. He turned away.

"You're very sweet," she said, and her smile would have melted a mile cube of polar ice.

In looking back, he would never remember how it was that he knew. But he knew. Inside, seated side by side on a wide, comfortable couch, he knew that if he had the nerve to kiss her she would not object. He did and she didn't.

"Damn, I'm sorry," he said, when their lips parted.

"Don't be."

He wasn't, really. The second kiss was longer.

"It isn't bad," she said, "because I want it too, you see? I want you to remember. I want you to think of me as Texas, all Texas girls, and the sky and the winds and all of it."

In a way it was bad, not evil bad, but bad for him, because, in her arms, feeling the natural slickness, the strength of her, the pushing and yearning and answering and a gale of pure emotion, he knew what he was going to miss. It was no disrespect when he thought of the girl in his school, the one with the short, curly hair of desert tan who smiled athim and let him kiss her, *once*, behind the trees in the park. He thought of how he'd determined then that he'd go looking for her when the time came, pit himself against the others who would be vying for her, win her. In his arms the teacher became that girl, all Texas girls, the girl he'd never court, the girl he'd never win, and it was a bittersweet victory when, together, they rode the tail of a comet down, down, down and then up to heights which, even with Gwyn, he'd never reached.

And because it was so beautiful, he lingered, close, joined, dampened by exertion and nature, and put his head down into the hollow of her shoulder and wept like a baby because, even if he didn't have to go out into the Empire, even if he could stay, it would never again be the same for him, because she was older and would choose again, a man of her own age, her own sort, not a seventeen-year-old boy not yet ready to go courting. She understood and didn't laugh at him because he cried and when he said, "Don't tell. Not ever. Not anyone," she kissed him atop his tousled head and soothed him.

"No, no, never."

He watched her as she dressed and felt a sense of the most devastating loss as she was, gradually,

systematically, covered, hidden from his eyes. He kissed her once more.

"Emily?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Thanks."

"You don't have to say that."

"Not for, well, not for—" He swallowed, suddenly shy, now that she was fully clothed. "I mean for letting me cry on your shoulder."

"You cried because it was beautiful," she said.

Well, that wasn't all of it, but he was grateful to her for saying it.

"I hope you never lose the ability to cry over beauty," she told him. "Remember it, even when things are rough. Remember how it was so beautiful and how it made you feel so full you had to cry. It wasn't unmanly. Didn't you ever feel your eyes mist over at a particularly brilliant sunset, or when the bloodflowers are blooming on the plains?"

"I know what you mean," he said.

"And Lex?"

"Ummmm?"

"Don't ever come to think you did something wrong here today. Don't ever blame yourself. We did it together. We did it because we needed each other. I needed you as much as you needed me. For a moment, we were one. That makes it something special. Don't ever let it become dirty. Promise?"

"You don't even have to ask."

And then it was more information being force-fed into his reeling brain and a string of other professional people talking, drawing out ideas, telling him what they wanted to know about the Empire when he came back. He didn't see Emily Lancing again, but he had a mind picture of her to carry with him as he went to the huge, noisy, crowded spaceport outside of Dallas City to watch the ships being collected and laden with frozen meacr meat. He'd never seen so many Texican ships in one place at one time. He guessed that the entire fleet was gathered there and his questions proved him to be not far from right. Outside of a thin line of patrol ships guarding the approaches to the planet, lest a stray galaxy ship come wandering in, the meat fleet represented all the spaceworthy hulls on Texas.

Day and night the sounds of alteration came to him as workers pressed into service from all over the planet installed freezers, ripped out bulkheads, carefully preserving any salvageable metals, prepared the fleet for the trip into the periphery.

Once he went to the slaughterhouse and saw the countless meacrs being herded into chutes and this, too, was another first, because he'd never seen death in such wholesale lots before. He was saddened. He had, of course, killed a meacr himself now and then and he was no stranger to hunting for meat, but to see thousands of the pleasant, mild little animals being pushed to slaughter made him a bit mad at the

Empire for being so hungry and set him to wishing that Texas didn't need Empire metals. But necessity was necessity and he left the slaughterhouse with a sick feeling to load his few belongings aboard the flagship and settle into his cabin to get the feel of it.

Billy Bob and a half dozen studs from his school came out, the night before lift-off, to wish him well. He sot frightfully drunk and he was carried bodily into his cabin and woke up the next morning in space with a lead as big as old Zed himself.

The last thing he remembered about Texas, and that only dimly, was his father standing over his bunk looking as if he'd been in a dust storm, his eyes red.

"You're not a boy anymore, Lex," Murichon had said. "Remember that. And remember that you're doing this for Texas and Zed."

Chapter Four

In relation to the total cube of the space occupied by the galaxy, matter makes up a small part of the total. Far out in the rim there are multiples of cubic parsecs of space which contain less than nothing, it seems, for empty space can be more than nothing, and the vast spaces between the hard, bright stars become an enormous black hole. Evenly distributed, the entire mass of the galaxy would place matter equaling one tenth of the mass of old Sol, the sun of Earth, in each cubic parsec, and that's one hell of a big emptiness.

Texicans were on a first-name basis with bigness. It was a part of their heritage. In their folklore were stories about the original Texicans back on Earth: These two Texicans were out walking and came to a bridge over a river. Needing to relieve themselves, they halted, unzipped their flies and proceeded. "Damn," said the first Texican, "that water is cold."

"Sure is," said the second Texican, "and deep, too, with rocks on the bottom."

Big planet, big space. Seen edge on, the galaxy is not as idealized as in the ancient photographic imitations which showed a neat disc with a bulging center made out of millions of suns, but is more ragged, messier. There is a definite disc and a definite core and spewing out from the shape, spread into parsecs of intergalactic space and allied to the galaxy only by gravitational attraction, are clusters and isolated, lost suns and out there, in the darkness, in empty space, safe from the casual explorer, Texas and its sun, old Zed, swims the darkness, orbiting the galaxy in something like 8×10^46 years, a period of time which can have no meaning to anyone, not even a Texican with his sense of bigness.

A mote in nothing. A brightness which, to be seen from the inhabited worlds of the Empire, needs to be discovered accidentally with the most powerful of telescopes. Yet, big as it was, the world was insignificant in relation to the occupied worlds of the Empire segment of the galaxy.

It was necessary to enter the periphery by a circumspect route, for Empire ships with sophisticated instruments were waiting, stationed on the outskirts, all systems alert, searching for the first blinking signal sent ahead by the Texican meat fleet.

Thus, Admiral Crockett Reds sent the fleet into Cassiopeian space, after a long, boring detour, in single file, spaced seconds apart. To emerge into Empire pace from the Cassiopeian line was the purpose, for the multitude of Cassiopeian ships would furnish a confusing background for Texican movement and add to the mystery of Texas by showing the Empireites that a fleet could be moved through the territory of the Empire's enemy with impunity.

Using the immediate double-blink technique, made possible by the use of a double-charge generator developed by the Blink Space Works, New Austin, the Texican fleet, blinking in one at a time, spent milliseconds in real space, just long enough, as the instruments of the Cassiopeians registered the momentary presence of ship after ship, to send the Cassiopeian fleets into Red Emergency Status and cause a flurry of movement along the Empire-Cassiopeian line.

Forming in columns abreast in Empire space, the fleet moved, Darlenes activated and ready, to a rendezvous with a single Empire Vandy, where contact was made and instructions given.

The transfer was made in emptiness, between the scattered stars, a long, tedious process of lock and empty, one Texas ship at a time becoming vulnerable by locking with an Empire freighter, the others ringed, at varying distances, on battle alert. As each Texas ship was emptied of frozen meat, it locked with a second Empire freighter to take on ingots of pure metals, then blinked, alone, into the emptiness. At no time was the number of Empire ships present allowed to approach the total number of Texican ships lying in wait to be unloaded.

Not every Texas ship was followed, but an unlucky few had to take evasive action, blinking in and out of Cassiopeian space to lose the Empire scouts and Vandys and, once, a freighter disguised as a Texican.

Then it was over. The flagship, laden, as were the others, with frozen meat, locked with a pitted Empire freighter and Lex watched, suited and ready, as the cargo disappeared through the lock tunnel into the Empire hull. Only one transfer was remaining. A sleek Middleguard cruiser approached, locks clanked. Lex stood aside and let the Lady Gwyn, bulky in her L.S.A., cross the flexible floor of the tunnel first. He shook hands with the unloading crew, thanked the Admiral, who was suited and present to say his goodbyes, held his shoulders back and left Texas behind with a sadness which was almost physical.

Into an Empire which stretched out in a long oval from the old Earth, extending eight thousand parsecs toward the core, skirting it, pushing into opposite side stars for another four thousand parsecs until it ended, bounded there by the opposite extent of the Cassiopeian dictatorships, the oval sweeping out the periphery to extend into extra-galactic space and isolated clusters of semi-autonomous nations and groupings of worlds, man having spread far, far in six hundred years, flying *the* wings of the blink generator through the cold void between stars, charting, building complicated patterns of starways along which blinked the commerce of Empire, millions of starships, billions of people all paying homage to a man who sat his throne in the heights of Galaxy City atop the old Earth's highest mountain.

It was to be discovered by Lexington Burns, Gunner Basic, Emperor's Battle Fleet, that Empire was an accomplishment not to be despised, but admiration, however grudging, was last in line behind more immediate concerns.

"Lexington Burns, of the Planet Texas, you stand accused—"

The judge, wizened, stern-faced, his voice strident in Lex's ears, speaking fast, words lost in the swiftness, around him the packed room with the vivid colors, the scant coverings, the foppish, foolish, modish clothing of Empire in contrast to his space blues. The judge robed in purple. Beside Lex, coming to his chest, a young attorney.

"Answer direct questions as briefly as possible. Don't volunteer anything. Say sir to the judge."

The training planet, marginal life zone, cold, cold as space itself, metal huts atop the ice and struggling through deep drifts thinking of *her*. Emily. Home. All that was Texas was embodied in a mental picture of

dark hair and flashing eyes and soft, soft arms and—

He was, of course, singled out. At first they tried to break him with physical strain. However, although he was unused to the cold, the snow, the eternal ice, he was a Texican and when he carried home an instructor on his broad shoulders, after a march which was supposed to drop him, panting and whining, into the snow to be picked up by the ski-mounted meat wagon, they gave up on that.

"Shit-eater, give me the table of organization." Face close to Lex's, the instructor almost as tall, breath issuing in freezing clouds from behind the cold mask.

"Sir. The Emperor, the Emperor's Prime Minister, the Joint Admirals of the Emperor's fleet, the—" Endless rote, crammed into his head at late night sessions, punishment tours in the library and that slow growth of the grudging realization that the organization of the Empire was a wonder on the order of a variable star.

"Shit-eater, give me the prime purpose of the Emperor's Battle Fleet."

"Sir, to preserve the status quo, to protect the citizens of the Empire and the citizens' property, to extend the glory of the Emperor into the galaxy."

It was a stern, rigorous life with food which, at first, made his stomach protest the lack of juicy mear steaks and fruit and green vegetables fresh from the rich, black dirt of Texas. Bulk pills to fill the void in his stomach, synthetic protein, tasteless, glutinous, eaten in haste with back straight and shoulders back, one hand held daintily on his lap. Endless harassment.

"Texas, you're latrine orderly. Hit it."

"Texas, you're disposal detail. Hit it." The wastes of the training camp open to freeze solid and be transported to dumps with the ski-car bumping and the waste sloshing until it solidified.

Instants of deep satisfaction. In hand-to-hand combat, a burly instructor, Lex's height, a big man for an Empireite. "I don't want to hurt you, shit-eater, so when you feel force, give."

Standing, resisting, driven to it. Straining muscles and a sudden move which sent the instructor cold mask first into a crusted drift to come up with hate in his eyes and hands dealing blows which, if landed, would have maimed, and Lex dancing, always just out of reach, until, in self-defense, he had to level the man to stand over him, chest heaving, as a silence hung over the parade ground and trainees stood fearfully at attention waiting for a lightning bolt to strike down the man who had dared best an instructor.,

"Scrub, shit-eater. Every inch of it. Anything I hate it's a smart-assed recruit. They tell me all Texicans eat meat, shit-eater. Is it true?"

"Yessir."

"Here's about seven inches, shit-eater, eat it."

"Sir, show me that in regulations."

"You're learning, shit-eater. Scrub." The floor extending for endless yards, an indoor parade of time-worn plastic, impossible to clean, his hands, his knees, his arms and legs protesting as he scrubbed and remembered soft lips and the winds of the plains and looked ahead with a despair which was a

physical pain in his gut.

"I sentence you to a labor planet for a period not to exceed twenty years and not less than ten years." His voice harsh and alien in Lex's ears, the room a-rustle with approving sounds.

"For to seize one of the Emperor's subjects, to carry her against her will far from the benevolent rule of the Emperor and all it stands for, is a crime of serious degree."

That wasn't all I did to her, Lex was thinking, standing straight and tall.

"Let not the leniency of this sentence influence future wrongdoers," the Judge continued, "for it is to be noted that the Emperor's agent herself," a glance toward a box seat where the Lady Gwyn sat in regal splendor, "has appealed for temperance. Thus, I am pleased to say that the Emperor is willing, subject to consent by the convicted, to commute the sentence to an equal term of service in the Emperor's battle fleet."

On an icy flatness, protected from drifting snow by heat shields, a grounded fleet: the hull of a Vanguard destroyer salvaged after the Battle of Wolfs Star, an aged middleguard cruiser and a Rearguard battle cruiser, huge, as long as three blocks in Dallas City, a city known for its spaciousness, weapons in place, engines deactivated but there, endless hours, in battle gear, at station behind the controls of the weapons, mucking in lubricants to test mechanical aptitude, assembling and disassembling, doing it by the book even when it took, obviously, longer. Empire life support armor was heavy and awkward, and finding a suit to fit Lex was not, seemingly, within the capacity of the Emperor's battle fleet. Tight joints chafed his skin, limited his movements, but the tedium of basic was over and he was oblivious to the harassment as he devoted himself to learning as much as he could possibly learn about weapons, ships, hardware, techniques, even the thinking of the Emperor's defenders.

Texican lads began tinkering with their airorses before they knew enough math and physics to understand the theory behind the hardware involved, and, indeed, tinkering seemed to be a natural ability with most Texicans. Lex knew the workings of a blink generator without knowing fully the theory and the whys of its working, but he could take one apart and clean it and test the various components and replace faulty ones, and the small blink generator on his *Zelda*, back on Texas, made the Empire machines look like primitive imitations of the real thing. He was shocked by the total lack of refinement.

Of course, the Empire generators did the job, but they were bulky and cranky compared to the souped-up models used on Texas, and not one advance had been made, seemingly, since the blink was perfected for the great expansion outward from Earth. It was thus with most Empire hardware. It was basic, stripped-down stuff of a simplicity which made it duck soup for Lex. However, very early he decided, having learned the operations of a ship of the line from his training manuals, that he did not want to be stuck below decks in the generator room mucking around in the Empire's primitive power plants. He had little to gain from ten or more years of service in the battle fleet, but one thing he could do, and that was observe. To observe, he had to be where the action was, and so he purposely made himself look to his instructors as if he were a six-thumbed novice with mechanics and showed his best on the controls of various beam and ray weapons.

On weapons, he allowed his reflexes, which could guide an airors inches off the uneven terrain of the deserts of Texas, full play. He was fractions of a second faster than any other trainee at programming the automatics which guided the weapons, and when assignment time came, he was sent to gunnery school on a planet some light-years away from the cold training planet where he excelled at knocking drone targets out of space.

It all took time, but not enough time. Days seemed both to crawl and to fly past. Hours in classrooms were devastatingly slow, but weeks went by without conscious observance. It was the months, building up to years, which seemed longest. Gunnery trainee Lex Burns had been off Texas for six months when he was assigned to the training ship *T.E.S. Crucis*. Behind him were endless long, lonely nights, countless humiliations, small victories, moments of looking upward to the crowded skies of the galaxy and thinking of home. He was more alone than he'd ever been while roaming the Bojacks of home in solitude. He formed no close associations. The Empire trainees seemed cold, distant, forming their little groups for games and talk and gambling without inviting the big outworlder to join. Not that Lex wanted to join in with the Empireites. They were a scurvy lot in general, runted, harsh-voiced, arrogant without reason. No, he was content to be the loner, obeying orders, doing each assigned task to the best of his ability, remembering, at times, Billy Bob's suggestion that he come with him and steal an Empire ship.

Perhaps, in the endless years ahead, he would think about it. In training, of course, escape was impossible. He didn't know where to run even if he could escape.

"Where is your home planet?"

"What course did you fly into the galaxy with the Texas fleet?"

"If you don't know where the planet called Texas is, tell us about the skies of Texas. What are the star formations?"

Under deep hypnosis, drug-induced, leaving small shards of memory, the voice of a man speaking quietly: "They are not primitive in their techniques, for if they were, there would be a residuum of the knowledge we seek. However, if the knowledge has been truly erased, there is no way of putting it back, at least not by someone who does not have the knowledge."

In his mind were dozens of interrogation sessions and he remembered with satisfaction their deep interest in the Darlene space rifle, their consternation upon discovering that the last active battle between the opposing forces came about not because of a Cassiopeian miscalculation, as they had long believed, but simply because one Texican had strayed, was captured and was rescued by a small Texas fleet.

The concept of a world moving, using all its resources, to save the life and liberty of one man was alien to them.

"Do you expect us to believe that your planet sent a fleet to rescue one unimportant prospector for metals?"

"No Texican is unimportant to Texas."

"He was the son of a great man then? Or he had important friends?"

"I think he was just a loner, an old prospector with a junk ship trying to make a dollar."

"When you kidnapped me," she said, standing before him in formal Empire uniform, small, beautiful, coldly distant, "were you acting on orders from higher up?"

"No, ma'am, I just liked you. I thought you liked me."

"Just answer the questions," said the Lady Gwyn.

"You acted like you liked me," he said, grinning. "That night on—"

"Shut up. Was this a plot to hold me for ransom?"

"No, I just wanted to marry you."

"Lady," asked the uniformed guard with her, "shall I still his insolent tongue?"

"Let him talk," the Lady Gwyn said. Lex was seated, chained to his bunk in the prison. "What did you hope to gain by kidnapping an agent of the Emperor himself? Surely my momentary attraction to you did not make you think that a cousin of the Emperor would choose to live out her days on an outplanet herding some dirty animals?"

"You liked me on the way back to the Empire, too," Lex said.

"Enough," said the Lady Gwyn. "He is hopelessly stupid."

On the way back to the Empire he hadn't had much to lose and she was there, taking over the cabin of the First Officer, having her meals served there, not choosing to associate with the lowly Texas crew. One day out, when the routine of blink, rest, blink and rest was established and the ship was running smoothly, Lex took her tray from the steward and delivered it in person.

In order to carry more cargo, the flagship had been stripped of luxuries. It was warm in the cabin and she was dressed in nothing more than the undergarments worn by a Texas girl, low-cut panties and a nearly miraculous bra which supported where no support was needed by some invisible means which had always puzzled Lex, not being too familiar with the article of clothing.

"Your food, ma'am," he said, knocking on the door.

He heard the inner lock pushed back. "You may put it on the table," she said, before opening the door. Then she tried to close it in his face, but he pushed in, almost spilling the contents of the tray.

"Get out," she said coldly.

"I don't believe I will," he said.

"I will inform the Captain," she said, taking a step toward the ship's communicator link in the cabin. He stood quickly between her and the unit.

"You are in enough trouble," she said, as he put the tray aside and looked down into her face.

"M'am, since I'm in Empire trouble, I been reading all about your laws. Seems there's no law against what I'm going to do to you."

She backed slowly away. "Don't touch me."

"Well, I don't think I'll just *touch* you," he said, advancing. "Way I look at it you were the one who issued the invitation back there on Polaris Two. What we did there seemed to be fun, but didn't seem to matter much to you, so if it doesn't matter to you I don't see why we should spend a couple of weeks or more without having fun, do you?"

"I will have you publicly whipped," she said, as he caught her, pulled her to him, held her arms as she tried to scratch his face.

"I figure worse things than that are already lined up," he said. He picked her up bodily and threw her, somewhat roughly, onto the bunk. He discovered that the fragile-looking bra was stronger than it seemed, for when he ripped it away the straps left red marks on her delicate brown skin.

She was surprisingly strong, but he was stronger and his body weight, atop her, soon exhausted her struggles.

"Animal," she said. She spit into his face. He wiped it off by rubbing his cheek on her breasts and leaned to kiss her. She bit him and he bit her back, leaving a big purple bruise on her lower lip.

"We just promised to deliver you back to his bigness," he said. "We didn't say unbruised. You wanta play rough I'm here."

The strange thing was, as he remembered the incident, that she came to enjoy the roughness, seemingly urging him on even after her cone-shaped breasts began to heave with her rapid breathing, forcing him to force her until, with a melting, gasping, moaning lunge, she came to him.

And it was never mentioned. Not at the trial, not ever, not by Gwyn. He made the reference to it when she took her turn at trying to pry the location of his home planet out of him, but that was it. He didn't see her again after that, but he spent a lot of cold hours in the training camp thinking about those times aboard the flagship when he'd knock on her cabin door and she'd open up, sometimes dressed in the Texas undergarments, sometimes in only her brown skin, her arms opening to him, that wondrous world of sensuality opening up to him at the sight of her.

Women.

He thought a lot about women. Not that he suffered unduly. It seemed to be much harder, those long weeks of male society on the training planet and on the ships and in schools, for the Empire trainees, because, as he'd heard in their conversations, things were much different on Empire worlds, with sex taken free and easy from an early age. He didn't suffer, because on Texas you didn't expect the total joy of sex until you were old enough to make your first trip into Miss Toni's place in Dallas City and after that until you courted and won. He was weeks short of his eighteenth birthday and he'd known three women. Miss Pitty once in fear and trembling and fumbling quickness, a second time when she, taking time from her work to give him a rousing send-off from Texas, taught him some interesting variations. Gwyn. He'd lost count. He tried, when things were rough and he had trouble getting to sleep, to remember the times. Some stood out. Others faded into the sweet, sensual memory of the totality of those long weeks of it there on the flagship. And Emily. Of all the three, she was the best. She was a Texas girl, all of Texas, all of life and sweetness and love and tenderness and beauty, the girl he would marry, someday, the girl he would have married sooner had he not lost his head and kidnapped an Empire farcat.

Emily alone was more than most Texicans his age could hope for and when you added in Gwyn there was no reason for him to suffer, because he'd had more than his share of women. So he counted his blessings and wondered about women and used his memories to ease his desperate homesickness.

T.E.S.*Crucis* was an antiquated Middleguard with some of her communications and battle gear removed to house dozens of trainees and the extra weapons on which they practiced. She was a leaking old hull and the Texican was often roused from his bunk, hustled to the locks, suited in L.S.A. and shoved out and away to crawl awkwardly over the rusting hull to patch weaknesses. He got all the *good*

details like that, mostly because he was the outworlder and possibly because he did them uncomplainingly. He was good with a space welder and did the job neatly so that the *Crucis* leaked less and less because the job was done right.

They were out in Vegan space, shooting at drones, when the main seam gave over the power compartment, stressed by the weight and mass of the generator, let space in and did in three power men before the compartment could be evacuated and sealed off.

Dead in space, the *Crucis* reflected the glitter of Vega as Lex, pressed into service as usual, crawled the curves, clanking soundlessly, except in the atmosphere of the L.S.A., to see a serious breach.

"Sir," he sent to the officer on the other end of his communicator, "it's a big one this time. I'll need help."

"Damn, Texas, can't you handle it?"

"Take a look, sir." He put his scanner on it and let the officer take a look. He heard a gasp. As the scanner moved, the seam opened wider, moving along the vertical axis of the hull. If it opened much wider it would rip into the crew area, venting a good deal of the ship's air into space and closing off a full quarter of the ship.

"A plate of extra patching metal and a magnetic clamp, too," Lex said, beginning to move already, taking his welder to the hairline crack which moved even as he began to throw a temporary weld onto it. "And, sir, I'd hurry if I were you."

They sent out an Empire Sub-Chief, not trusting the job, which had suddenly become critical, to a trainee. Sub-Chief Blant Jakkes stood five foot ten and, as did most Empireites, rather hated the big Texican, not because he knew Lex well enough for hatred, but mainly because Lex was an outsider and different and bigger and faster and decidedly more handsome. The Sub-Chief was a career man who had done ten toward his retirement at the end of thirty and he was a member of the training cadre of the *Crucis* because he'd shown, in a couple of duels with the Cassiopeians, that he was one hell of a weapons man. He was also a good teacher and, even if he did resent Lex, he had to admit that the Texican was also one hell of a good weapons man. That didn't make it right to have an alien on one of the Emperor's fleet ships, but the Texican did know his way around a beam control panel.

Blant Jakkes came crawling out, attaching and releasing his lifeline, carrying a plate of patching metal and a clamp to look down on the breach, which was still creeping forward in spite of Lex's efforts, with some concern.

"Right," Lex said, opening the communicator with his tongue. "We need the clamp here and there." He pointed with the welder, making marks on the hull. There was no time for Sub-Chief Jakkes to remind the trainee that he'd give the orders. He set his lifeline and put one contact of the clamp at the indicated near spot and crawled abeam to set the other. He felt the hull jerk under him and looked back, startled, to see that the seam had opened all the way to the joint of the inner-support bulkhead and he cursed the old single-hull construction, wishing that he were back with the battle fleet, where all ships had double hulls.

"Move," Lex yelled. "Set that contact."

Jakkes moved and his movement violated Newton's third law of motion to the point of sending the Sub-Chief spinning off the hull to jerk to a stop at the end of his fifteen-foot lifeline. The unconnected contact of the magnetic clamp was jerked from his hand, jiggled, hung from the connector free. The

seam, stressed hard from below, tried to rip through the bulkhead fastenings and Lex moved as fast as he could, ignoring the struggling Sub-Chief as Jakkas pulled himself down hand over hand trying to make contact with the hull, not watching his lifeline as it coiled and floated to let two loops fall into the opened seam.

Lex placed the second contact and, looking over his shoulder with some effort, saw that there were seconds to spare before the bulkhead fastenings went and activated the coil of the clamp. As the clamp contracted, there was resistance and the movement of the opened seam was jerky and slow and then, with a sudden snap, the seam closed, cutting Jakkas' lifeline in two places to leave him holding a line with no anchor, floating five full feet away from the hull. Although they were dead in space, there was some residual forward movement of the ship, Jakkas keeping pace, trying desperately to remember from long-forgotten training which movement to make to cause a reaction which would drift him toward the hull. He made exactly the opposite motion, a sudden jerk, and began to swim slowly outward. The situation was serious, because the ship was dead, damage having been done in the power compartment by explosive decompression. Jakkas knew that he was a dead man, because his L.S.A. communicator was of limited range and before the ship could be brought under power for a search he'd be the tiniest mote on a big black emptiness and he had enough air for, say, three hours.

"Texas," he yelled, his voice not concealing his fear, but far short of panic.

Lex looked up, sized up the situation immediately. A man who can fly an airor inches off the deck can judge distances. He saw that Jakkas was already too far out to be reached from his own lifeline and that there was only one chance. Extending out from the rear hull was a thin weapons pod, tipped by spidery direction-finding equipment. The tip of the framework was just under fifteen feet from the hull. Lex loosed his anchor, crawled swiftly aft, loosed the anchor again and, without thinking of what would happen if he missed, he tossed the anchor carefully, accurately, toward the very tip of the spider and it hit, held. His range of activity extended fifteen feet beyond the hull, he launched himself, swam slowly in weightlessness, caught the drifting Sub-Chief in a bear hug. After that it was just a matter of pulling themselves in, like toothfish from the western sea caught on a line from the *Crucis* .

Jakkas was shaken. Lex, calm, went back to his work; and the clamp holding, the matter was a simple patch and weld job and when he finished, with Jakkas recovering enough to help in the last stages, the hull was secure, stronger, in that area, than it had been.

In the lock Jakkas was still shaking, but he managed to hide his trembling hands. Lex was cool.

"Do you know what would have happened if you'd missed?" Jakkas asked.

"I didn't miss."

"You'd have been out there with me."

"Well, we would have both had company."

Jakkas was looking at the outlander as he'd never looked at him before. There were no lines on the face, although the skin was tanned and weathered. Hell, he was just a boy.

During target practice, he watched Lex in action and was impressed anew. He yelled as much as ever and showed no sign of having changed his Empire hatred of an alien, but toward the end of the week, after Lex had shown exceptional skill with the newest beam weapons control board, he sought out the Texican in trainee quarters and sat down next to him. "How old are you, Texas?"

Lex didn't figure it was any of the Sub-Chiefs business, and if it were, he could find it out on Lex's records, but he was feeling a little blue. He'd been thinking of what a party would be coming off if he were home.

"Today is my birthday, sir. I'm eighteen."

Jakkes saw a faraway look in the Texican's eyes and he was moved in spite of himself. "Hell, that means you're old enough to drink, doesn't it?" Lex grinned. "I've been that old for a long time." Down in the crew's lounge they looked hard at Jakkes and the trainee, but no one said anything as Jakkes took a bottle from the stock and two glasses and motioned Lex to sit.

Chapter Five

The roots of the war extended so deeply into history that only scholars could trace them backward to the time on old Earth when the race was divided into two philosophically opposed camps seeking the same goals, food, freedom of action, comfort, progress for a mere few billion people of various languages, skin coloring and temperament. Lex, who had been bookish only to the required extent, became interested in the war when he asked, idly, "Why do we fight the Cassiopeians?"

"Because," Blant Jakkes said. Lex's first assignment after training was aboard a huge Rearguard, not the newest in the fleet, for new ships were being added all the time to increase the fleet strength and to replace obsolete vessels. Out of a crew of over a thousand men he knew personally of two ex-cassiopeians, captured and rehabilitated, who held portions of responsibility. One was a Section Chief in the power room.

"It isn't because they're different," he said. "Not in looks," Jakkes said. "They're different, though."

"They speak the same languages."

"It's up here," Jakkes said, pointing a blunt finger at his temple.

"Their beliefs?"

"Yeah, I guess that's it."

Lex pressed on. "Their form of government is different, I know that, but not all that different. Instead of having one central head of government they have many, allied to form a grouping of worlds as widespread and as numerous as the Empire."

"They starve people," Jakkes said. "They haven't got the know-how we have. They almost match us in weapons, because they use their entire industrial capacity to build them, but on the worlds the people are poor and hungry."

"This Empire stuff leaves me a bit hungry, too," Lex said.

"They don't give their people freedom," Jakkes said, his brow wrinkled as he thought more deeply than he liked. "Here in the Empire we can do as we will, as long as we remember that personal freedom stops at the tip of the other fellow's nose."

"That's not what Rambler, down in the power room, says," Lex said. "He says that Empire red tape

would sink the Cassiopeian fleet forever if we could find a way of thrusting it on them in one lump mass."

"Rambler's a good guy. You can almost forget that he's Cassiopeian, but he's still Cassiopeian. He was a First Officer over there, you know."

"There's a lot of things I don't understand," Lex said. "Like we're fighting them. But we've been out here for three months with the enemy a short blink away, and we've not fired a shot. We've got enough firepower on this old wagon to destroy a hundred Cassiopeian worlds and yet we carefully avoid contact, hold our own positions. Hell, we even notify the Cassies when we're going to make a move so they won't get nervous."

"That's the way it is. No one wants war."

"But we are at war."

"Yeah."

Lex scratched his head. "Way I see it, the Empire is in the same fix as the Cassies. It spends most of its time making weapons and ships and there are a lot of people on Empire worlds, I hear, who don't even have the basic luxuries, like climate control and all. Every time the Cassies build a new ship the Empire builds one and a half."

"Listen, boy, there *are* a lot of things you don't understand. That's called the balance of power. Let them bastards get ahead of us and they'd run all over us. Give them the advantage and they'd sweep through the Empire shooting up worlds until there wasn't anything left but planet-sized cinders."

"No one wants a real war, then?"

"No sane man, but some of their dictators aren't exactly sane. They're power-hungry, irrational. Any one of them could start a biggie at any time. We have to be ready. We have enough firepower to kill them a couple of times over and they know it. As long as they know they'll all die, all their worlds, they won't start anything."

"How long," Lex asked, "has it been like this?"

"Hell, forever."

For six hundred years plus, Lex found out, hitting the obscure and seldom consulted electrobooks in the library of the ship. All the way back to the Earth when East and West held each other at bay with primitive newks. Throughout the expansion into space, with the other side seeing the handwriting on the wall first a id grabbing up all the good planets within a few light-years of Earth, only to be displaced with a huge pre-Empire push, shoved into the depths of the galaxy to lick their wounds and rape worlds to build a fleet which almost ended the budding Empire in its first hundred years. He thought of the waste. The expansion was a historic phenomenon, truly, happening with fantastic swiftness, but it would have been faster had not the main energies of the two sides been devoted to war and weapons of war.

"Jak," he said, one day after his reading session, "I give you this as a thought. If the resources and credit expended on warships and weapons by both sides were diverted to development of the galaxy, we'd have the whole thing catalogued and settled and everyone would be living like the Emperor."

"You gotta remember one thing," the Sub-Chief said, slightly miffed, "you're an outworlder. You didn't

grow up under the threat of the Cassies. What I'm saying is you don't know shit about the situation, boy, and sometimes you come close to talking treason."

So he stopped talking, even to Jakkes, who, after training, had requested an action station and had pulled strings to take Lex with him.

The thing about it was that there were facts and figures. The military budget of the Empire was a matter of record and, after his brain stopped swimming with the astronomical numbers involved, Lex began to think, more and more, that the waste was not only foolish, it was criminal.

Down near Centaurus there was a ship's graveyard. It consisted of outmoded warships and it extended for thousands of miles with the dead, stripped, pitted hulls packed as closely as possible. There was, in that ships' graveyard, enough metals to represent the ores of a hundred Texas-sized planets with normal density, enough to supply the needs of Texas for a thousand years, and it was a total waste, since reclamation was more expensive than mining new ore on the out-planets of the Empire. When Lex punched up the visual tapes showing the "reserve fleet," he was astounded. He put the facts into his brain and told them to stay there for future reference. He spent nights thinking about how a Texas fleet could blink in, latch onto a hull and blink out with enough salvageable metal to add to the meager reserves of Texas a stockpile which would make piracy worthwhile. "Alternately, he envisioned trade deals, meacr for old ships. The Empire, as imagined, would trade low, because they had fresh ores and their labor guilds would not stand still for Declamation, because it would throw miners out of work.

He had a lot of time to think as the Rearguard cruised up and down the line, covering an assigned volume of space at sub-light speeds, traveling from nowhere to nowhere and back again, instruments tracking the Cassie opposite who traveled the same empty trek time and again until the routine became automatic and the only escape, during his off-duty hours, was the library.

At the end of his first six months' tour he was somewhat of an authority on the war, could recite its high points and its isolated hot battles, knew and laughed at the dueling concept, and he had not been close to an enemy ship. Toward the end of the tour, he was almost wishing for a fight, anything to relieve the endless routine.

Luyten Three was a fleet port, a planet devoted to the clang and din of repair, modernization and outfitting of battle vessels. Land area was scant, isolated volcanic tips thrust above the endlessly rolling seas, but the location of the planet saved long and tedious blinks from that sector of space back into Empire central.

Luyten City was a brawling, tough town, always packed with spacers on holiday, its streets lined with gaudy fronts and flashing signs designed to lure the bored, spacesick servicemen into parting with their accumulated pay. Luyten City offered everything, whores for whoremongers, gambling for gamblers, Feelies for those who wanted their kicks vicariously, nude shows for voyeurs, safe drugs for those who wanted to drop out for a while, illegal and even deadly drugs for more reckless souls, drinks for drinkers, culture in the form of live drama and museums for the aesthetic, vulgarity for vulgarians and, for Lex, a meacr steak, costing a week's pay, served by a sweet-faced little girl in the scantiest of costumes who told Lex that she was off duty at local midnight and that her cost was reasonable.

"Don't mess with any of the townies," Blant Jakkes had warned, just before he disappeared for three days into a government-controlled brothel. "Some of them you put it in and it has teeth, boy. You wanta get laid, you go to a government place, right?"

"Right," Lex said, holding his town guide map and marking the restaurant which, according to the

information, offered the foods of a thousand worlds. And he struck pay dirt in the form of a fairly decent steak, the first real meat he'd had since leaving Texas, and thanked the little girl while declining her invitation and then went out to look things over, feeling good solid land under his feet and missing the wide expanse of home, for the Luyten landscape was hilly and the sea was never far away.

He'd asked, there in the restaurant, where the steak had come from, hoping to hear someone say "Texas."

"You got me," the little girl had said.

"You read anything recently about a planet called Texas?" he asked a runty little fellow in a stand selling printed materials and stat papers.

"Who reads 'em?" the runt asked. "You wanta read, you buy."

He bought a couple of stat papers and scanned them. Most of the news he'd heard on the daily report put onto the ship's communications system, all Empire stuff. Nowhere was there a mention of Texas, not even a mention of a trade deal for meat. But he knew that the trading had to be still going on, because he'd had a Texas meacr steak which could not have been preserved from the first shipment.

He hit a couple of bars and listened to the talk there, strange-sounding places and the typical language of the fleet, walked, feeling lonely, toward the brothel where Jakkes had disappeared, made a fantastic discovery.

Aboard ship Gunner Basics didn't have access to blinkstat machines. But there, on the corner, was a sign saying "Public Blinkstat." He had to go into a bar to get the proper coinage for the machine and then he sent a blink addressed to his father via First Leader Jum Anguls, Ursa Major Sector. He waited for acknowledgment and got it, acknowledgment meaning only that the stat had been started across the parsecs toward the addressee. He had no assurance that there was even contact between the First Leader and the Texicans, but he was hungry for some word from home. He wanted to know how his father was feeling and how Billy Bob was holding out and, although he had not dared ask in the stat, he wanted to know about Emily. He left the column of the enlisted men's mess and his name and rank with blinkstat central in case there was a return message before his ship lifted off Luyten Three and then wandered the streets, hitting a few more bars but limiting his drinking, talking with fleters, comparing tours of duty, getting around to asking, always, if anyone had heard any news about a planet called Texas.

Texas didn't exist.

"Texas? What sector?"

"I don't know," he had to say. "Had a buddy from there. Trying to locate him."

"Never heard of it."

Liberty was, in many ways, worse than duty, and the Luyten liberty was the first of many on isolated outplanets where the fleet touched down. And they were much the same, all the planets, chosen for their lack of livable land area, suited only for the fleet workshops, peopled by parasites who reached into the pockets of the fleters, whores, gamblers, opportunists, perverts, retired fleters making a credit on their ex-buddies. Liberty was loneliness and frustration, because each of his attempts, for a period of eighteen Months, to reach or make contact with his father brought nothing in return. Each time he'd send his

blinkstat, at the cost of a week's pay, and each time he'd wait in vain for an answer. It was as if Texas had ceased to exist.

Gradually, however, he ceased to be a loner. His acceptance by Blant Jakkes threw him into association with others and he came to find that not all Empireites were scrungy. Some of them were fairly decent fellows. Talking with his fellow crewmen, listening to their descriptions of their home worlds, gave Lex an embryonic feeling of being a part of something and helped to nurture his growing, if grudging, admiration for Empire. For the Empire was, truly, huge. Rambler, the converted Cassiopeian, talked of his home and the far-flung alliance of star groups on the other side of the line and Lex felt a glow of pride to be a member of a race which could, in so short a time, conquer so much of the galaxy.

He was sorry to leave the old Rearguard when transfer orders came, sending both him and his best friend, newly promoted Weapons Chief Blant Jakkes, to a fleet port on the far edge of the core sector to be assigned to a wheezing Vandy with a lonely sector of space to patrol. There at the core the worlds were few. The dense star fields glowed brightly, with no space debris in the relatively small areas between old suns, and the only reason for patrolling it at all was to forestall a Cassiopeian scouting sweep into Empire from the rear.

After the spaciousness of the Rearguard ship, the small Vandy was cramped. Worse, her age and condition seemed to dictate at least one cooling failure per day, so that the crew was constantly grumbling, out of uniform, sweating, panting, cursing the day they were ever assigned to T.E.S.*Grus* .

However, no one cursed the old*Grus* more than her skipper, Fleet Captain Arden Wal, hero of the Battle of Wolf's Star, goat of the Texas incident. Having lost two first-line ships, Captain Arden Wal was fortunate, he realized, to have any ship at all. But he had been passed over for promotion and had narrowly escaped being shipped back to the central Empire to fly a desk. He'd been saved from that fate by discovering the*Grus* on the way to the ships' graveyard, claiming her, seeing to her outfitting personally and calling on a long-overdue favor from an Admiral on the Emperor's staff.

There were days when he regretted his good fortune of getting another ship. Like the day when the blink computer misfired and sent them out into space so close to a huge core monster of a sun that the paint began to melt on the hull and the coolers whined with overwork and threatened to fail and bake them all and the generator seemed to take forever to charge for a quick, cooling blink to anywhere except almost in the Hades of that bastard sun.

When it was over and the coolers stopped complaining, Wal went storming down the corridors and ladders to chew on his navigator a little and, on the way, passed crew's quarters where he saw one helluva big man out of uniform, sweating, his chest bare and drops of perspiration forming on his well-developed muscles.

"Fleeter, you're out of uniform," Captain Wal barked. "When I come back, don't be."

Lex put on his T-top and swore a little, but snapped to attention when the Captain came back to stand in the hatch and look in with grim approval on his face. "Sure it's hot, fleeter," Wal said, "but we're all hot, carry on."

It was later, after the duel, that each of them was to discover that they had something in common, a chase into Cassiopeian space which had cost Wal a ship, a promotion and his career.

Since the blink computer proved to be accurate only to plus or minus one tenth of a unit, the patrol was, at times, a nervous one and the word got around and the crew began to sweat each time there was a

charge building up in the generator, because one tenth of a unit is a not inconsiderable distance. There, near the core, one tenth of a unit could put them back into range of a star or send them close enough on a straight-line blink to a mass to warp the generator. Between blinks, the tech crew labored with the computer, but it was past its prime and it was all they could do to keep it operating within that plus or minus one tenth unit range.

Off duty, Lex wandered into navigation and listened to the techs swear and peered over shoulders to see that the computer was a relatively primitive, fairly simple model out of the past, the kind kids practiced on back on Texas. Lex didn't follow the technical jargon being bantered about, but he knew a little about computers, especially the kind he and Billy Bob used in school, on the sly, to predict the possibility of Lex's sweet little girl friend's capitulation to more than a sneaked kiss. He soon realized that the computer was a shotgun model, designed to do far more complicated jobs than run a blink vector, and that some of its brain was superfluous to its present function. Moreover, the malfunction seemed to be in one of the superfluous sections.

"You might try bypassing this sector," Lex suggested to the Chief Tech, a man who occasionally drank with him and Jakkes.

Empire techs did things by the book. The Chief looked at him blankly, asking silently what Gunner knew about 'chinery, and turned back. The next blink showed an error of just under one quarter light-year and left them a week's run at mini-blink speed to the appointed station, making the opposition Cassie a little nervous. Lex was on the bridge at his gunnery station when the communication came through.

"You're consistently giving us false information," the Cassie sent.

"Computer failure," the *Grus* sent,

"Let us hope that your errant computer does not send you into our space," the Cassie sent.

So another element of tension was added, for the patrol route was along the line, close in, and the Cassie opposite was a new Vandy type with all the latest gear. There hadn't been a duel in the core sector in decades, but as the *Grus* limped and missed, limped and missed, the communications from the Cassie became more and more curt.

"He thinks we're up to something," Jakkes said. "We're going to have to fight him sure as hell."

"We haven't even got the latest screen on this old tub," said the Tech Chief, who was drinking with them. "And he's got us outgunned."

"You think he'd take us in a fight, then?" Lex asked.

"No doubt about it," Jakkes said.

"Why don't you bypass that defective lobe and give us at least that much?" Lex asked.

"Look, Texas," the Tech Chief said, "you just don't go frigging around with a computer. That lobe was put there for a reason. I have no idea what would happen if we blinked with that lobe bypassed and I don't intend to find out."

"It was put there to handle information not needed on a blink," Lex said.

"In view of your erratic and deceptive behavior," the Cassiopeian Vandy sent, "we must reluctantly challenge you."

The honor of the Emperor was at stake. Captain Wal knew that he had a slim chance in a head-to-head duel with the new Cassie Vandy and he answered with his head high, but with inner anger. So it was to end like this, out here in the core, on a ship which was years overdue for the junk heap.

"In the name of the Emperor, I accept your challenge," Wal sent. He followed, since he was the challenged party, with a time in universal and with coordinates in a clear area of space which would give his errant computer room for wide misses.

"Do we have to fight him?" Lex asked Jakkes.

"It's the code."

"Let me be sure I understand," Lex said. "We blink out at a place we've given him in advance and he'll be there and then we just sit there blasting at each other until something gives."

"That's the way it is."

"Why?"

Jakkes shook his head. "Hell, that's just the way it is."

"It's based on trust," the Tech Chief said. "By making the duel conform to tradition we assure the Cassie and he assures us that the duel is an isolated engagement and that neither of us is up to any tricks. That keeps it one ship on one ship and doesn't expand the fight."

"But we're apt to miss the coordinate by a few million miles and make him think we're trying to sneak by him into Cassie space," Jakkes said.

"If we do, we'll have a battle fleet down on our ass in hours," the Tech Chief said.

Jakkes was getting drunk rapidly. He looked at Lex with watery eyes. "If you want to write any last letters home, better get with it."

Lex didn't even know where home was. And he wasn't ready to write last letters. He'd done two of his years with the fleet and he'd even begun to believe, after the slow passage of what seemed like aeons of time, that he'd live to see Texas again as a free man.

The Captain called a crew meeting. "Fleeters," he said, standing tall in his finest dress uniform, "for those of you who have not dueled, I will explain. At the given moment, the *Grus* will go into normal space at a prearranged point. The enemy will blink in at the same instant. Should there be a slight discrepancy in blink times, there is a short period of adjustment allowable. When both ships are on station, armed, screened properly, a signal will be exchanged. That is when the reactions of the gun crew become of utmost importance. The gun crew which reacts quickest to the signal will be victorious. I have the utmost confidence that it will be you." He looked directly at Lex, who was on the main battery control on the bridge because of his superior reaction time.

There was more about honor and duty to Empire and Lex was sitting there thinking that something was wrong with the entire setup. Here they were, about to go willingly into a situation where they would be at

a disadvantage. Even if they had been evenly matched it seemed foolish to him to fight on prearranged terms. He'd never been in a fight to the death, but he'd faced a couple of tough old Bojack farks and when you're up against something or someone who is trying to kill you you don't give advantage. You take advantage if you can.

He thought about it through the waiting period and then, just before he knew that the ship was going to be called to battle stations, he went down into the navigator's room where his friend, the Tech Chief, was working feverishly on the computer.

"How is it?" Lex asked.

"I won't guarantee it," the Chief said. "There's a galloping decay in that damned lobe."

"What happens if we miss the appointed coordinate?"

"They start blasting, if they can. If they can't, they call in a fleet. There's one standing by a blink away. Either way if we miss it we've had it."

"And we're going to miss it, just as we've missed each blink point for the last few weeks," Lex said.

"Bet your ass on it," the Chief said.

"It's the only ass I've got," Lex said, putting his hand on a heavy wrench, lifting it, carefully demolishing the sick lobe.

"Now bypass that bastard," he said, as the crew stood there, shocked.

They had no other choice.

There was no time to test the jury-rigged computer. It was time to defend the honor of the Emperor. Captain Arden Wal sounded stations. The *Grus* came alive, quivered. At the appointed second she blinked and came out on the nose with the Cassie Vandy sitting within point-blank range getting ready to put up her screens for the duel.

There was a ritual for it. Wal sent his greeting. His greeting was returned gravely in the voice of a Cassiopeian. The next order was to be, "Screens up." After that there would be the mutual signal and the duel would begin.

Only it didn't go that way.

When he got into position, on the instant of blinking out, Lex was already arming his battery. He punched it in, programmed it. He could see the Cassie with his naked eye. At that range, with her screens not yet in place, she was a sitting duck. The Cassie didn't know what hit her. She vaporized and was no more.

There was a stunned silence on the bridge. Arden Wal's face went white. For three hundred years the honorable duel had been the accepted method of keeping a war relatively cool, of testing new weapons, of providing a victory for either side to propagandize. Now, at the hands of one crewman, the entire concept was shot down. He was shocked into momentary immobility, then he turned his attention to the scanners. By all rights there should be a Cassiopeian battle fleet blinking in at that very moment. However, space was empty. After five minutes of tense waiting, Wal concluded that the Cassie had not

sent a signal to the waiting fleet, that the suddenness of its destruction had prevented a report of the unbelievable action of the Empire Vandy.

He had time, then, to walk slowly to Lex's station. Lex was retiring his weapons, clearing charge on them,

Returning them to their pods. "Congratulations, son," Wal said in an even, tired voice. "You've killed us." Lex looked up. "If I may speak, sir?"

"Yes," Wal said wearily.

"I think I saved our lives, sir."

"For the moment," Wal said. "However, we have violated the Military Code of Honor as it has never been violated before. Every action, every signal is recorded in the ship's Automatic Record. That record will be inspected when we return to port. There is no way of erasing it. Tampering with an Automatic Record is a death offense, just as violating the Code is a death offense."

The First Officer stood at Lex's back, hand weapon pointed at Lex's head. "Shall I put him in the brig, sir?"

"Why bother?" Wal said.

"Damned Texican," the First Officer said, his hand white on his weapon.

"Texican?" Wal asked.

"This is the one, sir, the outworlder."

"Yes, yes," Wal said. "I've been meaning to have a chat with you." Actually he'd been putting it off. He had been afraid, having been harmed twice through contact with Texicans, that he would, face to face with one, lose his control. He knew, now, that Texicans had precipitated the Battle of Wolf's Star, where he'd lost his fine middleguard cruiser. He knew that the Texicans had led him into the Cassiopeian ambush, *asa* result of which he'd lost a splendid Vandy. It was because of Texas and Texicans that he was in command of a junk ship. And now, because of a Texican, he, as Captain and therefore responsible, would share this boy's guilt for blasting an enemy in violation of the Code.

And now that he was face to face with the Texican, he felt only an overwhelming sadness, and a hint of curiosity.

"Please bring him to my cabin," he said, turning his back. "And resume patrol." Halfway out the door leading from the bridge, he turned. "And you may say, in your report home, that we have emerged victorious in a duel with a Class-A Cassiopeian Vanguard destroyer."

He would at least have the rest of his patrol time to live. There was no reason to go rushing back to face sure conviction.

Chapter Six

"I did it, sir," Lex said, standing at attention in the Captain's cramped quarters, "because someday I'm going to be free to go home, back to Texas."

"Is Texas so heavenly that a man will violate his honor for her?" Wal sat, slumped tiredly over his small writing desk.

"Sir, with all respect, it was not my honor which I violated, it was yours. Or the Empire's. Or something. I mean, sir, that I wasn't the one who made the rules."

"The rules, fletcher, are the result of centuries of tradition. Till now, they've worked fairly well to keep us all alive."

"They wouldn't have kept us alive, sir," Lex said. "In fact, they seemed sure to get us dead."

"Rules are designed for the good of all," Wal said. Why, he asked himself, was he so calmly debating with this outworlder? "Is it every man for himself on Texas?"

"No," Lex said. "On Texas it's all for one and one for all, sir. And they, meaning that nebulous 'they' which we use when we talk about people we don't really know, people who have life-and-death power over us, don't make rules which would devalue the life of a single Texican as our lives were devalued by the situation wherein we faced a superior force and were forced to fight on terms not of our choosing."

"An interesting thought," Wal said, "in keeping, I think, with the rather incredible story which has been told about the Battle of Wolfs Star. I have heard that a Texican fleet moved to save one individual."

"It's true, sir."

"But they sent you out into the Empire to take your punishment," Wal said.

"I was given a choice, sir."

The Captain looked at Lex with knitted brows. He was trying to imagine a like situation in the Empire. He knew that the individual involved would not even be consulted, not given a voice, much less a choice. "Sit down, Gunner. Tell me about this Texas of yours."

Lex made himself as comfortable as possible in the undersized chair in front of the Captain's desk. Big, lanky, he spilled over the edges, leaned one elbow on the back. His ease in the presence of a superior impressed Wal and, as the Captain listened, he began to make unconscious comparisons.

Arden Wal was a loyal man. He was a Vegan. He'd spent his formative years at the heart of the Empire, had been educated in the best schools and at the Academy on Polaris Two. He was a man of some intelligence. His mind was never satisfied with the knowledge it held, always seeking more data. At fifty, he was in the prime of his middle manhood. He had never formed a permanent relationship with a woman. His love had always been the fleet and, for a long time, until the last Texican incident, he'd entertained hopes of rising in rank to, someday, command an entire sector. His cabin was neatly arranged, everything in its place, but packed to capacity with electrobooks, star charts and an impressive collection of antique printed books which included, as his prime source of pride, ancient star catalogues from the old Earth, the *Banner Durchmusterung*, first edition, listing 324,000 stars north of -2 degrees declination from the Earth; Schonfeld's extended catalogue and the *Cordoba Durchmusterung*, the *Cape Photographic Durchmusterung*, the *Carte du Ciel*. In addition to the priceless ancient catalogues, of value for their age, their quaintness, there were hundreds of carefully cross-filed electro-charts, a collection of star knowledge which covered the charted galaxy. Wal had traveled many of the blink lines charted in the *Complete Empire Spaceways* and, as First Officer of an exploration

scout, he'd personally helped to add to the continually growing charts. He was a cosmopolitan man in the true sense, having seen the Empire from old Earth to the far reaches of the periphery, its cities, its mining planets, its museums and prisons and fisheries, its agriculture and its people. But he'd never seen Texas and he'd never heard of a society wherein the individual mattered more than the whole.

As Lex rambled on, taking the opportunity to talk of home, Wal was fascinated.

The *Grus* blinked accurately, contacted a new opposite, sent out to replace the lost Cassie Vandy, and an hour passed. Wal offered Eridani brandy, warmed his glass in his hand as Lex talked about the big planet somewhere far out past the extent of Empire and Wal asked questions about its people, its industry, its war potential. Lex told him about the Darlene, about the maneuverability of an airors, about Texas' need for metals. But it was government which caught Wal's attention for long minutes.

"A board of citizens appoints a President?" he asked, unbelievably.

"No one really wants the job," Lex said. "But if he's chosen he serves."

"No one wants it?"

"Heck, no. Who'd want to spend his time pushing papers and talking with everyone who has an idea or a complaint when he could be on his own land, growing his own meacrs, or out hunting in the desert?"

"No Texican, then, seeks power for the sake of power?" Wal asked sarcastically.

"I can't speak for all of them," Lex said, "but when my father was appointed President he tried like hell to get out of it, and we almost had to hog-tie old Andy Gar to get him to serve."

Three brandies later Lex was talking wistfully about how he and ole Billy Bob went riding over the desert and how they shot low vectors at the hills and caught sanrabs with their bare hands and Wal found himself laughing. By this time he was convinced that Lex had no idea where Texas was located, except that it was well beyond Empire control areas and lonely in its big skies. And he was convinced, also, that Texicans were very atypical people. He had to admit that their ideas about keeping a planet livable were sensible. Overcrowding was a problem throughout the Empire and the drain of energies and goods and wealth to people unable to fend for themselves was a growing cancer. Instead of being angry with the young man, he was coming to like him. Lex's casual dismissal of his actions toward the ailing computer impressed him. The lad had not only thrown out every regulation in the book regarding destruction of fleet equipment, but he'd been right. And according to him every Texican who had attended a school would have recognized the necessity to disconnect the sick lobe. Wal envisioned a planet filled with men like Lex, intuitive tinkerers at home with machinery and electronics, able to mend and make do without the basic theory behind their actions.

As a military man, he was impressed by the Texicans' ability to destroy major Cassiopeian battle ships not only without fear of retaliation, but without detection. And he was inordinately interested in the double-blink technique which allowed a Texican ship to blink in and out of danger while others, like this new and impressive Vandy, had to sit and wait for recharging, taking the accumulated fire of a fleet while doing it, or use the last charging reserve and kill a ship to escape.

It was new data for his greedy mind. He fed the young Gunner brandy until he was satisfied that he'd picked all the available information and then he listened as Lex talked of his family with a loneliness which was touching. Sobered, Wal was reminded that both he and the Texican were dead men.

"I'm very sorry that you will never see them again," he said.

"But I will," Lex said. "Somehow I will."

"When we get back to base we'll both be brought up on charges the second the Automatic Record is monitored," Wal said.

"Sir, I've been thinking about that. Why do we have to go back to base?"

"Shall we sneak up and destroy the entire Empire as you destroyed the Cassie?"

"We don't have to, sir. We can go to Texas."

When it was said, Wal realized that he'd been waiting for the boy to say it. He mused silently for a moment.

"With all respect, sir, you don't look like a man who would just lie down and let someone kill him for using common sense."

"You used common sense," Wal said, realizing that the brandy was getting to him.

"If I had known that it would get you in trouble too I might not have."

"And you're not using it now," Wal said. "Even if we entertained the idea of defecting to your Texas—"

"I know," Lex said. "I don't know where it is. But we're still trading with the Empire, aren't we? I had a steak from Texas in a restaurant on Luyten not long ago. And if we're still trading, we can find the rendezvous point and contact a Texican ship."

"And if your escape from your punishment angers the Emperor to the point of stopping the trading, then-what? You'd be right back where you started."

"Well," Lex said, "it's different now. They weren't going to shoot me then. They were just going to hold me for a few years."

"They'd take you back at the risk of losing all the metals they need?"

"If I asked it, they would."

"Perhaps we could," Wal said, talking almost to himself, his voice soft. "But there's the crew."

"I've thought about that, too," Lex said. "I think a few of them would go with us. Jak would. The others. Well, we could fake disablement, put them in lifeboats near an inhabited planet, or on a main blink line."

"Son, it takes three men to prepare for a blink."

"We'd have at least three. Me, you and Jak."

"What do you know about an Empire generator?"

"Well, they're more or less the same all over, except yours, pardon me for saying so, sir, are a little more

primitive."

"I'll think on it," Wal said.

"Thank you, sir," Lex said. Sensing his dismissal, he rose, somewhat unsteady on his feet. "Good stuff," he said, grinning as he pointed at the half-emptied bottle.

"Take it with you," Wal said.

He shared the balance of the bottle with Jak and, when he felt the time was right, he talked about Texas. Jak had always shown some curiosity about the planet and was especially intrigued by the idea of hunting sanrabs from a flashing airors with his bare hands.

"They taste good, huh?" Jak had asked back when Lex first told him about sanrabs.

"As good as meacr steak," Lex said.

"I've never eaten meacr steak. I had a steak from an Earth bovine once. Let's see, I think it was when I graduated from finishing school. I was, oh, sixteen years old, I guess. And it took my old man a week to find the steak. It was about half a pound and we split it five ways, my dad and my mother, me and my sister and brother."

"Mecr steak is better than cow steak," Lex told the Sub-Chief.

That night, over a bottle of the Captain's best brandy, Lex brought the subject up again, adding some tales about eating shellfish off the shell, roasted on a bed of coals beside the big seas of Texas.

"The Emperor's balls," Jak said, after listening to Lex talk food for fifteen minutes. He got up and swallowed a bulk pill. "You're making me hungry."

"Jak," Lex said, "you've never told me about your family."

"Not much to tell," Jak shrugged. "They're all dead."

"I didn't know."

"Freighter brought in a new strain of bug from an outworld. Before they could find the cure half the city was dead or dying. My folks were among the first. The old man worked at the port."

"And you never formed a permanent relationship with a woman?" Lex asked.

"Came close," Jak said. "Don't like to talk about *that* ."

Lex held his tongue, although he wanted to know. "Well, Jak, it looks like you've got no real tie to anything except the fleet."

"Mate, mother and bedfellow," Jak said, grinning. "But sometimes I wish this old tub had hot and cold running females aboard."

"Jak, what if I gave you a chance to eat a meacr teak so big you'd have to chew for two hours to get it down?"

"Who do I have to kill?"

"Let me ask one more question. You're a career man, right? What are you going to do when you've done your thirty?"

"I'll be fifty," Jak said. "I'll have forty or fifty more good years, barring some hairy-assed bug or accident. I'm going to take my savings and my pension and go out on the Deneb frontier and buy a place. They say there are planets there where a man can own as much as ten acres. I figure if prices don't go up too much I'll be able to buy at least five."

"Jak," Lex said, "my dad gave me a hundred thousand acres of good graze land when I was sixteen."

"Shit," Jak said.

"A man can run enough meacrs on five thousand acres to live good on Texas."

"First you have to be on Texas," Jak said, a little miffed to have his dream of owning five acres of land to call his own diminished by the Texican's bragging.

"How'd you like to be on Texas, with five thousand acres of grazing land to call your own?"

"Shit."

Lex held his breath and took the plunge. "I'm going. You wanta go?"

"Sure," Jak said, laughing.

"Think about it, Jak. It would mean never seeing any of the Empire again."

"You're not shitting me," Jak said, his face going serious. "You've talked with Wal?"

"Yeah," Lex said. "And I'm hanging my neck out a mile to tell you about it."

"The Emperor's balls," Jak said, standing up, a grin on his face. "Five thousand acres?"

"With a stream through the middle with big trees on the banks and a starting stock of meacrs."

"I'll pay for it, Lex. I'll take my savings—"

"You'll pay for it by helping me get there. You won't be able to stop by an Empire bank to draw out your savings."

"How? I mean—"

"Later, Jak. Tell me this. Any others you'd trust? Any good men who might like to leave Empire?"

"I don't know. Tech-Chief Form. He's got no love for the Emperor. He was pressed. When he finished his first tour he went home to find his wife dead. She'd gone off with a spacer on leave and he'd crashed an atmoflyer, drunk. He's talked about the Deneb frontier with me."

"Feel him out, will you? It takes at least three. We've got me and you and the Captain, but we could sure use Form. Anyone else?"

"I don't know," Jak said. "I'm not sure. Most of them have families."

"We've got to play it right," Lex said. "We're going fake a dead ship and put the crew in lifeboats near a planet. We have to make the Empire think the *Grus* died in space, because I don't want to mess up my planet's trade deals with the Empire, and if they knew got away it just might. We can't take any risk, like Asking someone to go and have him say no and then tell what happened when he got back to Empire."

"I wouldn't swear to anyone but Form," Jak said.

"Then it'll have to be the four of us."

"Shit, four good men can blink this old tub."

"Let's take her to Texas, then."

"Buddy, I'm with you," Jak said, faking Lex's slow talk, grinning "Five thousand acres? How much is that?"

"Further than you can see," Lex said.

They could see the planet. They were that close. It was a small star among the hoard of stars and the Captain, in L.S.A., the ship's air becoming foul, made sure that the lifeboat chiefs had the coordinates down. The boats left the lock one by one. The last boat was moved into line, the one which was scheduled to hold Wal, Lex, Blant Jakkes and the Tech-Chief. But it didn't leave the hold.

The *Grus* had been disabled by some skillful work on the part of Lex, working with Tech-Chief Form. First the generator went, then the life support system. Anyone left on board, according to the endless tests run by crew techs before the order to abandon, would live only as long as the air lasted, and it was getting stale.

The boats left, traveling at sub-blink speeds, a long and tedious journey ahead of them before planetfall, and the life support system came miraculously to life, beginning to rebuild the stale air. The generator worked beautifully after Lex and Form did a bit of tinkering. When the boats were past a given point on the trip to the planet, a drone went out, laden with a rigged weapon which, upon a signal, detonated, making a star of some size for the boats to see. Their reports would state that they had seen the *Grus* die in a blaze of fire.

Lex stood on the bridge beside Captain Wal and felt free for the first time in over two years. In the improving air of the ship, he felt he could almost catch a sniff of the sweetness of Texas. Below, Form was charging for a blink. The Captain was checking the *Complete Empire Spaceways* for the hundredth time, making sure that he'd chosen the least frequented blinkways to reach that sector of the rim where the original meat for metal trade had taken place. Lex reasoned that if trade were continuing between Texas and the Empire, it would be conducted in that sector, for it was big, the stars were widely spaced and there was room for maneuver.

Between the *Grus* and a possible meeting with a Texican ship were thousands, millions of stars and hundreds, thousands of planets occupied by Empire and a billion chances of being detected by an Empire ship. To enhance their chances, Lex and Jakkes crawled the hull, after the first blink, to paint out Empire

fleet markings and paint on merchant fleet numbers. The *Grus* was old enough to pass for a surplus military ship turned to civilian use.

From near the core to the open spaces along the periphery is quite a jump, but they had unlimited power, drawn from the stuff of the stars, their life support system was regenerative over an indefinite period and with only four of them aboard there was only a slight drain on expendable supplies. The old *Grus* leaped from point to point along well-charted but infrequently used starways, taking the long way around thickly populated sectors, always alert, the four men working four on and four off in pairs, so that two men were always awake. The strain, after the first week, began to show on all of them. Wal issued wakers to all when he himself dozed off just before a blink.

Around them, the Empire's commercial and military traffic hummed. Blink signals alerted them, the ship's automatics would, at times, have as many as five blinking or charging ships on its computers. Once there was visual contact with a Rearguard cruiser, waiting a charge, coming out into space within instrument range and closing to ask identification.

"T.E.M.S. *Earthlight*," Wal sent, "en route core mining planets to Antares," and stood by, his tensions hidden behind a five-day growth of beard.

"Glory to the Emperor," the cruiser sent, edging away to let her big generators build. Then she was gone and Wal breathed a sigh of relief. He got to hell out of there before building a full charge, blowing a few fuses on the generator, but nothing serious. Lex and Form had it going again in two hours, missing half their sleep period.

But it was worth it. Lex would have gone without sleep until he fell on his face, because each blink brought him closer to home, to Texas, that big, light, airy planet which was somewhere, somewhere he couldn't even remember.

You could see the stars thin out and the blinks became longer and the worst was over. Ahead was the blackness of intergalactic space and behind the glow of the core, a sky full of brightness. In the relative safety of the rim, Wal called a rest and they slept for twenty hours, woke to toast their success in the Captain's best. Lex, Form and Jakkes were in full uniform and the *Grus* was undergoing one of her cooling crises. Wal grinned at them. "Gentlemen, since we are no longer in the Emperor's service, if you'd like to let a bit of air to your hides—"

Lex sighed and, with a feeling of freedom and luxury, shed his T-top and wiped sweat from his chest with it.

Wal's charts showed the positions of Empire blink beacons. Lex scoured his memory. He couldn't be sure, because space was big and he hadn't been all that attentive, but he knew that the route of the first trading mission went within range of one of about a dozen blink stations. He wrote a blinkstat and put it on the machine and then Wal began positioning the *Grus* on a line with the blinkstat beacons and started sending the message into empty space, beamed as if it had originated from the stations.

"For Texas and Zed." That was the content of the message. The beep on the end meant reply along receiving beam within a half hour. The theory was that if Texas were still trading with the Empire there would be Texican ships out there, blinking random patterns. And if there were Texican ships monitoring the Empire blink beacons sooner or later one of them would pick up the message from the *Grus*. It happened on the fifth try. From somewhere out there near the darkness the blinkstat came back just before the end of the *Gnu's* half-hour waiting period—a longer stay in one position would expose them to Empire discovery, since, Lex reasoned, the Empire would still be interested in taking and questioning a

Texican crew—and Lex felt a soaring elation.

"Zed who?" the return message read.

"A beagle flies from San Ann to Dallas City in thirty-two minutes," Lex sent, using a recognition code at least two years old.

The monitor took a message beginning with coordinates. Lex nodded. Wal, the ship fully charged, fed the numbers into the computer and the old *Grus* blinked out between two far stars and waited.

"I don't see a Texican," the message read. "I see a Class-F Empire Vandy."

"Carrying Lexington Burns of Dallas City, son of Murichon Burns, with three Empire subjects seeking freedom under the skies of Texas," Lex sent.

"Kill your power, Lexington Burns. Be a dead ship when we come out or you'll be dead with two Darlene projectiles up your ass."

"Kill the ship," Lex said. Wal moved to send the appropriate orders. They waited. They donned L.S.A. and vented the air out the locks. There was just over two hours' worth of air in the suits. The Texas ship waited a full two hours and then came in slow, sending feelers to detect a flow of power, finding none, moving faster then to lock to the open port.

Lex met the Texican at the lock, holding his hands out to show he had no weapon. "Boy," he said, as a tall Texican came warily into the tube, hand weapon ready, "you're as pretty as a batgull."

The Texican ship which had made the contact worked out of New Austin, on the far East Coast of the eastern Texas land mass. The skipper was a grizzled old war-horse who took nothing on faith. Until he reached open space, outside the disc, where he could blinkstat for confirmation of Lex's identity, he kept the four men from the *Grus* on a tight string, always in the company of a tall, grim-faced Texican. A half-dozen blinkstats convinced the skipper that Lex was, indeed, a Texican and would be welcomed at home on his western continent by the government and his family and 'hen there was cactus juice around and some wild backslapping as Lex told his story and roars of laughter and congratulations.

Lex asked to be brought up to date on developments at home and was pleased to learn that metals were becoming more plentiful with the continuing trade agreement with the Empire. The Blink Space Works had expanded its operations threefold and was producing a new type of ship which, with its double-blink generators, would fly circles around anything else in the galaxy. With the new ships, expeditions had been sent into the distant globular cluster, there to prospect and try to establish metals sources which would make Texas independent of the two warring powers in the galaxy. Already, the child quota had been raised, allowing for a small population growth over the next fifty years. In addition to the meat trades, Texas was now doing business with the Empire in grains and other foodstuffs and any spacer who wanted to make a credit was in demand in the growing merchant fleet.

Andy Gar's term as President of Texas was running out and there was talk of drafting Billy Bob Blink's father, old Billy, for the job, although old Billy was raising hell, saying that he had ships to build. A compromise choice was a middle-aged woman on the eastern land mass who had pioneered the present methods of pre-natal inspection. Some of the spacers didn't like the idea, thinking that the woman would spend too much time trying to improve the race instead of looking after the beans and meat affairs of everyday government.

It was all good news and Lex was so fascinated, so thrilled to be hearing word of Texas again that he forgot his companions. When he surfaced from a sea of gossip about Texas in general and the upcoming Worldwide Airors Rodeo in specific he went in search of the Empireites and found them in the crew's mess. Blant Jakkes was eating a meacr steak two inches thick and Arden Wal and Form were sampling a half-dozen bottles of good Rio Grande wine.

Jakkes talked through a mouthful. "They said if my stomach wasn't used to good, solid food I'd get sick, but it'll be worth it."

When his excitement wore off Lex did his best to catch up on a few weeks of lost sleep and he seemed to be in his bunk constantly until landfall at Dallas City, where the reception was wild and woolly, with Billy Bob and all his friends on hand in addition to the family. He was tossed, pushed, pounded. His hand was squeezed until it hurt. And then he was looking into his father's face and there was a happy, little-boy grin on his face and Murichon, who seemed to have become more gray, cleared his throat and seemed unable to speak. Lex solved the problem of what to say by letting out a whoop and lifting his father off his feet in a bear hug.

"You've filled out, boy," Murichon said.

Lex was looking around for her, for Emily Lancing. There were Texas girls there, but no familiar face, not the face which had helped him through some dark hours out there in the Empire.

Then he was introducing the others and explaining to his father that without them he wouldn't be back on Texas and that the best was none too good for any of them.

"Chief Jakkes is going to be a rancher," Lex said. "And the Captain—" He paused. There still existed a gulf between him and his former commanding officer. He realized that he had not even fully discussed what Wal would do on Texas.

"There's time for that," Murichon said. "First you men rest up, then we'll talk."

On the way to the ranch Murichon talked mostly with Wal, interested in the quiet, proud-faced man. "We'll have to ask you to submit to a little bit of questioning, Captain," Murichon said, after a general discussion of things allied to the Empire fleet. "Then we'll find you something to do."

"You run a fleet," Wal said. "Actually, that's what I'm best trained for, for following orders, for taking a starship into places where others might not want to go."

"There's always room for a good man," Murichon said.

Lex rested by screaming his *Zelda* low over the hills in chase of Billy Bob's *Clean Machine*, which had been altered into something unbelievable. *Zelda* was left panting. Then they taught Jakkes and Form how to ride airorses and the four of them went down south and rode the beach with sudsy white surf splashing on speeding feet and after a night on the sands with plenty of brew they went back home to walk into trouble.

The scene was much like those which preceded Lex's departure for the Empire. The house was filled with stern-faced officials from old Andy Gar on down.

"What's wrong?" Lex asked when he led his crew of dusty, tired playboys into the house.

There weren't a helluva lot of explanations as the four were hustled into arcs and delivered to the hospital in San Ann. There an ovate instrument was removed from within Lex's skull. He awoke with a headache to see his father, President Gar and Admiral Crockett Reds by his bedside.

"It's a thought monitor," Murichon said. "During one of those interrogation sessions you told us about they inserted it and blanked the memory of healing from your mind. Captain Wal had one, too. They've been broadcasting constantly."

"Oh, no," Lex said.

"We've got Wal's hooked back up," Andy Gar said. "When they come we don't want them to know we're expecting them."

"I shouldn't have come home," Lex said. The Empire fleet numbered into the millions. Each unit was more than capable of taking out a planet.

"Well, you did, boy," Gar said. "And you'd every right to. But now I'm afraid you're going to have to fight for that home."

Chapter Seven

The hole in Lex's head kept him in bed for a few days, but caused little pain. What bothered him most was the constant tests he was forced to undergo. The ovate object which had been removed from under his skull was, depending on how you looked at it, both large and small. It was frighteningly large to think of it inside your skull, displacing some brain tissue, replacing some, for actual gray matter had been removed to provide space for the object. The tests were being run to determine what, if any, permanent damage had been done to Lex's mental capacity. However, the human brain being what it is, a study in redundancy, it was finally conceded that the removal of the small—or large—depending on how you looked at it—amount of brain matter was not Hanging in any way. There are large areas of the brain which perform no useful functions. It was in one of those areas that the transmitter-monitor had been mounted.

Both small and large. Small to a frightening degree when the extent of its function was fully understood by Texican technicians. Large to a sickening degree when it had been inside a human skull.

And that one object forced a complete reassessment of Empire technology. Until slight abnormalities had been noted in the encephalogram of Arden Wal the Texican picture of Empire technology had not been a flattering one. It was a fact that Empire blink generators were much the same as the original design, the design which lifted man into interstellar space from the old Earth. Hasty examination of the *Grus*, bunked to Texas on the locks of the Texican ship which contacted Lex out there in the rim, confirmed the Texican impression that the Empire's techs had stagnated, become bogged down in endless repetition of old themes, spending the time and resources of a million worlds in building quantities, rather than in improving quality. It was true, and had been proven in the field, that a Texican ship, equipped with advanced generators, could fly rings around any Empire ship. Moreover, the technology which had produced the Darlene space rifle was, clearly, far ahead of the Empire, which depended solely on beam and ray weapons. However, the highly compact instrumentation of those objects found under the skulls of both Lex and Wal caused some brow-wrinkling among Texican scientists.

The transmitter mechanism in the brain monitors was a simple one, sending nothing more complicated than a one-tone signal at regular intervals. This, in itself, was not remarkable. What was astounding was the range over which the signal could be picked up. Over a range of something under a quarter of a

light-year the monitor could be read by hastily fabricated receivers to obtain an indication of the emotional load of the one being monitored. In a range of a few thousand miles, those who had made a study of the human mind could tell enough from the signals sent out by the monitor almost to read the subject's thoughts. The ovate object in Arden Wal's head made him a unit in the whole. Had he been commanding a ship in a fleet someone, perhaps, it was theorized, aboard the flagship, could read Wal's emotions and stresses just as a good tech read the condition of the various components in a ship's mechanical system.

Wal was deeply shocked. He had no recollection of having been implanted with the instrument, but he did recall various times during his training when he would have to undergo tests and treatments. He requested that the instrument be removed from his skull immediately and was told that it was important that the Empire remain ignorant of the fact that Texas had discovered the implantations.

Lex was not shocked, he was outraged. He felt as if his most secret sanctuary had been invaded. To think of some Empire doctor messing around with his brain was enough to send him into a fury.

One primary implication was drawn from the discovery of the monitoring device in Lex's gray matter. That was the thing which was of most immediate concern to all of Texas, for the most fantastic part of the device was its ability to induce power from the tiny electric currents running through Lex's brain to send a simple tone over distances so vast that it was a certainty that the *Grus* could have been followed to Texas, followed at such an immense distance that a ship's sensors would not detect the stalker. Such a transmitter would have been installed in Lex for one reason and one reason only, to allow the Empire to follow him home.

There was one hope. Perhaps the Empire had not maintained constant surveillance on Lex, knowing him to be safely aboard a ship of the line. Perhaps, just perhaps, the instrument had been intended for use when Lex was released from the Empire's service at some future date, after a long enough wait to make it seem as if it were Empire benevolence, rather than an Empire plot to find the location of Texas, to reduce his punishment. However, the signal from Lex's personal bug had reached parsecs into space. There was too much at stake to risk anything less than complete preparedness.

And so a world mobilized.

Messages went out. The most far-flung prospectors were blinking back to Texas to add their hulls to the fleet. For years Texas had been riding a tiger in the contacts with the Empire and now the tiger was threatening to buck.

Ironically, it was good Empire metals which went into the forges at the Blink Space Works to turn out armaments at a pace which had every available worker on overtime. Within a year, every spaceworthy hull under the Texas flag would be armed with a minimum of one Darlene space rifle, but no one was sure that Texas would be allowed a year.

The growing makeshift fleet trained in near space. Scouts ranged into the galaxy, watching for movement of a large Empire fleet toward the rim.

Lex's hole in the head was healing. He was on his feet, still in hospital, given the freedom of the place. He visited Arden Wal, still under observation, and upon walking into the room stopped in mid-stride.

She was dressed in professional whites and she looked even more beautiful than he remembered.

"Hello, Lex."

"Emily."

"I've been meaning to drop in," she said, "but we've been so busy."

The surge of pure joy in him drove out all else. He forgot, for the moment, that it was because of him that Texas was preparing to fight for its life. He forgot the years of loneliness out there in the Empire. She had changed so little, except that she was wearing her hair differently.

He walked toward her, oblivious of the curious look from Wal. His arms went out. She, with complete poise, met him, embraced him in a sisterly way, pushed him back. "My, you're a man now."

It was then, with her hands on his arms, holding him f at arm's length, that he saw the ring. She noted the change of expression. "Yes, I've chosen. He's a doctor. I want you to meet him."

The sun which had begun to glow in his heart died. "Yeah, sure." He swallowed. "Well, sure is nice to see you again, Emily. Hope I didn't break in on anything."

"Oh, no. In fact, I'm glad you stopped by. Captain Wal is very much disturbed. He seems to think that it's his fault Texas is threatened. I've been telling him that the transmitter in your instrument was much more powerful than the one in his, that his seems to be intended for purely local use."

Lex wasn't listening. He stayed a decent interval, said comforting things to Wal, then left to go out of the hospital without permission and get drunk for the first time in his life. Really drunk. Forgetting, falling-down drunk.

When he awoke, back in his room, he had no idea how he had arrived there, but he knew a dead dream when he met one face to face and kicked himself mentally for letting it get to him, because he'd always known that it was nothing more than a dream, that she was older, that the way things were she'd surely choose a man of her own age, probably a man in her own field of interest. But a dream dies hard, especially a dream which had sustained him through the years of Empire service, when he was so much alone.

A visit from Billy Bob, in the uniform of a lower officer of the fleet, helped in a small way, but his release from hospital helped more and then a silent, solitary run into the desert on *Zelda* cleared away the last of the hospital smells from his nostrils. He came home on *Zelda*, flying low and fast, knowing that it was time to stop mooning over girls and start helping Texas. He joined the continuing conference in the big house and was questioned by the Admiral and the Rangers about fleet tactics in the Empire.

He had already dictated all he knew. "I think you'd do better to talk with Captain Wal," he said. "He's spent his life learning fleet tactics."

"I realize that he's your friend," Murichon said, "but he's still Empire."

"Ex-Empire," Lex said. "He came here to escape a sure death sentence and now he's learned that he was never a trusted officer of the Empire, as he'd believed all his life. This thing about the thought monitor has hit him hard. He feels that he was betrayed when it was implanted. He thinks that every officer in the fleet must have such a unit, which makes someone very, very powerful. He was a Fleet Captain, which is a pretty high rank. There are only six active grades above that. I think he's fed up with a system which feels that it has to extend some form of secret control down through the higher ranks to include a man who is capable of direction of the operation of a full fleet He'll fight with us, Dad. I know he will."

"He couldn't go into space with that thing still in his head," Admiral Reds said. "He'd be spotted from a distance, assuming there are monitoring devices on the flagship, or whatever. He'd become a prime target, in addition to endangering others."

"But he can tell you more about Empire tactics than any man on Texas," Lex said. "And I'd also suggest you give both Jakkas and Form an opportunity to serve. Jakkas knows as much about the beam and ray weapons as anyone I know and Form can talk specifics about Empire power plants."

"We have, of course, questioned your friends," Reds said.

"But have you treated them as friends? Have you allowed them to act on good faith rather than as suspected aliens?" Lex asked.

"They are aliens," Andy Gar said. "And, I might add, the first to be on Texas soil since you brought home that Empire girl who started all of this."

"That's a little unfair, Andy," Murichon said calmly. "We've always faced the possibility of the Empire tracking us home. We all knew it would happen sooner or later."

"Sorry, boy," Gar said. "I don't like the idea of losing good men in an unnecessary fight, that's all."

"I'm going to be fighting, too," Lex said, but he wasn't quite sure that would be enough. No matter what his father said he blamed himself for the crisis and he was just one man. He could not, alone, face the danger which his actions had brought down on Texas.

He attended a briefing session. The fleet captains were there and the speaker was Arden Wal. Wal was not in uniform. His small stature had called for clothing in sizes not available except in children's stores and he was dressed in teenage blue jeans.

"You can be sure, gentlemen," Wal told the group, "that it will be done by the book. The fleet discourages initiative. One of three planetary approach plans will be used, and my guess is, depending on the fleet commander assigned to the expedition, that it will be one of two, for you yourselves left in Lex's brain the information regarding population and industrial capacity of your planet. The fleet will approach with confidence, emerging into space about here—" He pointed with a baton. "—to form in lines for maximum deployment of firepower. They will not, at first, think of attacking the planet directly, since the planet is the prize. They want it intact with its agricultural capacity. Their detectors are quite good enough to spot any and all ships lying in wait for them, but they are not equipped with that rather marvelous double-blink generator which your people have developed. I would suggest that the strike be made during or slightly before the final blink brings the fleet into formation. It will not be necessary to destroy the entire fleet—"

"Question," said Admiral Reds. "Why do you say that? That we shouldn't destroy the entire fleet?"

Wal was not rattled. "One, for humanitarian reasons, Admiral. Two, should you show such overwhelming strike power, the ability to destroy an entire fleet without losses, the Empire will, to put it plainly, be scared shitless. The brass back at Empire central might declare Texas to be a galactic threat: In which case, the next strike would be made from deep space with planet-killing missiles. I need not remind you that one missile, getting through the first line of defense, is enough."

"So your thinking is to show just enough power to drive the fleet away," Reds asked. "But wouldn't that

assure another attempt in greater force?"

"The Empire won't give up easily," Wal said. "But you will buy time, and you will confine the war to space, rather than escalate it into planetary stages."

"We can kill a few planets, too," said a young line Captain.

"But you have only one to be killed," Wal said. "Therefore you have more to lose."

"At the Battle of Wolfs Star," Admiral Reds said, "your fleet executed a flanking maneuver of some interest. Would you explain the tactics?"

Wal smiled wryly. "I understand that you know something of that battle, sir."

"I was there," Reds said, smiling back.

"Yes," Wal said. "Well, when the Cassies deployed—"

Lex had lost interest. He began to look around at the serious, dedicated faces. He wondered, with a sick feeling *in* his stomach, how many would attend the debriefing session after the battle.

As it turned out, all did, except one ship's captain who fell down a gangway while doing a little dance of comic victory. He broke his leg in two places and was still chuckling happily as they wheeled him away.

The Empire fleet blinked out into space at almost the exact point predicted by Arden Wal. One thousand ships deployed, materializing instantly, in ranks of awesome power, weapons ready to annihilate a fleet of Texican ships which disappeared from their instruments even as the pre-programmed guns were activated to blast briefly into empty space before the first of two waves of Darlene projectiles ripped the ranks of the Empire into flaming disarray.

Men died there in the cold space of Texas, died instantly, vaporized, burned, torn, thrown into hard vacuum. The Texas fleet blinked and, at the instant of Empire blinking, double-blinked and sent the Darlenes into the Empire ships from the left flank. Shields up, the Empire forces closed ranks, counting losses with a shock which reverberated throughout the fleet and was expressed in emergency blinkstats beamed along the route to Empire central.

For a brief period, the Texican fleet was exposed to long-range beams, but the distance limited damage to a few singed external pods and extensions. The Darlene projectiles ripped through space, blinking out. An explosion against a shield was as deadly as an explosion against a bare hull.

The Empire launched a thousand ships against Texas. When the generators were charged, allowing for orderly retreat, under seven hundred vessels sought the safety of far space in a planned withdrawal which no officer of the fleet could accept. It was inconceivable to the Empire mind to think that a ragtag fleet of converted freighters could rout an entire Empire battle fleet. Combat commanders wanted to mount an all-out assault on Texas immediately, withdrawing huge units of the fleet from the Cassiopeian lines. Cooler heads prevailed. It was recognized, at fleet headquarters, that the Empire was up against a new weapon and a new technique of battle. Gray-haired Admirals gulped wakers and pored over reports of the brief but tragic battle. Plans were made and discarded. The Emperor himself interested himself in the affair and shipworks all over the Empire were put on overtime to replace the lost vessels.

On Texas, it was party time. The victory over the Empire fleet had been so swift, so decisive, so

bloodless that young hotheads called for an immediate strike into Empire territory on the theory that the best defense is a good offense.

"If I were in charge of the Empire fleet," Arden Wal told a group of high-ranking officials at the debriefing, "I would deploy my forces to envelop all of Texican space with a ring of fire. Such a plan would require massive forces, but I need not tell you that the Empire has such forces. Ranks of ships blinking in at intervals, in tremendous numbers, would, sooner or later, catch your fleet between blinks. True, you can double-blink, but then you must charge. True, you are superior ship to ship because of your armaments, but the Empire's weapons are superior to your ship shields. Some of your ships are not even shielded. Caught in a direct fire, you'd sustain losses. And the loss of one Texican ship is the equivalent of the loss of some several thousands of Empire ships."

But the first battle of Texas did what it was planned to do. It bought time, time for the Blink Space Works to finish and outfit hulls, time for Darlene space rifles to be installed on everything large enough to handle the weight. And it bought Lex enough time to reenter the hospital to find the reason for his severe headaches.

In spite of the surgeons' skills, a small hematoma had formed and once again he was lying in bed with a hole in his head cursing the Empire sadists who had mucked around in his brain. It was not until he was moved into convalescent quarters atop the large building, with a view of the plains to the west, that he began to believe that fate works in strange ways and that his hematoma was a blessing in disguise, for there he met Riddent.

Most of the female personnel of the hospital were career people, aged thirty and up, stern-faced, motherly, businesslike. They brooked no nonsense from patients, not even a young, virile Texican of good looks and restlessness. Lex complained bitterly against a technology which could build an airors brain and a Darlene projectile, but which could not devise a better means of getting medicines into his blood than with a needle the size of the fangs of a beagle. There were two broad, meaty areas on his lower backside which were the favorite targets of the females and their needles and it became almost automatic with Lex, upon the approach of a nurse, to lower his hospital pajamas and roll onto his stomach.

But when they snuck up on you in your sleep—

He'd been lying on his stomach thinking of that little girl back in school and wondering what she was doing. He dozed and awoke to a feel a draft on his backside and then the bite of a needle and he yelped, twisting away to break the needle off in his flesh.

"Now see what you've done," said a female voice.

"Ouch, dammit," Lex said, as fingers pushed flesh down around the stuck needle and then plucked. "Great Zed's balls, do you have to—" He halted in mid-sentence, for a big, forceful hand had zapped him, hard, right on the spot where the needle had penetrated. "Ahhhhhh," he groaned, rolling over to escape and then he was frozen because she stood there, tall, new whites crisp and bulging with Texas girl, big, a man's woman, an armful.

"I will not," she said, her lips pulled back, her eyes fierce, "tolerate such language."

"Duh," Lex said, his mouth open.

"Not on my first day," she said, her eyes going moist.

"Well, look, I'm sorry," Lex managed, but the tears were there and she turned. He tried to scramble off the bed, but his pajamas were down and he fell heavily and she, hearing the thump, turned, tears streaming.

"Oh, did you hurt yourself?" She was kneeling by his side and he was thinking more of his exposure than of his bruises, and was pawing at his pajamas and trying to look at her eyes, which were as blue as Texas skies, and her hair, which was the yellow flame of a sun, and her—well, he was trying to look at all of her and his eyes weren't made to take in that much at one time and they crossed as he let them fall to the bulging front of her whites.

She, seeing his crossed eyes and thinking terrible things about concussions and possible reinjury, went white through her lovely tan and said, "Don't move, I'll get help."

"Help," Lex repeated, in a stunned voice, as he fell a thousand parsecs deep into her eyes.

"Yes," she said, pushing him back as he tried to sit up. "I'll get help."

"You help."

"Yes, yes, I will," she said, her voice agitated.

"I'm all right."

"Yes, I'll get help."

He grabbed the sleeve of her dress. "No, don't leave me."

"I have to. I have to get help."

"I'm afraid," he said. He was truly afraid, afraid she would walk out and he'd never see her again.

"Yes, yes, I'll help." She began tugging on him. He was a big lad. Her hands were so warm, so soft on his arms. He let her pull him to his feet, and then he leaned, putting an arm around her shoulder. He had the universe in his arms, the stuff of creation was bursting inside him. He let her guide him to the bed.

"Where do you hurt?" she asked, leaning over him anxiously.

"Hurt?" he asked stupidly.

At last she recognized his dazed look. "Oh, you," she said, popping him on the chest, hard, with her fist. And then she was gone, turning, skirt flaring to show lovely thighs.

"Miss, miss," Lex wailed, seeing her back retreating from him. She paused, turned. "Don't go, please don't go."

"There's nothing wrong with you," she said.

"I'm hurting. The fall."

She approached his bed warily. She looked at him with her big eyes squinted. "I can give you a shot."

"I don't hurt anymore," he said. "Don't go," he said, as she turned.

"Look," she said. "I have work to do."

"Give me the shot," he said.

"You don't need a shot."

"I need to—look at you."

"You can do that every day when I make the rounds." She smiled, the skies opening up after a dark, northern storm. "No extra charge for looking."

Her name, he discovered, was Riddent. In Old English that meant "laughing." It was, he felt, a beautiful name, a descriptive name, for just seeing her made him want to laugh, to sing, to do things like leaping on an air and gunning it to all-out and making low passes at the hills.

And there were no rings on her fingers. Not even a promise ring.

"Riddent?"

"Yes?" Patient. Eyes so large, so deep.

"Don't go."

His hip tingling from another shot. With perverse female joy, she seemed to like punching him with needles.

"I have work to do."

Another day. "Riddent, have lunch with me."

"Sorry, I have a date."

He sneaked into the dining hall, ambulatory to a limited extent, to see her lunching with a doctor, a youngish doctor, but old enough to be her father. He guessed her age at eighteen.

"He's too old for you," he said, next time she rolled him onto his stomach. She slapped his bare hip, drove the needle ouchingly deep into his flesh, and then wiped the sting with a cool, damp something.

"Who?"

"That man. The doctor."

"That's none of your business."

But as she left the room, she turned, gave him a pixie grin. "He's my father."

And, another day, the rain clouds rolling down from the big northern emptiness, gusty winds making themselves heard inside the room, fat drops running down the glass. "I'm a San Ann girl. Grew up in the

shadow of the hospital."

"And you wanted to become a doctor?"

"Not a doctor. Yeeech. Cutting into people."

"You shouldn't have any qualms about cutting people the way you drive that needle into me."

"For that, smart ass, I'm going to put laxative in your afternoon milk."

And she did.

"Damn, Riddent," he complained.

"Well, it was doctor's orders."

"And you just doubled the dosage."

She grinned. "No. You do me an injustice."

"Well, I'm sorry."

"I tripled it," she said, fluffing his pillow and smiling so sweetly that he forgave her immediately, even as his stomach cramped again and he went white, sweat popping out on his brow as he tried to wait until she was gone.

Recovered, emptied, he watched her, next morning, come through the doorway with his breakfast, a big, sweet-limbed Texas girl with a mouth which opened wide when she smiled. Her hair was pulled into a neat mass at the back of her head. Her ears were delicately formed.

"Something wrong?" she asked, as she saw him following her every move avidly.

"No."

"You're still angry about the laxative."

"Not angry, but you're going to have to make retribution."

"It was a dirty trick, wasn't it?" she asked, with a girlish giggle.

"Filthy."

"Horrid."

"Terrible."

"What can I do, sir, to make it up to you?" she asked, not very seriously.

"Marry me," she heard him say.

"Not a chance."

"You owe me that much," he said.

"Come back in five years."

"You'll be old and out of shape, past your prime."

"Tough," she said.

"If you don't marry me I'll tell your father you poisoned me. A good nurse doesn't poison her patients."

"It's hospital fever. All patients fall in love with their nurses. You're getting out tomorrow. You'll go away and find another girl and," she was hamming it up, making her voice tragic, "you'll forget all about me."

"You won't marry me?"

"Not today."

"Why not?"

"You've got too many holes in your hide from needles and your insides will all run out, leaving only an almost empty husk. I don't want to marry a husk, do you?"

"If you won't marry me, go swimming with me."

"OK."

"Tomorrow?"

"Sorry."

"When?"

"I'm off Saturday."

"That's five days away," Lex said. "I can't stand it."

"Tough."

"I'll have a relapse and stay here until Saturday."

"You do and I'll give you twelve shots a day."

"I'll come back Saturday."

She gave him her comnum. He hadn't touched her, except when she helped him get back into bed the day he fell with his pajamas down around his knees. He reached out and put one finger on the back of her hand. It was delicately veined, warm. She looked down at his finger making a little white indentation in her brown skin.

"I shouldn't go with you," she said.

"Why?"

"You're a man of experience."

"You're—"

"No," she said, "I was at the port when you came back, with her."

"Oh," Lex said.

"But since I won't marry you, I don't care. Just don't think—"

"I wouldn't dare," Lex said, grinning. "Saturday?"

"Against my better judgment," she said, leaving him.

When he was cleared from hospital he looked for her, but she was assisting her father in delivering a new Texican up on the third floor.

Chapter Eight

The new uniform of the Texas fleet added inches to his height. Janos Kates of Dallas City designed it. It was a man's outfit, made of a tight-fitting but stretchy material, a masculine light tan in color, colored by unit insignia and rank badges. The meachide boots were heeled and soft to the touch and made authoritarian clicks on walking. You saw it everywhere. You saw it on the streets and in the training sessions and at dinner—Murichon was a General. Not that Texas was suddenly a militaristic society, just that when a Texican was faced with a job he attacked it with a single-mindedness designed to see the job through.

Lex was a Captain, and as such, ranked high enough to command a ship, although he was steadfastly refused a ship. He was too valuable at headquarters. He was in constant demand for conferences on Empire methods and technology. He protested, and asked repeatedly to be assigned to the same battle group in which Hilly Bob had a ship and where Arden Wal, his thought monitor at last removed, wore the Texican uniform with his proud flair and sported the insignia of a full General. In that same battle group Captains Form and Jakkas served, Jakkas having spent some few weeks on his new ranch only to report in as the reports of the spy ships told of massive buildups of Empire force in the periphery. Form, knowing nothing but the service life, was senior in rank to Jakkas and was in charge of battle group maintenance, having adapted to Texican methods with a pleasing rapidity.

And all the time the battle group was doing its turn on patrol and training Lex was talking to gray-haired politicians and generals in headquarters with scarcely enough time to continue his courtship of Riddent, much less take time off for an airors ride.

Out in the galaxy, the Empire was swarming like angry biters driven from their mud shells. At some risk, a Texican scout, equipped with the new bunk power, the latest advance from the Blink Space Works, observed an encirclement of a dead planet and reported the efficiency of the Empire fleet in urgent blink-stats, adding that the culmination of the exercise was planet-blasting, total destruction.

President Belle Resall was worried. She'd lifted breeding restrictions temporarily, messing up the new administration's generation plan to a point of total despair, but she and all her advisers felt that Texas

would not be so lucky in the next battle. There would be casualties. The casualties would be male, of course, since males fight wars. So, every Texican woman of breeding age was trying for a boy and if the first sperm wasn't the proper sort the fertilization was negated and Texican women tried again, and again until a male union of sperm and egg was achieved and there was, in the minds of the moralists, something musky in the atmosphere.

Belle, being a logical woman, worried, first, that Texicans would die and, second, that they wouldn't die and she'd be the President who completely unbalanced the sexes on Texas, leaving the planet with a surplus of males which not even places like Miss Toni's in Dallas City could handle.

And she worried, but not as much, knowing Texicans and having faith in Texas men, about a planet being killed. That was a possibility. All of Texas might end up a cinder orbiting old Zed, but that was only a farfetched possibility and her main worries were the deaths of young Texicans and the host of younger Texicans who would, in a few months, start screaming and breathing the air of the planet.

Now and then she'd leave her desk and walk the streets, a handsome, matronly woman in sort of old-fashioned mearchide skirts, taking the grins and the salutes, for they were her due. And her heart would fill with pride as she saw the tall Texicans in the new uniforms which she'd commissioned from Janos Kates and then she'd go back to her desk refreshed and call in General Murichon Burns and a few other old heads and ask, "Do we have to risk it? Isn't there another way? Can't we negotiate?"

They'd tried that. "We don't want war," they'd blinkstated. "We do not ask for war."

And in return they got cold silence, the stars themselves answering with their eternal radiations, but no word from Empire.

On a night when the two moons were full, a rare event, Lex rode double on *Zelda* with two soft and warm arms around his waist and landed at his favorite deserted beach to roast candies over an open fire and drink good Rio and look into the firelit beauty of Riddent's face. She was in swim wear and it was almost too much for him. It was almost too much for both of them. There was a musk in the air. There were two moons. They were young and he stopped himself and tore away and wept with his sadness at having to stop. She, recovering, said in a small voice, "Thank you, Lex."

He had seen and felt the warmth of her, the top of her. "I'm not making excuses," he said. "But I would not have done that—"

"I know. Things are different. The war—"

"No excuse," he said. "Riddent—"

"Yes?"

"Just Riddent. It has a good sound."

She moved to lean against him as they sat in the sand. They heard the rote of the waves, the far-reaching combers, the whistle of a predatory nighter. There was a sense of peace there on their deserted beach, until a squadron on training bunked low into atmosphere, chasing dummy missiles. The streak of fire was death, a missile past the last line of defense. They had seconds to live and they watched as the streak came in like a runaway meteor and two fast destroyers chased futilely and the missile splashed out there, just this side of the horizon.

A shiver went through her and he put his arms around her.

"It was only practice," he said. "They set up impossible situations, making it as bad as bad, as difficult as possible. We'll catch the real ones."

Her skin felt cool. She did not stop shivering.

Above them, the two destroyers climbed and blinked out of existence, to go back to the squadron for a reaming out for having missed.

"I wish you hadn't stopped."

"You don't mean that," he said.

"Yes, I do. I don't want to die not knowing—"

"Riddent, Riddent."

"I will I know it. I feel it. I know that you'll be killed and I'll be killed and Texas will be killed—"

"Now you stop it."

But she was weeping. He held her close and felt utterly helpless and then, with his eyes milky with tears, he kissed her wet cheek and turned her lips up to him and after that there was an irresistible force which pushed, propelled them and when it was sweetly over she wept again, but not from sadness.

"Wasn't that a clever way to trap you into marriage?" she asked.

His shout, his whoop, jarred her, causing her to pull back, holding her outraged ear. Then he was dancing around her, a nude, mad young man, until she giggled and said, "Damned fool," and rose to join him in his mad dance on the hard-packed sands near the pounding surf until, with another whoop, he picked her up and swung her around in his arms and then, panting, held her at arm's length. "You mean it?"

"You know I do, silly."

He bounced sonic booms on the way home and sang of his joy in a loud, untuned voice and then woke up Murichon, who had slept six hours of the past twenty-four, to shout, "She said yes, Dad, she said yes."

They spent three nights in a cozy cottage on the northern ice. There, there was no war, no threat. There were only endless hours of togetherness and happy, giddy experimentation and a growing wonder *m* Lex that he should have been fortunate enough to court and win Riddent. He would awaken in the middle of the night and feel her body warmth next to him, her amazing softness, and he couldn't believe that she was his, that he had his own wife in his own bed and that his feelings were not unwelcome and that, his hand doing things, she responded and woke and said, "Glutton," and then added her gluttony to his for a sleepless hour before, moist and sweetly warm, she slept atop him.

Naturally, now that he had a reason for wanting to stay at headquarters, he was transferred. Saying goodbye was the hardest thing he'd ever done. It made his first departure from Texas, into Empire servitude, seem distant and not at all serious. She was weeping when he boarded the shuttle to join

Arden Wal's battle group and he remembered the things she'd said there on the beach when the practice missile got away and went splashing down into the sea. On the way out he decided, for sure, that he didn't want to die and, above all, he didn't want her to die. Then he started to think of ways he could assure prevention of either.

"You're crazy," Billy Bob, Captain, said when Lex told him that he wasn't about to die and that he wasn't about to take on the Empire fleet face to face outnumbered and outgunned. It was the duel with the Cassie all over again, Texas waiting to fight the Empire with the Empire's rules.

"He's crazy," Billy Bob told General Wal, when Lex demanded and got an appointment, with Captains Billy Bob, Jakkes and Form in attendance. "But I like the idea."

"It is crazy," Wal told them, after he'd heard the proposal.

"It just might work," Blant Jakkes said.

"The crazy bastard kept us alive when that Cassie had us cold," Form said. "Let's give it a try, General."

"We'll have to file for permission," Wal said. "There are regulations—"

"If you always followed regulations, sir, you'd be dead now," Lex said. "Executed by your own people. At least we don't have the death penalty on Texas."

"I could have been in charge of a sector," Wal said, rolling his eyes and grinning, "but I had to meet a crazy Texican."

The main force of the Empire fleet was grouping near an isolated red giant inside the periphery. Outlying zones were thickly patrolled by Vandys. A blink-stat message couldn't be smuggled through the dense lines, much less a vessel. But, to the rear, there was an entire Empire group which acted as security against a sneak attack by a suicide force of Texicans. At least that was Empire thinking. Lex had done his own thinking and he had convinced a cadre of fellow officers, up to and including Arden Wal, that his thinking was good. Wal, knowing the terrible force represented by the gathering Empire battle fleet, was fearful for Texas. And he found, in those first few months on the out-planet, that Texas was all that Lex had described, that his new freedom was more precious to him than he could ever have imagined. An alien, former officer in the force of the enemy, he had proved himself in the first battle of Texas and had been accepted as one of Texas' own. Nothing in his life had ever given him as much pride as the insignia of General in the fleet of the Planet Texas, and he was prepared to take some risk to preserve his new liberty, his pride, his peace of mind. Thus, he was a willing accomplice in a wild plan dreamed up by a young Texican just past his legal majority.

At first, the plan seemed to be designed to allow young Texicans a holiday from the fleet. A growing group of men began to take liberty from the battle group commanded by Wal, assemble on the empty sands of the big sandy country and do what young Texicans had been doing for generations, ride airorses. This in itself did nothing to arouse the suspicion of the high brass, who were too involved in the speculation regarding just when the Empire would choose to strike to notice that the airorses riding on the desert weren't of the usual sort. Those who took note of the weekly gatherings of the young in the desert grinned, remembering when they, too, were young and life seemed to be lent a rosy color merely by the act of mounting an airors. Nor did the presence of repair vans from the Blink Space Works arouse any undue interest. Kids were always tinkering with their mechanical steeds and now that they were all in the services, drawing a man's pay in good Texas credits, they had the money to waste on new doodads for their airorses.

Lex and his co-conspirators took some pains to hide the extensive alteration sheds which were built in the shadows of the dunes and camouflaged with desert growth.

They assembled in groups of hundreds at a time, one hundred on one day, a hundred on the next, as the program accelerated and then there was some grumpy grumbling from the brass, because it seemed that certain battle group commanders were too lenient in allowing their men planet leave. There were ships of the line on duty with a skeleton crew. Only the continued inactivity of the Empire fleet saved some high officers from be called on the carpet.

When two thousand young Texicans left their posts on the fleet ships at the same time, grouped in the desert and began to perform a ballet of precision flying, Murichon Burns was called into President Resall's office to explain why so many fleters were off duty at once. By then it was too late. Murichon took an official arc into the sands to find deserted sheds, traces of activity which demanded some explanation, and several airorses with alterations which sent a cold chill of fear through his heart before his anger rose up and sent him hurtling toward the station of Arden Wal's battle group in a new destroyer to find that the ships were, true, on station, but that on each ship there were just enough men to keep the machinery running.

Two thousand of Texas' finest, ranging in age from fifteen to the early twenties, were in space. And they were in space on airorses. When the news broke, the planet held its breath.

In council, the old men of Texas looked to Murichon, for it had become known, after a hasty investigation, that his son was the ringleader.

"It is well known that the range of an airors is limited by its life support system," said Belle Resall, to open the discussion. "What do they hope to accomplish by killing themselves?"

That was the way Murichon had felt when he first realized that Lex and his alien friends were leading a strike force of airorses into deep space, but then he'd prowled the deserted sheds in the desert and found the converted airorses. He had one wheeled into the council room.

The vehicle was recognizable as a standard Blink-built airors but certain things had been done. The dome had been enlarged and armored to withstand the most deadly space radiations. The air regeneration unit was beefed up. Murichon opened the dome and pointed out features, space to store a considerable ration of dehydrated food, large tanks for water.

"As you can see," Murichon said, "the boys have not been idly playing tag out there in the sands. As this model indicates, they've successfully extended the range of an airors. We estimate that by living on short rations they can take one of the altered models all the way to mother Earth, if that's what they have in mind."

"And weapons?" asked a grizzled Ranger official.

"None," Murichon said.

"None?" asked Belle Resall. "Then why?"

"Unless you consider this pod, on the left underside, a weapon," Murichon said. "We've tried to figure out why they installed it and the best we can guess is that it was built to carry an explosive charge in the range of fifty pounds of expand." He looked at Belle, who was asking a question with her eyebrows.

"Expand is a charge used by miners," he explained. "Fifty pounds of it would take out about half of Dallas City. What it would do to, say, an Empire Middle guard cruiser can be imagined."

Murichon detached the pod and held it in both hands. He showed it to the group, wordless.

"All right," Belle said. "They've extended the range of the airors by adding to the life support system. If I understand all I know about power, the blink generator in an airors is equal to that of a small destroyer. That means they can go almost anywhere they want to go in the galaxy. They've added a detachable pod to carry an explosive charge. Does this mean they're going to attack Empire on airorses, head on?"

"I think not," said ex-President Andy Gar, in civilian clothing. "I know that boy. I've had a few talks with his friends, that Empire fletcher Wal, the others. They're not suicidal."

"We have this to consider," said old man Blink, Billy Bob's father, who had narrowly escaped being President. "The alterations were evidently done under the direction of my boy, Billy Bob. He's got a head on him." The old man smiled proudly. He was allowed his moment, for Blinks were and had always been one of the prime raw materials of Texican greatness. "He's been coming down to the plant of late studying the captured Empire gear we're testing. He was especially interested in the range and sensitivity of Empire detection equipment. I think they're planning to do something in regard to that fleet which is building up out there and I think it's based on the sensitivity of the detection instruments. Empire has been fighting a stagnant war for a few hundred years, fighting it by a formula. They're geared to detect the ships of the Cassiopeian fleet. The instruments are good, don't doubt that, but they're calibrated to size. They'll spot a Cassiopeian Vandy at incredible distances, but when the size falls much below Vandy volume—"

"I think I see," Belle said. "Then an airors, even one of these beefed-up models, would be too small to make much of an impression on Empire detection instruments."

"Exactly," Murichon said. "I think they're going to try to sneak in past the scouts and plant charges on Empire ships."

"Damned fools," Belle said quietly, not angry. She felt a tightening in her chest, pure fear for two thousand Texas boys out there in deep space on a fool's errand. And she visualized the national period of mourning when the casualty reports were delivered back by a few survivors.

Actually, the plan was more complicated than the council had guessed.

While the council deliberated and mourned in advance, "Professor Emily Lancing was piloting an arc from San Ann to Dallas City, the homer tuned to the new house built outside the city on Lexington Burns's land. She felt a bit of reluctance about her errand, but since she'd been in on the plan from the first she felt she had a duty to carry out Lex's request. She had thought about having her husband make the trip, but she'd promised and she felt, after thinking it over, that the news would be more endurable coming from a sympathetic woman.

And Riddent Burns was a lot of woman, woman at her finest, big, strong, fat in the belly with life, a new Texican forming in there, causing her trim waist to expand and grow. She was one of those fortunate women to whom pregnancy is a blessing, smoothing any hint of roughness from her skin, adding a color to her face, bringing out that almost supernatural beauty which some women possess when they are building life within their bodies.

It was the nature of their relationship that there were no secrets, so she knew Emily Lancing and knew of the tender scene which had once occurred between Emily and her husband. Being a sensible girl, she

recognized love when she felt it being lavished on her, and she knew that Lex loved her above all women and, rather than feeling resentment toward the older woman, she felt a sense of warmth, for Emily had done a nice thing for her husband at a difficult time. Therefore, when she answered the door and faced Emily Lancing, she smiled with genuine pleasure and led the lady into the fine, huge main room and plied her with good things, hiding her curiosity about the unexpected visit. However, her curiosity was not to be strained, for Emily, with a cup of good Earth-type coffee on her knee, looked at her, smiled uncertainly and said, "I came because I have something to tell you."

"About Lex," Riddent said. "I thought so. He's doing something dangerous, isn't he?"

"Yes," Emily said, admiring Riddent's control. "You mustn't be angry with him. He didn't want to worry you until, as he said, it was time to worry. He asked me to tell you after he was gone."

"Where?" Riddent asked, her heart beating a bit burpily, but calm on the exterior.

"Into Empire," Emily said.

"He'll come back," Riddent said, smiling.

"Of course."

"I don't think I want to know any more," Riddent said. "I think I'd rather not know because if I know then I'll worry more, I think. As it is, I will just pretend that he's on some simple spying mission or something—"

"Everything possible has been done to make it a successful mission," Emily said. "There is danger, of course, but if advance planning can eliminate danger, then it has been done. Lex is a brave and fine man, girl."

"Yes," Riddent said. "More coffee?"

"Thank you, no." She rose. "If you feel, later, that you'd like to talk about it, please call."

"Yes," Riddent said. She had known. He had been strangely possessive of her the previous evening, before leaving in the dead of night, holding her, taking her with great passion while being careful of the baby. And there had been all of those trips into the desert. At first she'd been angry, thinking that he was leaving her merely to play games with his comrades, but then, noting his seriousness, she'd come to believe that something special was happening.

"I won't worry," she said, walking toward the door with Emily, "but when can I stop worrying?"

Emily smiled. "Three weeks from this morning."

Three weeks. Three eternal weeks. During the third week the baby kicked for the first time, a strong, male kick which caught her by surprise and made her gasp, then laugh happily. She patted her distended stomach and said, "Easy there, you little beggar." And then she cried, for she wanted, so much, for Lex to be there, to place his big, rough hand on her skin and feel his son beginning those life-preliminary exercises.

Emily Lancing had been working on the micro-electronic techniques revealed by the two instruments which had come to Texas inside the skulls of Lex and Arden Wal. Texican spies had been searching for

more indications of a hidden Empire technology and had come up with nothing. The mind monitors were, it seemed, the most closely guarded secret in Empire. After a few weeks the instruments themselves held no more secrets, could be duplicated easily on Texas, had there been a need. Thus, when Lex had come to her some weeks past, the building of a monitor to monitor the monitors was a simple thing and with some little burning of midnight oil a way had been found to make the monitors operative through the simple connection of electrodes to shaved spots outside the skull, rather than inside the bone structure. Thus, when the two-thousand-man fleet of converted airships left Texas, one man in a hundred wore, or would wear at the proper time, Empire monitors. They were all of the local broadcast type found inside Wall's head, the type which, it was predicted, were to be found inside the heads of all top commanders in the Empire fleet. That was an example of the advance planning about which he'd hinted to Riddent.

As she flew home to San Ann to join her husband, who was standing by watching the progress of the airship fleet by reading the Empire monitors, which, in addition to the signals detectable by Empire on a local basis, broadcast a beam receivable only on Texas, she felt a moment of doubt. Had she participated in a plan which would result in the death of hundreds of young men? She shook her head. No. She had confidence in them, those young men. There was a strange aura of strength about Lex Burns. Moreover, she believed in their mission. She was one of a pessimistic few, among whom Arden Wal was a standout, who felt that in a face-to-face battle Texas was destined to lose. She believed in the mission. Had she been given the opportunity, she would have been out there with them. Into the periphery.

She could read their position on the larger star charts. Their signal was loud and clear and moving in leaps as they blinked deeper and deeper. Toward far Centaurus, hidden now and then as fields of force blanked the signal, emerging ever deeper into Empire space.

It was decided, in the second week, to explain to worried friends and relatives why two thousand Texicans, mostly young, were missing from their regular stations. The Empire fleet was still running practice missions over in the galaxy, ever building, and the population was bored with reports which said that the situation was still tense, critical, but showed no change. The nation, Belle Resall decided, needed some positive news for a change.

"We can now announce," she said on a planetwide trid broadcast, "that steps are being taken to alleviate the tense situation in which we find ourselves. Numbers of our young men are in secret training to strike a blow to the very heart of our enemy."

The announcement was brief and cryptic. There was a Texican spy on Earth itself. There could, therefore, be Empire spies on Texas, or in near space. But saying that the blow would be struck at the heart of Empire would throw the enemy off guard, had he detected the blink signals of the airship fleet which, at that time, was boring deeper into the galaxy. Saying that the men were in training would make the enemy think that the blow would be long in coming, rather than imminent, as it was.

A planet buzzed with speculation. Hearts swelled with pride as families and friends realized that old so-and-so's unexplained absence meant that he was a part of the strike force.

Meanwhile, a mobilized planet put aside the things of peace and prepared for the ultimate battle. All production capacity was geared for war. Every able-bodied man was in uniform. Women manned the factories. Always a thinly populated, community-conscious world, the planet was drawn into even closer empathy among its people. There was a spirit of shared danger. People smiled and spoke on the streets. Teenage girls manned detection stations. Neighbor helped neighbor. Some luxury items fell into short supply as the resources were spent in the building of more and more ships of the line. But there was a plenty of food as city dwellers turned out en masse to harvest crops. The birthrate began to rise as

thousands of baby male Texicans were born, Belle Resall's horde, they were called.

Now and then, as he blinked, cramped, living on wakers, eyes feeling as if they were full of desert sand, Lex thought of one future edition of himself, an unborn member of Belle's horde, his son. And he thought of his wife and of Texas and, in brief periods of sleep, alone in the small dome of his *Zelda*, his muscles cramped and already being shaped by the long period of non-movement, he dreamed.

He didn't like his dreams. He told himself that they were the result of his physical discomfort, for his dreams had always been pleasant ones.

But now they were anything but pleasant. One recurring nightmare never failed to break through the fatigue and bring him awake, grunting, moaning. He saw a beloved, familiar figure, clothing soiled and torn, a vile red stain covering all limbs bent unnaturally. He saw blood. And he saw Riddent. Riddent dead. His urge was to turn around, forget the mission, but he found a strength which pushed him on and on.

Chapter Nine

The total mass of two thousand airors would not equal that of one Empire Middleguard. Spread over a volume of space limited only by the necessity to keep in voice contact the airors fleet became mere notes in nothingness, detectable only by the signals sent ahead by the power of the blink generator. These could have been easily detected by any Empire ship, were, in fact, detected numerous times by the Emperor's patrol ships. However, the signals were being generated, when first detected, deep within Empire space and investigation proved space to be empty.

The very strength of the blink signals led to a result predicted by Arden Wal. At first the power signal of simultaneous blinks by two thousand generators raised alarms. Then, reports filed properly, the Empire, involved as it was in assembling the largest fleet ever to be massed, while keeping a suitable force opposing the traditional enemy, discounted the signals as an unexplained phenomenon in the warp of space and assigned half a dozen scientists to investigate and advance a theory. Without leaving the comfort of the various laboratories in which they worked, the scientists postulated a minute bubble in the fabric of space and time, a moving bubble with random patterns zigzagging from the periphery into more dense portions of the galaxy in the general direction of Centaurus. Since the bubble avoided mass, skirting stars and black holes and planets, it was concluded that it would, in time, wear itself out without doing any damage. Had not a dozen investigations been made? Had not the finest detection instruments found nothingness in the area of the signals? The Emperor's fleet was equipped with the finest instruments. Instruments don't lie. The space-time bubble theory was officially accepted at fleet headquarters and the attentions of the brass were returned, once more, toward the continuing buildup of force, a force which would, once and for all, establish the Emperor's power and teach those upstart Texicans a lesson.

Meanwhile, two thousand young Texicans and three Empire renegades blinked and rested, cursed the close quarters, tried to keep life in aching, cramped muscles with isometric exercise. They fed on space rations, recycled water and air, rode fifty pounds of expand down the long star lanes, making random jumps into nowhere, but always returning to the line leading them toward Centaurus.

For the rest of his life Lex would remember the thrill of pride he'd felt upon lifting from the sands, two thousand strong, in perfect formation, riding the tiny vehicles with their enlarged domes into the high air and then, on a signal, entering space with one long blink, power sizzling from tiny plants which generated the force which could throw many times the mass of an airors into the finite distance.

Since they knew the fleet positions it was possible to escape detection by Texicans on the way out. Texas was not monitoring the planet itself for unauthorized movements, but was facing galaxy-ward. So the first long blink threw them beyond the main forces of Texas and a second blink, using the double-blink generator, removed them from odd scouts and advance guards in the big emptiness between the isolated star, Zed, and the beginnings of space matter on the rim of the galaxy.

At first, they flew familiar routes, but chose not to enter the Empire through Cassiopeian space. They sat astride, able to relax only partially by leaning backward against the near side of the life dome. Legs, pointing downward, ached. Eyes strained, after the first few near sleepless day periods. And around them was a vastness which was intimidating enough when one had the security of the hull of a spacer around him and which was an awful, aching emptiness to a lone man riding astride a tiny vehicle meant primarily for sport and planetary transportation.

Mere voice chatter was so lovingly slow that conversation was unrestricted among the groupings and that chatter helped pass the time. By the time broadcast talk traveled the distances between the fleet and the nearest Empire planet, even a stray ship beyond the limits of their local detectors, the fleet would have moved on to success or failure. Behind them at each blinkcharge point, the radio waves radiated outward, carrying with them the light, bantering talk of young men trying to pass the long wait with an oft-heard joke, a semi-witty remark or simply boylike rememberings of how it was to ride in the hist herding contest. Voices lived in the form of modulated waves, would live, perhaps, traveling through limitless space, after the flesh and blood vocal cords which had formed the sounds had decayed.

During the trip inward, toward the goal, Lex had ample time to consider such morbid thoughts, to question his decision to take the battle to the Empire. But in dim history an honorary Texican had said, "I leave this rule for others when I'm dead, be sure you're right —then go ahead," and that old rhyme had surfaced from somewhere down in the depths of Lex's school memories and, as he blinked ahead of his group into Empire, he liked the simplicity of it. Be sure you're right. He had to be right. He'd seen the vast extent of the Empire. He'd spent two years in the Empire's service studying their power, their vastness, their arrogant disregard for the right of the individual, and he knew that the Empire would never leave Texas alone unless, in some way, Texas made things so hot, so costly, that the pragmatic policy makers back on the old Earth would decide that the price was too high to pay. And, while Empire would scarcely blink at the loss of a million men, being blessed or cursed with a surplus of people, the loss of two thousand ships of the line would cause no little concern. He did not delude himself into thinking that two thousand ships taken from the Empire's entire fleet would end the war, but it would serve two purposes. Most importantly, it would tell the Emperor's war planners that the action against Texas was not to be taken lightly, that Texas had the capacity to strike as well as defend. If his operation were successful, the Empire would be forced to guard the rear of the front with Texas, and that would scatter he massive fleet building on the periphery across the void of extra-galactic space between the planet and Empire territory. Thus, valuable time would be gained.

There were times as the fleet of tiny vehicles crossed the long parsecs when Lex doubted. He limited his own talk with others to checking navigation with Arden Wal, leading the group on his right flank, and to checks with other group leaders. The isolation didn't particularly bother him. He'd spent his time in the big lonesome spaces of the Bojacks, herding winglings. And he had the thoughts of Riddent and his unborn son to comfort him.

Actually, the trip in was uneventful. There were a few tense moments when Empire warships came to investigate the blink signals, but the incidents merely proved the theory that Empire detectors were set for masses too large to allow detection of widely scattered groupings of airorses. Mostly, the trip was unending tedium and it was with a sigh of relief that the fleet heard General Wal's announcement that the bright dot ahead, gleaming in the blackness after a short blink, was the goal, Centaurus.

With the fleet on alert, Lex and Wal blinked ahead to scout.

There, orbiting a lifeless planet, row on row, tier on tier, bank on bank, dead in space, gleaming in the glow of Centaurus, was the discarded debris of the long Empire war. Ships. The graveyard. Outdated Vandys, middleguards, Rearguards, supply ships, scouts, all used up and thrown away in a display of waste which awed Lex. He'd been amazed when he first read of the Empire's ships' graveyard, and now, seeing it close up, he was saddened. There were ships in the Texican fleet twice the age of the more recent discards there in the darkness of space.

There were no guards. The Empire considered the junk fleet of so little value that no one watched. Nevertheless, guards were posted by the Texicans to avert chance discovery in case still another ship or group of ships was scheduled to be blinked out by space tugs to be abandoned.

Now the careful practices in the desert of home began to pay off. In groups, the airorses began to seek specified hulls, to attach to the pitted metals with magnetic grapples installed in the alteration sheds. The selection was not random, but carefully charted by Arden Wal, who was familiar with the makeup of an Empire battle fleet. Each man had his assignment.

The generators of the airorses were adequate for the job. Lex was grateful for the long tradition which had made the airors the most overpowered vehicle in creation. Souped-up toys became engines of war as the airorses mounted the huge hulks, Vandys, Middle-guards, Rearguards, supply and support vessels, and blinked to assigned points, there to jockey into rehearsed formation, the formation of an Empire battle fleet.

When it was assembled, that dead fleet, manned by single Texicans sitting their airorses atop the dead hulks like biters on the neck of a farl, the formation was perfect. Detectors would have recorded the precise positioning as an Empire fleet, readied for blinking across long distances.

Now the thought monitors were turned on. Orders were given. The power in the airorses blinked and the fleet moved, outward this time, leaping grandly and without attempt at concealment toward the aggregation of force threatening Texas. It would take close visual examination to reveal to an Empireite that dead and gutted ships were moving in battle formation.

Arden Wal's advance time schedule was accurate to three standard hours. Three weeks to the day from lift-off on Texas, the fleet of dead ships emerged into normal space within range of the mass of the fleet in the periphery, choosing the headquarters body, a closely linked grouping of ten thousand ships with a deadly core of Rearguards inside the protecting Middleguards and Vandys.

The approach, of course, had been monitored. Blinkstat contact had been made hours previously. It was another example of the stagnancy which had fallen over the Empire's military that communication codes and procedures had not been altered in the time since Lex and his Empire friends had taken to Texican space in the old T.E.S. *Grus*. Arden Wal's statement that he was officer in command of a battle group sent out as additional reinforcements was accepted. Empire did not expect attack from the rear. They were facing one thinly populated planet. Their confidence was based on the knowledge that behind them were a million worlds controlled by Empire, millions of ships on duty.

In voice contact, Lex heard Wal ask for position orders, heard the orders given. The Empire fleet was spread over millions of cubic miles of space, and the position assigned to them was not suitable, too far from the main headquarters group which was their target.

Wal was equal to the occasion. "Request repeat of the previous message," he said, signaling for a short blink which put the Texican fleet within optical instrument reach of the Empire force.

"You are far out of position," came the irritated answer. There followed coordinates for a blink, but the Texicans were moving at sub-light speeds, closing the gap.

"You are entering guarded space," the voice of the Empire communication said. "Halt. Reverse your thrust. That is an order."

"We have you on optics and will pass safely," Wal sent.

There was a short pause and then a voice full of authority came onto the communicator, a voice with cold fury. "What do you think this is, Admiral, amateur night at the maneuvers?"

Two thousand ships closed on ten thousand. The dangers of collision were small, but the movement of the Texican fleet was against all Empire regulations.

"Perhaps our optics are malfunctioning," Wal said, in a cowed voice. "Sir, could you glow your ships for a visual check?"

"I want to see you, sir, in my quarters when you're in position," the arrogant voice of command said, but ahead, near, pleasingly near, dots of light began to gleam as the headquarters fleet lit up to avert possible collision.

"This is an order," came the voice. "You will reverse blink at once to a distance of one-tenth unit. Then we will send a guide, since you're incapable of finding your way."

"Targets," Lex said, on the private communicator which linked his two thousand young Texicans. "Lock."

"Yes, sir, at once," Wal said, but the fleet continued to close.

"We are preparing to fire on you," the fleet commander said, his voice cold and full of fury.

"Now," Lex sent, hitting his release button, disengaging smoothly from his Vandy hull, in the advance, hitting his sub-light speed control at the same time, shooting his *Zelda* out and away and seeing the blinks and glow of power as two thousand vehicles followed, darting toward the Empire fleet even as the Empireites realized, their instruments now reading dead ships and, astoundingly, live ships, unseen, over them, under them, around them, moving in like darting insects.

Lances of fire came out from the ships on the near flank, lighting dark space. Behind Lex, the dead fleet, shieldless, glowed and burned, but he was boring in, dodging, twisting, avoiding the beams skillfully, finding that it was child's play compared to herding a spooked wingling.

Now it was a matter of seconds and seconds were critical, for the Empire was mounting screens, the dim glow of power beginning to show on first one ship and then another.

The flagship was his. At the center, he saw it, huge, a lovely target. He zoomed in and over and threw reverse power at the last instant, darting into the shield as it closed over him, his airors making contact with the hull aft of the main weapons turrets in a blind spot. He engaged the magnetic grapple and said, "Report."

There was a wait of seconds before group leaders began to count down. It was a simple affirmative, agreed upon in the long sessions of training. Each individual reports to his leader, each leader reports to a group leader, ten group leaders say, "Got 'em, Lex; OK, boy; yes indeed, buddy."

There was a frenzy in the fleet as weapons continued to sear and burn the remnants of the dead ships left behind, the Empire discards which had been the Texicans' passport through thickly patrolled Empire space. Then, in a silence, space lit only by the dim glow of the screens of the Empire fleet, Lex opened his communication to an Empire frequency and said, "Overfleet Lord Kal, in the name of Texas, I ask you for surrender."

He waited. He felt a hint of the nausea of excitement. Now would come a test of Empire loyalty.

"I am, sir, Captain Lexington Burns, Republic of Texas. I am in a position to destroy your ship, sir. It and all the ships in your fleet. However, I do not wish to cause wholesale death. Will you speak with me?"

Again he waited. And there was, in his ear, the same voice of command, Overfleet Lord Kal, the Emperor's own choice, a noble from old Earth. "I will speak."

"Read your hull, sir," Lex said. He activated and deactivated the grapple, causing *Zelda* to bump up and down on the huge Rearguard's metal plates. "Do you hear a thumping aft of the main turrets?" He could imagine the reason for the long delay. Ahead of him, weapons swiveled, but he was below the angle of fire. Over him the screen flickered.

"I am sitting on your plates, Lord Kal, with fifty pounds of expand. In case you are not familiar with Texican expand, it has, in fifty pounds, almost one kiloton of explosive power."

He waited.

"I am in a small, mobile vehicle which can penetrate your screen from the inside, as you must know. I can be off and away before detonation. I do not want to destroy you. I offer you terms, terms which are quite lenient. Surrender. Fly your ship to Texican space on my direction and you will be treated as a prisoner of war."

"You, sir," said Lord Kal, "are a madman."

"Must I kill to demonstrate that I am capable of destroying ten thousand of your ships?"

"On the contrary," said Lord Kal, "I must kill you. Granted, you are in contact with my ship, but you are in the center of a million Empire ships. Even if you can destroy a limited number of my command, you cannot escape."

"But you'll be dead," Lex said. "You and all the men in your headquarters fleet. Do you desire that?"

Silence. Then, "I have alerted the fleet, Texican. Within minutes you will be surrounded by a million ships. Now I ask you to surrender."

"Would you, then, like to choose which of your ships, those nearest you, will be the first to die?"

"Lord Kal," Arden Wal's voice came, "I beg of you. Don't force us to kill. I am Arden Wal, former Fleet

Captain in the Emperor's service, now in the service of Texas."

"You are a traitor, then."

No, a free man," Wal said, "with your thought monitor removed from my brain."

Silence. Then Wal, on the Empire frequency, speaking passionately. "To each of you, each officer of rank in the Empire's fleet, I offer this. I am authorized to tell you that Texas offers you your freedom. From personal knowledge I can tell you that each of you is a slave to the Empire. You think, perhaps, that you have been trusted officers of the Emperor, while, all along, inside your brain is a device which reads your very thoughts, invades the most private of your personal feelings. You have been used. Now your commander is asking that you die for an Empire which values you less than it values one old Vandy. Surrender. Come with us to Texas and discover freedom."

"This is your commander," Lord Kal broadcast. "If any ship moves, the guns of the fleet will be used on her."

"General Wal," Lex said, "we have to do it." There was a sadness in his voice.

"Yes," Wal answered.

"Lord Kal," Lex sent, "train your instruments on the new Rearguard on your port quarter at an inclination of thirty-five degrees."

He had established, during Wal's oration, that Blant Jakkas was locked onto that particular Rearguard. In a quick conversation on the Texican wavelength, he had prepared Jakkas, and he knew that it would be a severe test of the man. To kill a thousand men was not a simple matter.

"Jak?" he asked.

"Ready, Lex."

"Well, we have to do it."

He saw the blink as Jakkas left the Rearguard, then shielded his eyes, opening them only after the Rearguard had exploded into a small star of fire.

Two thousand men. He felt his stomach go sour. But all of Texas would meet a similar fate at the hands of the Empire. There was no choice. Darwinism. The survival of the fittest.

"LordKal," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "Don't force us to do it again."

But it was necessary. Five ships died. Then and only then, after desperate attempts to send men onto the outer plates of his flagship to dislodge the intruder only to have them swept off the hull by the mounted weapon on *Zelda*, did Lord Kal, the Emperor's choice, Overlord of the Empire fleet, surrender.

"I will do as you ask," Lord Kal said in a broken voice.

"Flagship-directed blink," Lex said, giving coordinates. "First, however, signal the remaining groups of the fleet that should they follow, all the ships of your groups will be destroyed."

Lord Kal obeyed.

The trip home was mercifully short. Short blinks were necessary until the scattered stars of the galaxy's edge were behind them, and then it was long blinks, the Empire fleet in perfect, tight formation, the airorses still in place on the hulls of two thousand of them, until, in the big emptiness, Lex signaled ahead.

"For Texas and Zed. General Arden Wal's Expeditionary Force reports capture of ten thousand Empire ships of the line, asks sanctuary for officers and crew and requests escort to landing zones in the desert."

It went smoothly. Ten thousand ships was a lot of ships, but the Texas desert was big enough to absorb ten billion ships. They landed in orderly ranks, crews stepped down to be taken into custody. Tired, bent young men lifted their airorses to the sands and breathed the air of Texas, their hearts laboring after a month of nul-gravity, receiving medical attention, trying to unbend twisted legs and arms, hunched like the apes of old Earth from their thirty days in the seat of an airors. There were, however, no deaths.

Lex, trying to straighten his back, in pain, gasping at the pull of normal gravity, grinned at his father.

"Zed's balls," Murichon growled, "every time you go off the planet you bring home more Empireites. What are you trying to do, repopulate Texas with aliens?"

"I'm just trying to stay alive, Dad," Lex said, just before he collapsed into the sand.

He woke in the San Ann hospital with Riddent looking down at him through happy tears.

"I'm back," he said.

"Yes."

"You all right?"

"Sure, you?"

"I'm fine. Now."

"He kicked," she said.

"You're kidding."

"Here, you can feel."

He put his hand on her stomach and his son obliged. He felt life under his palm and he grinned. But the grin faded. He was remembering the five ships which had blossomed into deadly fire out there in space.

Chapter Ten

He was older. On the outside he still looked as if some teenage boy had stolen his older brother's uniform, but inside he was old and sad. He was in a place called the Alamo Bar, a new establishment on the outskirts of Dallas City where servicemen gathered to forget the boredom of patrol after a tour of duty. He wore the insignia of a full colonel. The medal, which he didn't wear, had been pinned onto his blouse by Belle Resall herself. The men with him could have worn the same medal, Jakkas, Form, Arden Wal, Billy Bob Blink.

They had been screening volunteers from the captured Empire forces. Texas had ten thousand new ships, but it needed trained men to man them. Even now the hospital at San Ann was working overtime to remove the thought monitors from the skulls of the top officers, many of whom had expressed an interest in joining the Texican fleet. It was an old custom for lower grades to defect to the other side upon capture, so there were some seven thousand enlisted men undergoing indoctrination and training now for the purpose of joining the Texicans. It had been decided to give the ex-Cassies among the Empire fleet almost immediate status in the Texican forces, for in a fight against Empire, the Cassies would, it was felt, be loyal to anyone lighting their traditional enemy.

The planet was, more than ever, on a wartime footing, for the capture of a battle group and a top Overlord of the Empire fleet had sent vibrations throughout Empire, all the way to the old man who sat his throne on the planet called Earth. Spies reported renewed activity among the gathering attack fleet, rigid security measures throughout the Empire. There would be no more sneak attacks, for once aroused, the Empire was a fearsome military machine. Arden Wal estimated, for the high Texas brass, that it would take a mere three months for the empire ship works to replace the ten thousand ships lost to Texas.

Billy Bob was also advanced in rank after the airors raid and was in charge of rearming the captured Empire ships. Already more than half of the new ships had been outfitted with Darlenes and were on the line, ready to fight the last battle for Texas.

The mood of the planet was good. Had they not emerged victorious from two major battles without the loss of a single man? The problem, in fact, was not in preparing the Texican people for war but in impressing upon them that victory was not always going to be so easy. Around the planet underground shelters were being excavated, with women and young people making up the labor force, since all able-bodied men were on fleet duty or building ships. The work went on in an almost festive atmosphere of confidence. Not once but a thousand times the government's decision to build shelters was questioned. The opinion of the general public was that it was a waste of effort and money. But there were those who knew the true gravity of the situation, and the five men sitting around a table in the Alamo were among them. Arden Wal knew that the next attack would be in force, upward of a million ships of battle.

"There will be no honor in this one," Blant Jakkes said. "That's the tone of the reports we get from the spies. Empire says that we fight outside the military code, citing the destruction of five defenseless ships in the raid into the periphery."

"We'll only be outnumbered five to one," Billy Bob said. "And we're mounting up to ten Darlenes on the big Rearguards. We can cut off a hundred projectiles in five minutes."

Ex-Empire Tech-Chief Form, now Major, drained his glass. "And five million men will die in five minutes."

Lex looked at him, knowing his feelings. He still suffered nightmares remembering the flowering of the Empire ships as fifty pounds of expand went off against a hull. "We've tried, Form, we've offered terms. All we want is to be left alone."

"Empire's attitude is if you can't control it, kill it," Arden Wal said.

"I suppose that's the basic issue," Billy Bob said. "Empire has built a central government which is all things to all people. Here on Texas we think that government should defend the planet, build public utilities and regulate the numbers of the population for the good of all. When it comes right down to it,

that doesn't seem like a big difference, but I guess it is."

"I'd never sit down to drink with a General in the Empire," Jakkos said.

"Is that so great an honor?" Wal asked, smiling. "I feel that I am the one who is honored by the openness of the Texican society. I never had friends before."

There was an embarrassed silence. It was Form who broke it. "When I pulled the plug out there and lifted off to see that Rearguard ship go up I didn't even feel anything," he said. "And that's funny, because my logic tells me, told me then, that inside that cold hull there were thousands of men. Men like me. Poor jokers, some of them impressed into service, who would leap at a chance to live like we live here on Texas. But I didn't feel anything for them."

"You couldn't see them," Wal said. "You were killing a machine of war, not men."

"Yes, that's what makes war so easy, I guess," Lex said. "If you had to look into the eyes of everyone you were going to kill I wonder if it would be so easy."

"We didn't ask for the war," Jakkos said. Lex grinned to hear him use the pronoun "we" so easily. In many ways Jakkos was more Texican than most Texicans.

"And we're not threatening the home planet," Billy Bob said. "We have no planetkillers in all of our arsenal. We don't plan to build any. But out there in that fleet there are a quarter of a million ships which are armed to make Texas a cinder. I think that justifies what we've done and what we have to do. I'm not saying that the life of a Texican is worth the lives of a million Empireites, I'm just saying that we are only a few and we have few lives to spare. We have to fight to keep what we have. A man takes your life, he's taking everything."

"We'll fight," Lex said. "We'll kill. I don't quite understand why we have to fight, but it's Empire's choice and that leaves us no choice at all, does it?"

"I've got to get back to the plant," Billy Bob said.

Lex had one more and then rode *Zelda*, stripped of her extra features and returned to her clean lines, to his home, where Riddent waited, the evening meal on the table, her stomach protruding past all laws of anatomy.

"He's been a little devil," she said, smiling as Lex kissed her. "Playing kickball all over the place."

After dinner they watched the news on the trid. Riddent reached for his hand and held it tightly when it was announced that the stream of reinforcements into the gathering Empire fleet had come to a halt. "It is felt," the newsman said, "that attack is imminent."

Lex was in command of a first strike group within the fleet command by Arden Wal. When the fleet was alerted, upon the first outward movement of the Empire forces, he went over emergency procedures once more with Riddent. At the first encounter, she was to take shelter in her assigned underground bunker on the south side of Dallas City. There would be medical attention for her there, and she might, in the excitement, need it, for she was nearing delivery time and her personal doctor had warned Lex that the excitement of the battle would, in all probability, bring on labor.

As he was lifted to his command ship, a powerful Empire Vandy with two Darlene space rifles mounted,

in addition to the standard Empire armament, he was aware of a growing resentment toward those who were taking him from his wife at such a crucial time. He resented, of course, Empire's attempt to take over Texas and make it just another planet in a huge combine of planets, but most of all he hated the Empire war planners for depriving him of being present while his son was being born.

He did not, however, let his anger show. He grouped his strike force on Arden Wal's port flank and ran battle station exercises until his crew was sharp and on the fine edge of their best capabilities. Then came the long period of waiting. Empire was in no hurry. The massive fleet approached with short blinks, scouting the way, line upon line of death edging ever closer.

When the Empire fleet was well into the void between the scattered stars on the galaxy's rim and the Lone Star, Zed, Lex moved. Command ship calculators estimated the probable position of the next advance jump by the Empire vanguard and Lex's strike force was there, materializing out of nothing to rake the ranks of Empire ships with Darlene projectiles, blinking in and blinking out before Empire gunners could train their beam weapons on his ships. Fairly minor alterations had given the captured Empire ships the advantage of the double-blink generator and Empire ships had one advantage over Texican ships, their shields.

Thus it was captured Empire ships which began to strike terror into the Empire fleet before a single Empire ship was in range of Texas.

As Lex, the first to strike, blinked out, men were dying behind him, dying by the hundreds, the thousands, as Darlene projectiles blinked inside the hulls of Empire ships, the shields useless, unable to stop the passage of an object traveling in non-space, and the kill was total.

The vanguard force staggered, regrouped and bored onward. And it was thus for hours as the fleet of the Empire moved on, marching with admirable determination into certain destruction. Ship after ship flamed, burst, became dead particles in space. A thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand ships vaporized and still the movement went on, directed by Overlord Guton Artlz from the safely protected Rearguard lingering on the fringe of the galaxy, removed from death. Artlz quoted the Emperor himself when he was informed of the losses. "Let one rebel against the benevolence of the Empire and the disease will become epidemic."

That such a statement represented specious reasoning did not concern Overlord Artlz. He was the Emperor's own cousin, a man who had been forced by necessity to leave the comforts and pleasures of the court to live in the confines of a spaceship out beyond the limits of civilization. Nor was Artlz overly concerned by the high casualty rate of the approach. He had expected casualties. Not so many, perhaps, but what was a hundred thousand ships? That left him just over nine hundred thousand ships, many of them armed with weapons which could, upon his order, end the battle once and forever with the simple destruction of the whole accursed planet of Texas.

"We must strike," advised one of his Admirals. "They're cutting us to pieces. We must abandon the slow, controlled approach, blink close and engage the main fleet."

"We will carry on as planned," Artlz said coldly, as Lex made his second strike, Darlenes rearmed, to burn thirty Empire ships within split segments of a second.

"Like shooting beardies on a pond," Billy Bob Blink reported, after his first strike. He had been fifth in, and when he made his second run, blinking into the center of an Empire grouping, Empire gunners were ready, the weapons trained at a randomly selected area into which Billy Bob's group happened to emerge. The Empire weapons caused three Darlene projectiles to explode prematurely as they left the

muzzles of the Texican ships. Texas suffered its first casualties with the loss of three captured Empire Vandys with all members of their, crews.

At a point in space a few astronomical units from Texas, the Empire fleet began its encircling maneuver. While this split the Empire forces into spaced groupings, making the strikes by the double-blinking captured ships less hazardous, it also split the Texican forces facing the main fleet, setting the stage for a face-to-face encounter near the planet. From the Texican flagship went out the orders. Full attack.

Two hundred thousand Texican ships locked on targets, blinked, left havoc in their wake as they blinked out, but not without losses. Empire gunners were not that slow. In the point of time required for aiming and firing Darlene rifles, the Empire ships could bead on the enemy and the unshielded Texican ships burned easily. Belle Resall's horde would, after all, be needed to restore the balance of the sexes on Texas. There would, indeed, be a national day of mourning, if the planet survived.

Now the multiple guns of the captured Rearguard and Middleguards were brought into play. Shielded by the Empire's best screens, the big vessels turned the tide, fighting on the Empire's terms, head to head, visible by optics, sending salvos of Darlene projectiles into the Empire ranks.

The skies of Texas were no longer empty. Those who watched from planetside saw stars born and die in seconds as ships burned.

Not even a million-unit fleet could take such losses and remain a fighting unit. A single Texican Rearguard, able to sit through the barrage of weapons aimed against it for the time required to launch projectiles, could kill a hundred ships in five minutes. One million of anything represents a huge quantity, but when the whole was being reduced at the rate of approximately eight thousand per five-minute period, with the resulting loss of Texican ships on a scale less than one one-hundredth of that total, the facts were made clear even to the Emperor's own cousin, who had moved into range but was still safe out in the depths of space.

With a red and angry face Overlord Guton Artlz gave the order. "Prepare to disengage."

The signal went out too late for a thousand Empire ships. The broken and detached remnants of the greatest strike force of all time began to regroup, unable to count the soaring losses, and, on a signal, blinked away, taking a long hop to the bigness of space.

There, with the strike forces still blinking in and out, caving flaming stars in their wake, another order was sent from the Empire flagship.

"Missiles," Guton Artlz said, his lips compressed in hatred.

They traveled at sub-light speeds and were picked off in space by the Texican fleet, alert to the possibility. They went out from the Empire fleet by the thousands, each potentially deadly, each, if the Empire had chosen planetkillers, capable of ending the battle for all practical purposes. The Texican fleet would be homeless, able only to extract a measure of revenge before running short of supplies. And space was lit by them, by the thousands, to be centered on target finders and then destroyed systematically, by the hundreds, then by the tens as they streaked through space.

On the planet, screens were filled with them and the controllers worked frantically, pointing out positions to the wildly blinking fleet as it chased missiles. Had the Empire fired from close range it would have been hopeless, but from a distance hours were available to seek out the missiles and destroy them.

Meanwhile, regrouped, the shattered Empire fleet limped toward the periphery, safe from Texican pursuit, since all Texican ships were involved in the life-and-death game of tag with the missiles.

A few hundred of the missiles made it past the Texas fleet to home in on the planet, gaining speed with the planet's gravitational pull. Lex accounted for dozens of them as they neared the planet, throwing his ship around space with reckless abandon, lashing out with rays and Darlenes at the points of death which appeared in his finders, listening with half an ear to the locations sent up by the ground controllers. And when the missiles, those very few which had gotten through, began to glow with heat upon entering atmosphere they were met by the reserve guard, Texicans on highly mobile airorses, herding missiles instead of winglings, burning them until, with a sigh, the ground controllers said, "All clear."

The missile which took out Dallas City was a fluke. A near miss out in deep space had killed its power, leaving its velocity and direction. The fleet was engaged in mopping up, finishing off partially destroyed missiles, when the alarm sounded from the Dallas City control center and fire began to form on the nose cone of the missile as it hit atmosphere. A twelve-year-old boy, mounted on his first airors, was in position to strike the missile, but he blew it, punching too much power and overshooting, and screens all over the planet watched the missile fall the last few thousand feet until it was below horizon for all but the screens in the greater Dallas area and then seismographs registered the hit.

The planet did not burn.

They were using population reducers, strategic weapons designed to kill concentrated groupings of humanity and leave the lush agricultural countryside intact. The force was not even dirty. Radiation was no problem. But where once the largest city in Texas had spread its broad avenues and its parks in all directions there was a crater hundreds of feet deep.

The point of impact, it was determined later, ground zero, to use an old term out of the past, was immediately over the underground bunker which had sheltered Lex's wife and unborn child. The entire complex was vaporized. Search teams could find nothing to bury, nothing of several thousand inhabitants of the city.

Chapter Eleven

He could stand on the patio of what had been their home and look at the fringe devastation. The blast had extended outward past his property line, taking the acres given in reward to Blank Jakkas, and almost reaching the main house. There, glass was shattered and there were brown singe marks on the frame of the building itself. But it was not the damage to his property which caused Lex to stand, weeping, looking out toward the raw crater which had been Dallas City.

As in almost every tragedy, the word "if" was the epitome of sadness.

If he had not insisted that she go to the shelter—

If he had insisted on staying with her—

If—if—if—

Had she stayed in her own home she would have been shaken, but alive. Even if she had been in the main room, where glass was shattered everywhere, her worst injuries would have been cuts and bruises.

At times, during the first terrible hours, having returned subdued but victorious, he had told himself that it

wasn't true. He had not seen her body. Therefore, she was not dead. She would show up, appearing miraculously, having decided to disobey his stern orders and weather the attack in the home of a friend well away from Dallas City. Seeing is believing and he couldn't see her dead so she wasn't dead.

Except that she was and he knew it. She would never have endangered their unborn child by failing to seek shelter and somewhere up there, in the warm, formerly friendly atmosphere of Texas, the minute atomic parts of her were floating, traveling the routes of the jet streams, moving with the planet's weather to fall, someday, somewhere, to enrich the soil.

Riddent.

And Murichon and President Belle Resall and old Andy Gar and all the old, gray advisers who had been in the Dallas City command center. And the home-place, Murichon's house and the fields where he'd played as he grew, all a part of the raw hole.

He had told them he wanted to be alone. And then he'd ridden a borrowed airors from fleet headquarters in the desert to see for himself and had come here, to his home, their home, to walk empty rooms and feel her presence, smell her lingering fragrance.

The sun set.

He stood looking out toward the vast crater until Zed was only a glow below the horizon and the first of the seasonal Texas moons was showing over the eastern world. Death was in him, around him, was a glowing crater whose seared outer rim, flattened, barren, was within his view, adding a dim light to the Texas night He himself had risked death. He had delivered death. He had felt the sickness of it as he ordered Jakkas to kill the first of the five Empire ships which had been destroyed in the airors raid on the Empire fleet. He had seen his grandfather lying cold and still in his own bed and that was death, too, but a clean, natural death which obeyed nature's laws and was, somehow, sweet and bearable, although painful.

But Riddent dead? His unborn son dead? There was nothing natural, nothing fair, nothing acceptable about that."

For a moment, he wished them all dead, all the billions of Empireites. His rage sent him pacing, his face flaming, heat waves causing him to sweat inside his uniform. At that moment, had he been given divine power, he would have depeopled half a galaxy, but his rage faded, paled with his memories of his service in the Empire fleet to exclude the rank and file, the masses. The Emperor, then, all his top advisers, the men who directed the attack on one lonely planet far from Empire's sway.

Someone had said it once, about the Empire: "If you can't control it, kill it."

And they were trying to kill Texas as they'd killed Riddent.

They found him at midmorning, sleeping in the house with its shattered windows, sprawled on the bed in full uniform, his boots making dirty spots on the sheets.

"Damn, Lex," Billy Bob said.

He awoke slowly and his arm automatically went out to feel her next to him, then he was fully awake. They could see that he'd been weeping. He didn't care.

Arden Wal, his hat in his hand, put his other hand on Lex's shoulder. "They're reorganizing the government, Lex."

"We," Lex said, his voice cold and hard. "We're reorganizing the government. You are one of us now." He stood, ran a hand through his tousled hair.

Billy Bob, looking at him, wondered what it was that was changed. He seemed different. There was a cold, hard light in his eyes.

"They want you there," Billy Bob said.

"All right. Where?"

"San Ann. The opera hall."

"I think I should tell you," Wal said, "that the fleet is putting you up for President."

"Now why did you go and tell him that?" Billy Bob asked plaintively. "He'll not come for sure, now."

Lex said nothing. He nodded grimly. His father had been President. Andy Gar had been President. Belle Resall. All of them old, wise, geared to take the demands of office.

"Now don't you say no before you hear us out," Billy Bob said.

"I'll listen," Lex said softly.

The opera hall was in tan. The majority of those present were in uniform. Lex sat down front listening to but without hearing a eulogy for dead Texicans. Then the business began. Nominations. Billy Bob advanced his name and a huge cheer went up from the uniformed members of the Republic. There was a recess. There had been no other name mentioned as candidate for President. Lex went into a conference room with Wal, Billy Bob and some older members of the government who had not been in the city when the missile impacted.

"It's yours if you'll take it," Billy Bob said. "The fleet will vote for you to a man."

"We need a strong, young man in the office," an old graybeard said. "In peace, when there's nothing to do with government but keep order and count noses, a wise old head, but we're at war, son. And you've shown your metal."

"Lex," Arden Wal said, "as President, you'll be commander in chief of the armed forces."

"Yes," Lex said. "The Empire fleet?"

"They're throwing up defense lines all along the periphery," Wal said. "They show all signs of siege. We'll not see any metals from the galaxy."

"We can find metals in the cluster," Lex said.

"Son," said the old minister, who had been at his post on the opposite side of the planet when the missile got through to Dallas City, "we've been searching the cluster for a decade and we've found not one planet."

All signs show that she's a non-planet-forming group of stars."

"We can hold them off for a year or two," Wal said, "even a decade or two, but then the metals shortage will begin to show. You can't go on recycling forever. There's always a loss factor. And while we're declining they'll be building."

"We need to hit them now, Lex," Billy Bob said, "while they're down. We want you to take us into the galaxy, finish off that fleet. The Empire has trouble with the Cassies now, so it's not likely that they'll try a direct attack again, and I don't think they'll be able to muster too many reinforcements for the periphery."

"The Cassies?" Lex asked.

"The Empire pulled off a lot of ships from the lines," Wal said. "The Cassies are making hit-and-run attacks. They've even captured a few Empire planets. The Empire is going to be busy in the next few months. We could go in, take on the rest of that fleet and grab a few planets and have enough metal to make Texas strong enough to withstand any attack from either the Empire or the Cassies."

"All right," said Captain Lexington Burns.

"My fellow Texicans," said President Lexington Burns an hour and a half later, "these are difficult times."

"Surrender," said Fleet General Lexington Burns, speaking to a single Empire Vandy acting as an advance patrol just outside the periphery.

"Surrender," said Lex speaking to a fleet guarding a five-planet star.

Behind them the Cassiopeian fleets were making dire and terrible raids into Empire territory. Before them was a force of Texicans with that terrible weapon which blinked death into the very guts of a ship. They surrendered by the ship, by the fleet.

In three months, Texas had extended a protectorate into the periphery to a depth of ten parsecs from the outlying stars. Captured ships were carrying metals back to Texas. On the inhabited planets, Texican governors were talking of true freedom, of regard for the individual, of controlled population, of good and plenty for all.

As the second line of defense was reached, resistance stiffened. There, Texas met Empire commanders who had not been present at the Last Battle of Texas and had to learn for themselves the strength of Texican weapons. Ships blazed and vaporized. A fleet supply planet refused surrender.

"There are only a few thousand men down there," Arden Wal said. "An invasion force on airorses could take it in five days."

"At the loss of how many Texicans?" Lex asked. "I've seen enough Texicans die, General Wal. There will be no more Texican deaths as the result of my orders, not if it can be avoided."

"Lex, they're just soldiers. They're just plain people down there." Billy Bob looked into Lex's cold, hard eyes.

"Send this," Lex said. "Tell them they have one hour to lay down arms and surrender."

"Lex, that's a helluva cost to take out one fleet supply planet," Billy Bob said. "Those people down there are defenseless."

"So was Dallas City," Lex said.

At the end of one hour a captured Empire Rearguard moved into position and launched one missile. The missile's powerful engines sent it deep into the heart of the small planet and the detonation ruptured the shell in five places, the vast rents spewing magma. The very atmosphere burned.

The next military planet was shown trid tapes of the incident. The planet surrendered.

A beleaguered Empire, with millions of stars and planets under its rule, sent an emissary to meet with President Burns of the Texas Republic as the Texican force cut through the heart of Empire, a deadly point aimed directly at mother Earth. Behind the fleet lay thousands of subject planets, on which millions of former Empire citizens were finding that the rule of the Texicans offered certain advantages.

The emissary met Lex in space, approaching under the guns of the fleet in a swift scout.

She had changed little. She wore the official robes of state in purple and gold. The robes hid her body, allowing only a glimpse of her trim ankles.

"It's been a long time, Lexington Burns," said the Lady Gwyn.

He had half expected her. It made sense to send her. They would use her to probe his weakness, for she knew him. He had not bothered to rise. "Please have a seat," he said. He was in the uniform of a Texas Fleet General, minus insignia.

"You have come a long way," Lady Gwyn said, seating herself and allowing the official robe to part, showing one lovely leg.

Lex nodded.

"Are you determined, then, to destroy all of the Empire?" she asked, with a half smile. She had intended the remark to be sarcastic, half joking. It came out flat. There in the midst of the Texican fleet, seeing its power firsthand, she could not bring it off.

"That would be a large undertaking, wouldn't it?" Lex answered.

"Truly large," she said. "Can even a Texican do it? Ten million warships? Millions of planets? Billions of people?"

"We won't know for a while, will we?" Lex asked.

Gwyn used her nicest smile. "You don't have to try, you know. There are other ways. The Emperor—"

"—ordered the use of population reducers on Texas," Lex said, dropping his booted feet from the top of his desk.

"Are your hands completely clean of blood?" asked Gwyn.

"My hands show only blood I'm forced to spill."

She had come expecting to see an overgrown boy in a man's neatly pressed uniform, but, looking into his cold eyes, she was unsure of herself.

"The benevolent conqueror?" she asked, hating herself for having been forced into trying to reach him through the cold shell. She regained control. "When it comes to administering what you've taken, do you think you could use a little bit of help?"

"Maybe," Lex said.

"The Emperor has asked me to offer a truce. We would leave the lines as they are now. You would have your planets for your needed metals. We would work together to restore order."

"That's big of you," Lex said, a non-smile parting his lips. "It seems that you're willing to give me what I've already taken."

"I am directed," she said, "to ask you to look around, see what's happening in the galaxy. In fighting you, we've opened up our flanks to the Cassiopeians. They are taking planet after planet. When they take a planet it isn't pleasant for the Empire inhabitants. They're put into virtual slavery. Lex, there's a black pall of savagery falling over the entire galaxy. Don't you understand what you're doing? You're destroying the only force which has held it all together. Empire has its faults, but look what Empire has accomplished. There is no hunger on Empire planets—"

"Because you can make plenty of tasteless synthetics," Lex said.

"But it is food. Can Texas feed all the planets you've taken?" She shook her head. "It's easy to take a planet, all you need is force. But afterward? When the people are hungry? When the trade routes which have kept Empire an entity are closed? How many planets are self-sustaining?"

"We'll teach them to be self-sustaining," Lex said.

"Will you, then, agree to a personal meeting with the Emperor?" Gwyn asked, as a last resort.

"Sure," Lex said, glancing at a star chart on the wall of his cabin. "Tell the old boy I'll be calling on him on Earth in approximately six months."

"In six months, the Cassiopeians will be on Earth," Gwyn said, in desperation.

"It's that bad, huh?" Lex asked.

"It's that bad," she said.

"Tell you what," he said, rising to the height of his six-seven stature, "I want to hear more. You'd better stay the night." He looked at her, waiting for an argument. "Here," he said.

"All right," she said. "If that's what you want."

Chapter Twelve

As the Texican fleet blinked and waited, moving deeper into the galaxy, Fleet General Billy Bob Blink transferred over to the flagship carrying a bottle of liberated brandy. He found Lex in his cabin brooding

over star charts.

"Hey, boy, time for a break." He brandished the bottle. Lex pushed his eyebrows apart with thumb and forefinger and managed a grin. He threw his booted feet onto his desk and accepted the glass offered by Billy Bob and let the crisp taste of the brandy linger on his tongue.

They drank in silence for a few minutes and then Billy Bob chuckled. "Hey, you remember that time we laid one on in Dallas City, that time just before you went off to do your time for the Empire?"

Lex nodded. He had scant time for memories these days, but it was pleasant to take his mind off problems for a few minutes.

"Drunk, whee, I had to hold onto the grass to stay on the world," Billy Bob said.

"And the look on the faces of those herders when you tackled them," Lex said, entering into the mood. "They thought you were some crazy kid and they tried not to hurt you."

"Well," Billy Bob said, "I didn't really need your help."

"Oh, no," Lex said.

Billy Bob chuckled again and mused into his glass. "Hell, I miss it, old buddy. I miss all of it, Texas, the big spaces, riding old *Clean Machine* down across the desert blowing low and fast."

"Yeah," Lex said.

"Here I am going on twenty-three and I ain't married," Billy Bob said. "And the ratio of women is up at home, too."

"There'll be time," Lex said.

"When?" His question was not an idle one. Lex recognized that and let his feet fall to the floor with a thud. "When we gonna quit, Lex? Hell, we've made it secure for Texas. We occupy a quarter of the galaxy. We've got our buffer zone through which no one could attack with any degree of surprise. When we gonna call it enough?"

"When the killing has been stopped," Lex said.

"Seems to me we're doing our share," Billy Bob said.

"We didn't start it."

"No, but we can stop it. I talked to your friend when she was here. I know the Emperor offered you a deal."

"Only to be able to kill Cassies," Lex said.

"Is that our business?"

"B.B., I've been doing me some reading now and then. And I ran into something which might explain to you the way I feel. I may not remember the exact words, but they were written by a fellow back on the

old Earth, long before we went into space. It goes something like this: The death of any man diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. You get what I mean?"

"I don't wanta sound smart," Billy Bob said, "but it seems to me you're saying you're gonna kill people to keep them from killing themselves."

Lex's face went stiff. "I kill only when there is no other way."

"Sure, you offer them a chance to surrender. What if it were the other way and someone was taking Texas piece by piece, would you surrender?"

"It's different," Lex said.

"We've got the Empire on the ropes," Billy Bob said. "We could fly through to Earth right now. And I'm not sure we're on the right track, buddy. There are the Cassies. Now I've been doing me some reading and some talking, too. I think of the two the Empire is just a hair better. What are we gonna do, take nut the Empire and then tackle the Cassies?"

"Nope," Lex said.

"Then what?"

"Take a look," Lex said. "Here." He shoved a star chart across his desk. Billy Bob looked and then he pursed his lips and whistled. On the chart, marked in red, was the line of march extending out from Texas into Empire. Red areas showed areas of Texican control. The dotted line of future movement extended not toward Earth, but outward. There was a circle around the star Cassiopeia.

The fleet blinked into Cassiopeian space just over two years from the time it first left Texas space and the messages began to go out. There were the usual offers of surrender and honorable terms, all, of course, refused. Cassiopeian ships learned the hard way that they were no match for Texican weapons and the dark space flared with their lessons. Nevertheless, the resistance was stiff. Again, Texicans died and the news of their dying brought a delegation from the home planet to meet with President Burns in deep space. Of the five Texicans, two were known to Lex. Retired Admiral Crockett Reds shook his hand and congratulated him on his successes. Emily smiled and her hand was warm in his.

He seated them in his cabin, although it was crowded. He listened. They questioned his wisdom in attacking the Cassiopeian dictatorships while still engaging the Empire.

"You elected me to assure the security of Texas," he said. "Are you now saying that you want me to resign?"

"Of course not," said Reds in his aged, deep voice. "But dammit, boy, we've got security. A free electron can't get through the ring of territory you've established on this side of the galaxy. Now you've done a fine job. I'm told that the people on the occupied planets have started treating us as liberators, rather than as conquerors. But let's look at it this way. You've got a supply line which reaches back toward Texas for one helluva distance. By leaving good Texicans behind on occupied planets to administer them you've reduced your fleet, leaving you with Empireites in key positions. Over half your ship Captains are non-Texican. We think you're extending yourself too far."

"Has there been one defection among the converts?" Lex asked.

"Not that I know of," Reds said, continuing to act as spokesman, "but you're taking on a whole new game now that you're moving into Cassiopeian space. You're suffering losses. As long as you're winning the men are happy. But they've seen ships burned. How long can you keep them willing to risk, and risk, and risk?"

"Long enough," Lex said.

Emily remained when the other had gone. "Are you going to lecture me now?" he asked.

"You have become a very handsome man," she said disarmingly.

"Gonna sweet-talk me back to Texas, huh?" he asked, grinning in spite of himself.

"No. Actually, I just want to see you alone, talk with you. How are you, Lex?"

"Great."

"No, I mean really, inside. Can't you forget?"

He turned away without answering.

"My Poul was in Dallas City, too," she said.

He looked at her. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"My way of trying to forget was to submerge myself in my work," she said. "The techniques we discovered by testing the Empire thought monitors led to many new things. Miniaturization in many fields, but, most importantly, they led to a new understanding of the human mind. The mind is a funny thing, Lex. We think we do what we want, but sometimes we're conditioned to think we're doing what we want to do by an oversecretion of some obscure enzyme in the body. Or our thoughts are colored by emotions. Grief has a chemical effect on the brain, and on the entire entity we call mind, soul, ourselves."

"I won't say that I'm not a different man because of—"He paused, then said it. "—because of Riddent's death, but it's Texas I'm thinking of."

"Is it?" .

"What else is there?" He looked at her challengingly.

"Glory?"

"Bullshit."

"I talked with Billy Bob."

"Changing the subject?"

"Not really," she said, smiling. "He says you spend a lot of time alone and that when you're not working you're reading, old things from Earth. Do you know Alexander?"

"Do you know Sargon?" he countered.

"And Frederick and Napoleon and Eisenhower and Hitler and Stalin," she said.

"Yes, I remember, you mentioned Hitler to me once."

"He killed fifty million people, directly or indirectly," she said.

"And Empire has been fighting the Cassies for hundreds of years," Lex said. "I'm going to stop the killing, not continue it."

"Alexander was a young man, too," she said, "and he established what was, perhaps, the first empire."

"He sold his captive women and children into slavery," Lex said. "Am I Alexander? When we liberated the first Cassie planet the people were, at first, suspicious, but when we opened the political prisons and allowed the citizens to elect their own local officials—"

"Yes, yes," she said.

"Of course," he said, "there is a comparison with Hitler, because, like Hitler, I have turned down the opportunity to ally myself with one of our most powerful enemies, the Empire, to fight both Empire and the other strong force in the galaxy."

"You said it, not I," she said.

"That's the real reason for the delegation, isn't it? You think, at home, that I'm biting off more than I can chew?"

"There is talk," she said.

"Fear, you mean."

"Fear. Yes. We're afraid of the casualty reports, Lex. We live by them. For the first time in history there's unlimited birth on Texas. That's a blessing, I suppose, because now people can have as many children as they want. They can have boys and girls without strict control, letting nature do the balancing. But the joy of a young one in the house is diminished by the news that a husband, a brother, a son has died out here in the galaxy."

"It will end soon."

"Will it, Lex? When you've beaten the Cassiopeians, what then? Will you then come home and bring our young men with you?"

"There'll be opportunity to go home."

"But you'll have a galaxy at your command. Will you leave it and come back to Texas?"

"Those who want to go home will be allowed to go home," he said stubbornly.

"And Texas will never be the same. Already we're scattered over vast distances. Families separated. Men making alliances with Empire women."

"Distance is nothing," Lex said. "You're not aware, apparently, of the work being done at the Blink Space Works on Macall. Using the Empire techniques of miniaturization we are installing multiple generators on ships of the line. That means no charging periods along known space routes, making a series of blinks possible, reducing the distance between, say, Earth and Texas to hours. The approach to a planet will take longer than the blink across galactic distances."

Emily smiled sadly. "And it will make the Texas fleet even more invincible."

"I'd like to talk more with you," Lex said. "Will you May with me? Here?"

"No," she said. He examined her face closely. "I'm still a Texican woman, Lex. I've had my two husbands and I've lost both of them. I'll admit that once I was close to you, but—"

"Who has changed?" he asked. "You? Me? I'm a Texican, too, Emily. I'm a lonely Texican. I remember how you—"

She broke in, not wanting to hear it. "I am told that Empire women flock to all fleet bases. I am told that they like Texas men."

"A man wants to be with his own," Lex said.

"Then come home, Lex. Let the Empire take care of its problems with Cassiopeia."

"No."

"Why?"

He thought for a moment. He wanted to be truthful with her. He owed her that. "Texicans have died," he's aid. "They've died uselessly. Riddent died for no good reason. I'm going to see that there is an end to useless dying."

The violence of her response shook him, made his face go slack as he withdrew within himself. "Meacr shit," she said. "You're not thinking of Riddent. You're not thinking of dead Texicans. You're thinking of revenge, of yourself. Lex, no amount of killing, no amount of conquest can bring her or them back."

"You are entitled to your opinion," Lex said weakly.

"Tell me, Lex, how does it make you feel to know that you're the moving spirit of the most deadly battle force the universe has ever seen? Does it make you feel powerful?"

He looked at her with his eyes cold. "I know my power," he said. "I know it down to the last man on the last airors, to the last projectile in the arsenal."

"And do you realize how that power has changed you?"

"We all grow up."

"No," she said sadly. "It isn't just that. You've changed, Lex. You're not Lex anymore. You're not even a Texican. You're Alexander. You're Napoleon. You're capable of wielding unlimited power and that power will, eventually, turn on you. It always has. It always will."

"When it's over, I'll come home."

"No," she said. "No."

When she was gone, Lex sat at his desk, moodily fingering the corner of his star chart. Then, with a shrug, he bent to check, once again, the path of Texican conquest.

Chapter Thirteen

The Second Battle of Wolfs Star lasted two hours and ten minutes. The allied dictatorships had massed their main power there, at the site of the last major engagement with the Empire, and it was met by a Texican fleet which was outnumbered ten to one.

On Texas, Emily heard the engagement called the Slaughter of Wolfs Star.

With the miniaturized multiple-blink generators installed, the Texican fleet blinked circles around the traditional formations of the Cassiopeians. So efficient had become the killers from extra-galactic space that the destruction was selective. First, Darlene projectiles took out the protecting Vandys, then, millions of men dead, a concerted effort demolished the Cassiopeian force of Middleguard cruisers, leaving a core of huge Rearguards grouped together like frightened, herded meacrs.

"To the death," vowed the elected battle leader of the Cassiopeians.

"Death it is, then," Lex sent. "In three minutes and live seconds your ship dies." He himself pushed the button which sent a Darlene projectile blinking into the main control room, there to hang in air as Lex sent, "There is death, my friend. Now you must choose. Surrender, if you will."

"Never," said the dictator, speaking his last word.

"Any more heroes?" Lex sent.

The final engagement of the War of Texican Conquest saw a battered Empire allied with the Cassiopeians, their traditional enemies. Lex sent a phalanx of captured Cassie Rearguards into the scattered formations, spreading fire on all sides. Two days after the final surrender, ship works on a thousand planets began conversion of the huge warships into merchantmen.

Behind him, Arden Wal administered all of the Cassiopeian territory, bending his main effort to trade, for the Cassies excelled at agriculture. In exchange for foodstuffs, a flow of manufactured goods began to stream out of the old Empire even before Lex began the slow, triumphal march to the home planet, old Earth. Blant Jakkas was in charge of the outer limits of Empire. Form had died at the Second Battle of Wolfs Star. Billy Bob Blink, after the final victory, said goodbye and blinked toward Texas. All over the galaxy, young Texican officers were assuming their duties as administrators of planets, groups of planets, vast star fields. An isolated dictatorship, embracing six planets, resisted. The main military planet was broken, burned, using captured Empire planetkillers, and there was peace.

The Texas-built *Lone Star*, flagship of the victorious Texican fleet, neared old Earth, paused as scanners played over the planetary surface to show, in full color close-ups, a park planet, manicured and clean, population confined to towering cities, the main administrative city covering the central belt of the North American continent in what had once been the states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas and Missouri. The spaceports which had once served the capital were deserted. In the streets there was little movement.

Lex scorned the spaceports, lowering the *Lone Star* into the vast reaches of the park surrounding the Emperor's palace. The building, when he stepped out onto the earth of his mother planet, towered over him, gleaming, dazzling in the bright summer sun. The planet was weather-controlled. The temperature, after he confines of a warship, seemed chill at seventy-two degrees. Around him growing things followed orderly patterns as he walked, at the head of his crew of officers, toward the group which was forming to greet him on the palace entry.

The Lady Gwyn was there, dressed officially. In addition, there were somber-faced old men, documents in hand. "In the name of the Emperor," said one official, "we welcome you to Earth."

Lex waved them aside, taking the steps two at a time, his officers following, hands on their side arms. The Lady Gwyn, as they passed, said bitterly, "Gentlemen, this is your new Emperor."

Lex heard. He kept his face forward, striding purposefully up the stairs to the grand entry door. Inside, a huge hall stretched away from him. Uniformed attendants stood fearfully at attention. "The Emperor," Lex said to one of them.

"This way, sir," the attendant said, bowing, leading Lex across the huge hall into a series of corridors until, with another bow, the man indicated a door flanked by two men, tall by Empire standards.

"To see the Emperor," the attendant said. "President Lexington Burns."

Lex brushed past the two guards.

The Emperor was a very old man, small, seemingly enfolded in official robes of purple. Contrary to Lex's expectations, the room was only of moderate size and there was no throne, only a large desk flanked by a bank of communication equipment. The walls were simple white, decorated with sun paintings, the floor not as luxuriously thick in pile as the corridors outside.

"Ah," the Emperor said, standing, making a short, stiff bow. "President Burns. Or should I say Emperor Burns."

"I don't want your title, old man," Lex said.

The Emperor remained standing. Lex examined the simply furnished room.

"If I may have your permission to sit," the Emperor said. "Age is a terrible adversary, even more irresistible than your Texicans."

"Sit, sit," Lex said impatiently.

"Thank you. May I send for something? A brandy, perhaps?"

"Nothing," Lex said. He stalked toward the desk. One chair faced it. He sat, letting his feet stick straight out in front, oversized for the chair. He looked at the old man, wondering.

"So now it's over," the Emperor said. "Strangely, I'm not even sorry."

"Old man, you launched population reducers on Texas," Lex said.

"I plead guilty," the Emperor said, with an open-handed gesture. "For I must confess that even then I felt,

shall we say, a prescient foreboding." He sighed. "Ah, well, there is an end to everything, man, his works, even the universe ultimately."

Lex had looked forward to the moment. All the way, all that long, terrible way, with death his constant companion, feeling the pain of his victims, drinking blood with his soul, a bitter draught. Now, as he looked at the withered, old, feeble man he felt as if he'd been cheated.

"Empires," said the old man, "are among the most fragile of man's creations, coming and going as history marches inevitably onward. Now my time has come, just as yours will come."

"You won't live to see it."

"Ah." Lex noticed that the old hands were shaking even more. "I ask only, if I am allowed that favor, that I be allowed to choose my own way, a peaceful slumber, as it were, in my own bed."

Lex rose, walked to a white wall, examined a particularly effective painting. When he turned, the old man's eyes were on him.

"No," Lex said. "We won't ask that. You can go, if you want to. Pick a place. Just go."

"Ah. There is a planet. It's in the Sirius sector, a family place. Thinly populated, treed, a green place of quietness and peace. I used to go there when—"

"Yeah, sure," Lex said. "Just go, huh? Take any with you who want to go. But do it."

For he had seen, in those few troubled moments, that the death of one old man, already near a natural decease, would change nothing. He turned on his heel and left the Emperor's office, finding his officers in conference with the Emperor's people, discussing an orderly turnover of the mechanics of government. Bored by the discussion he wandered the halls and rooms of the huge building. He discovered the war room in a sub-basement, a huge, gray place of the most sophisticated instrumentation, and that occupied his attention for an hour. Beyond the main room, with its vast arrays of communications, computers and gear, was a wonder which halted his step upon entering, a vast, complicated, scaled model of the galaxy. The loom stretched far and away, two hundred, three hundred feet, and it was filled with it—the galaxy, the stars and the fields and the glowing areas of space debris.

At first he thought he was alone in the room, but he gradually felt the presence of another and he turned to face a uniformed woman.

"Sir," she said.

"Who are you?"

"I am the operator."

"Of this?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's remarkable," he said.

"Shall I show you?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

He seated himself. The woman disappeared. In a moment the model of the galaxy glowed to wondrous life. It was as if he were looking from the viewport of a ship to see the universe spread before him.

A voice came to him, pleasant, speaking in Empire accents.

"We have traced your progress," the voice said. "From the time you left your home planet and entered the galaxy here."

A red glow showed the point of entry.

"And I, personally, could not help but admire you," the female voice said, as the red glow began to move into the galaxy, coloring star after star in its inevitable spread.

"The red color of your movements," the voice said, "the path of conquest as it passed Centaurus and then into Cassiopeian space."

Seeing it graphically reproduced, he felt, for the first time, the sweep of it. In his mind he relived the march down the starways, in his eyes the glow of red, the color of his achievements.

"At the Battle of Wolfs Star," the woman was saying, but he blanked it from his mind, the voice, and let his eyes watch the march of red toward Earth and then it was all red, the galaxy, all red, all his. And as he watched motion began in the vast wheel as it simulated the 'whirl of the galaxy in space, the movement greatly accelerated. He watched it wheel before his eyes and wished, dreamed, that she was by his side to see. Riddent.

Or Arden Wal. Or Jakkas. Form and Billy Bob. His father. But he was alone with the slowly wheeling galaxy, his galaxy, his red, beautiful galaxy.

And they were dead. Riddent. His father. Form. Billy Bob was back on Texas, probably competing for the hand of a Texas girl. Jakkas and Arden were doing his work out in his galaxy and he was alone.

Emily.

He had offered her a chance to be by his side and she had refused.

A moment of hurt and anger. He could send for her. He was Lex. He could order and she would come, or be forced to come.

But no.

"Please go," he said.

The woman heard. "Yes, sir," her amplified voice said.

"Leave it turning."

Now he was truly alone with his galaxy and it flowed in red and wheeled in front of his eyes and he remembered the awe he had felt when he first came to be aware of the extent of the old Empire. Now

the Empire seemed puny when compared with the sweep of his galaxy. Now it was all one, under the protection of Texas, a unit. Billions of people with the capability of expanding, of peopling the uninhabited stars past galactic center. Cassiopeia and Empire were one, under the flag of Texas.

Why, then, did he feel as empty as space, as sterile as a sun which has long since gone into nova, crisping life from its planets?

Emily.

She had been so close, once. And there on the flagship when she'd come with the Texican delegation she'd been cold, sadness in her eyes. Why sadness? He had not changed. She compared him with the ancient conquerors of old Earth and, in effect, told him that he had changed. But he had not changed. He was older and he'd seen enough death and destruction to drive the joys and frivolity of youth from his mind, but every man grows up. How had he changed?

He remembered the day in his home when she was preparing him for his first venture into the Empire, a trip as a prisoner. And, as if she were with him, standing by his side as the model of the galaxy rolled, he could hear her voice.

"You cried because it was beautiful," she had said. "I hope you never lose the ability to cry over beauty."

"No," he said aloud, "I have not changed."

And with a gesture of personal triumph, he wiped a tear from his cheek.

"I haven't changed," he said, his voice going out to lose itself in the sheer wonder and beauty of the galaxy which wheeled majestically before him. His galaxy. And somewhere in it the memory—he did not believe in the soul—the fractured atoms of what once had been Riddent and his unborn son, old Form, dead at Wolfs Star, all of them, all the good Texicans dead and gone, their elemental particles spinning, spinning in space or reintegrating with the soil of Dallas City. And he felt a vast and overwhelming sadness as he watched the model of the galaxy spin them away from him forever. He had come so far. So far. Now it was over, the fighting. Now was only the task of restoring order, of making the galaxy the best possible place for people.

His sadness faded as he faced the task ahead. The Orion Arm swept past him in the accelerated spin of the galactic model and he thought of its emptiness, its vast distances, and relived the march inward, the great, grinding power of it, the cold satisfaction of it, the heat and smell of men at war and the flash of a disintegrating enemy ship of the line. He had led the greatest march of all time. And it was over.

That, he knew suddenly, was the greatest sadness of all. And he knew, then, what she had been talking about, Emily, when she told him he had changed, for it was over and there were no more worlds to conquer and ahead of him stretched the endless chore of keeping it going, his empire.

"When it's over," he had told her, "I'll come home."

But he knew now that he could never go home, for he was at home, wherever he was in his galaxy.

BURNS, LEXINGTON—2572-2605

President, Planet Texas; President, United Texican Galactic Protectorate, later called Emperor. Born to Murichon and Alica Burns, July 13, 2572, on the outlying planet of Texas. Participated in early trading

between Texas and the First Galactic Empire; he was sentenced to a punishment tour in the Empire fleet for the kidnapping of Lady Gwyn Ingles in 2589. Served two years in the Empire fleet before enlisting the aid of confederates in taking an Empire ship to Texas. The activities of Burns were instrumental in precipitating the Great War of the Galaxy which ended in Texican conquest, uniting the galaxy, for the first time, under the flag of the Planet Texas. Burns took control of the governmental functions of both the Empire and the Allied Cassiopeian Dictatorships in 2595. An efficient administrator, Burns is credited with altering the age-old patterns of galactic life through agricultural reform and an enlightened attitude toward the freedom of the individual. Adept at delegating authority, Burns seemed to have a flair for selecting efficient governors to administer the vast Empire which he established. Married in his youth to a Texican girl, first name Riddent, surname unknown, he was widowed during the Last Battle of Texas in 2592. He never remarried, although court gossip linked him, with some justification, with various women, among them one Lady Gwyn Ingles, cousin of the former Emperor. His death at the age of thirty-three engendered a lengthy investigation, during which various charges were made and disproved. Popular folklore to the effect that Burns was poisoned by a jealous lover has not found historical confirmation. Upon the death of Burns, the United Texican Galactic Protectorate disintegrated into warring factions, although General Arden Wal, appointed as a successor to Burns, defeated, first, the revolt of the Cassiopeian sector in 2608 and then the New Republics of Texas in 2611. Of Burns, Professor Axil Zenthith has said, in his authoritative *Lex the Conqueror*, "He was a man five hundred years ahead of his time. His one mistake was in thinking that galactic man, only six hundred years removed from the home planet, could accept and handle unlimited freedom. The worst that can be said of Burns is that he gave the people of the galaxy too much too soon."

GLOSSARY:

Airors: Probably short for air horse. A one man unit of transportation on the Planet Texas.

Arc: A Texican contraction for aircar, used for atmospheric travel on the Planet Texas.

Atmoflyer: Luxurious mode of transportation in the Galactic Empire for travel within the atmosphere. A few models were known to have limited space capacity.

Batgull: A seabird of Texas, half bird, half mammal. Batlike head, two rows of teeth, a long, unfeathered neck dwindling into a chunky, short body covered with dull gray feathers.

Beagle: Flying mammal of Texas. Noted for its appetite, omnivorous, feeding on anything from carrion to vegetation. In appearance, the beagle resembled the extinct bears of Earth, with huge, leathery wings appended to the shoulders.

Biters: Parasitic insects of Texas. As large as an Earth housefly, red and blue striped, biters were, in the early years of Texican settlement, a hazard to both health and comfort.

Blink Drive: A nul-grav, anti-space engine developed on Earth in the 1970s by Zed Blink. A popular explanation of the function of the blink generator, in brief: forces created in the generator negate mass while nullifying the existence of space itself. Under proper direction a chosen vector can be applied to the nul-mass under the influence of the blink generator. In effect, an object under the influence of a blink generator ceases to exist at one point in space and emerges into reality at another chosen point.

Blinkstat: A system of blink generator stations was established under the first Empire with relays at chosen points, enabling a physical message to be "blinked" from any given point in the galaxy, so long as straight line transmission was possible through relay stations.

Blood-flowers: A particularly showy native flower of the Planet Texas, three inches in diameter when fully opened, the bloodflower exuded a liquid of the color and consistency of human blood when disturbed.

Bojacks: An Earth term adapted by Texicans to indicate the wilderness areas of their planet.

Comnum: Communications number. Identifying number for the receipt of blinkstat messages or planetary trid calls.

Darlene Space Rifle: A weapon developed on the Planet Texas. Anachronistic in one respect, in that it used a physical projectile, it was advanced in its time since a tiny blink generator allowed the projectile to be delivered instantly on target.

Dozer: A potent, non-narcotic sleeping pill used mainly by spacers.

Electro-book: After 2050, the form of most printed material. Words were commuted into electronic impulses, stored in a cartridge and activated into either written or spoken language through an electronic reader.

Expand: A powerful explosive developed on Texas. Used primarily in construction and mining and, on specific occasions, as a weapon of war.

Farl: Largest of the land animals native to the Planet Texas. Smaller than an extinct Earth tiger, the farl was catlike and was said to be the most fearless animal ever encountered by man. In the early days of Texas settlement there were many casualties before the farl population was reduced and confined to wilderness areas.

Hornie: A toadlike reptile; habitat, the deserts of Texas.

L.S.A.: Life support armor, a complete life support system in compact form used by spacers.

Meacr: Shortened form of the Texican phrase "meat critter." Bovine in character, prolific in breeding, the meacr became the principal source of meat first on Texas and later in the galaxy.

Nighten: Nightbird of the Planet Texas. Owl-like in form. A flying marsupial, the nighter fed on small rodents.

Rio Grande Wine: A general term indicating any number of alcoholic beverages distilled from the juices of cacti from the deserts of Texas.

Sanrab: Short for sand rabbit, an edible rodent of the Texas deserts.

T.E.S.: Prefixing initials meaning The Emperor's Ship, preceding the title of all Empire military vessels.

T.E.M.S.: See above: The Emperor's Merchant Ship.

Toothfish: Warm-blooded fish of the southern oceans of Texas. Up to thirty pounds. Large mouth with large display of tearing teeth. In schools, toothfish were dangerous to divers, swimmers and any other form of life to cross their paths.

Trid: Three-dimensional form of communication forming an image, amazingly lifelike, on an electron

screen.

Vandy: Short for Vanguard destroyer, a swift, small, deadly warship used in both the service of the Empire and the Cassiopeian allied dictatorships. In battle, Vandys, being more agile, were used as strike force, and as security for the larger vessels of the fleets, Middleguard cruisers and the ponderous Rearguard dreadnoughts.

Waken A non-narcotic anti-sleep pill. Used mainly by spacers on duty.

Winglings: The newly born form of the Texican meacr. Capable of swift and darting flight, the wingling soon lost its ability to fly, due to an active metabolism which induced an amazingly fast growth. Weight and the withering of wings soon confined the wingling to the grazing plains.